

## *Prophecy and Fulfilment*

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*The idea of the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament provides the New Testament with one of the foremost of its categories for the interpretation of God's action in Jesus. Recent study of the redactional history of the prophetic literature shows how the idea of a single comprehensive divine act of the fulfilment of prophecy took shape, and the distinctive features of the New Testament interpretation may be compared with this.*

We have become accustomed to thinking and working with two distinct subjects which we call 'Old Testament Theology' and 'New Testament Theology'. Increasingly however a number of scholars have come to argue for what might be called a 'Biblical Theology' which would pay special attention to the structure and composition of the two Testaments as collective entities, and in particular to their relationship to each other.<sup>1</sup> Certainly there is something distinctly odd about any Christian commitment to the Old Testament which bypasses the major arguments and themes which provide the New Testament writers with the grounds for their adherence to,

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and use of, the Old Testament. In any case we must consider what it is that makes one Testament 'Old' and the other 'New' since this very nomenclature implies a form of relationship to each other. So it is that the theme of prophecy and fulfilment provides for the New Testament authors one of the foremost categories by which individual passages from the Old Testament are interpreted as relevant to the events and personalities of the New. More than this can be noted, for in fact the entire message and significance contained in the Old Testament is regarded as a divine promise, made concrete through individual prophecies, of the events concerning Jesus Christ and the birth of the Christian Church. Prophecy and its fulfilment therefore provide a quite fundamental means of relating the two Testaments to each other.<sup>2</sup> In doing so the notion of prophetic fulfilment establishes the primary category of interpretation for what prophecy 'means', and how it is to be understood in relation to human life and history. It is not overpressing the claim to argue that, so far as the New Testament writers are concerned, it is through its fulfilment that the meaning and significance of prophecy becomes plain.

We may at the outset draw attention to two features which must largely be left outside the scope of our discussion. Both relate to the way in which the New Testament authors deal with parts of the Old Testament. The first concerns the fact that there are many instances where the New Testament takes as prophecies passages which were clearly not so intended in the Old Testament; e.g. Matt. 2:23 with Ju. 13:7. Secondly, and in a rather similar vein, there are many instances where the New Testament reads back into the Old Testament text a meaning which could clearly not have been so understood from its original context and where the original sense is quite plain; e.g. Matt. 2:15 with Hos. 11:1. Both of these features are undoubtedly the consequence of a kind of exuberant overspill, where the central conviction that the fulfilment of prophecy has taken place has led to an enthusiastic searching through the Old Testament scriptures to trace as many such prophecies as possible. Their strained and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. Gese. 'Tradition and Biblical Theology', Eng. Tr. by R. P. O'Hara and D. A. Knight. *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Knight. Philadelphia, 1977, pp.301-26.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, Grand Rapids, 1975, pp.133ff.

rather artificial character should not lead us to dismiss the whole idea of the fulfilment of prophecy as built up from similarly strained and artificial premises. What we must do is to look at the more central and direct claims of this kind, and seek to understand how they have arisen and what it is that they assert, so far as they lend meaning to prophecy.

Modern discussion of the problem owes a good deal to an interesting and provocative lecture of Rudolf Bultmann's, dating from 1949. We may usefully cite some of his opening words: 'According to the conception which prevails in the New Testament and in the tradition of the Church, prophecy is understood *to be the forecasting of a future happening, and fulfilment is the occurrence of what has been forecast*. And if the prophecy is authorized by God, it is to a certain extent a promise of God's, which finds its fulfilment in what happens later.'<sup>3</sup> Bultmann, following a current of criticism which has been extremely widespread in the twentieth century, goes on to argue that the artificiality of the manner by which such prophetic foretellings are matched up with subsequent events means that such a mode of argument can have little or no force for the modern critical mind. He proceeds in consequence to draw attention to the way in which the German nineteenth-century theologian, J.C.K. von Hofmann, extended this form of the ancient argument from prophecy into a more directly historical area.<sup>4</sup> In

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this the events recounted in the Old Testament constitute the basis for God's Promise', and the events of the New form the 'Fulfilment'. In this fashion history takes over from the specific texts and words of prophecy and a very much broader basis is given to the argument. Quite recently a relatively similar position has been advocated by the Roman Catholic scholar J. Becker in relation to the messianic hope.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the seeming attractions of such a modern reinterpretation of the biblical perspectives, I believe that we should dismiss them for two reasons. The first is that it is very far from clear what kind of validity can be attached to claims that a given range of historical events can 'fulfil' the implicit expectations, or significance, of earlier events. The very nature of history as an ongoing process reveals continuity and causal connectedness of such a kind as to preclude any sort of end-point, such as a fulfilment requires. In any case we must recognize that Judaism would certainly not recognize the New Testament events to be a fulfilment of the Old, and, although this could not be a final objection, it points the need for a fuller definition of what it is in the Old Testament that is 'fulfilled'. Is it the abandonment of Jewish claims to nationhood, or the abandonment of claims to the land of Israel, which constitute fulfilment?

This leads us to the second objection which is that the biblical understanding of prophecy lays special stress on its verbal character with its particular set of verbal images. Hence it is that the New Testament writers can find their assurances of prophetic fulfilment in the appropriateness of such images as 'a virgin shall conceive...', or in the triumphal entry of the messiah into Jerusalem riding upon an ass (Zech. 9:9). All of this points to an awareness that it is supremely the verbal character of prophecy and its rich use of poetic images which renders it capable of special fulfilment. This provides both the strength and weakness of the biblical view of prophecy and its fulfilment. The strength lies in the clarity and appropriateness with which the prophetic imagery can be applied to the New Testament

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<sup>3</sup> R. Bultmann, 'Prophecy and Fulfilment'. *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, Eng. Tr. J. C. G. Greig, London, 1955, p.182.

<sup>4</sup> R. Bultmann, *art cit.*, pp.188ff.

<sup>5</sup> J. Becker, *Messianic Expectation in the Old Testament*, Eng. Tr. D. E. Green, Edinburgh, 1980; cf. especially p.95: 'Messianic expectation is a matter not of isolated prophetic messages but of the history of Israel'.

persons and events; the weakness, correspondingly, lies in the complete detachment, and lack of contextual identity, between the original prophecy and what is claimed as its fulfilment. Matt. 2:18, for example, sees a fulfilment of Jer. 31:15 in Herod's slaughter of the innocents, although it is certain that what the Jeremiah passage was referring to was the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon.

We may note a number of important features which have a bearing on this question of the fulfilment of prophecy. The first of these is that, from the New Testament point of view, the length of time that elapsed between the prophet's speaking and the event which is held to fulfil his words can be a very long one, so long in fact that it appears unreasonable, and almost incredible, that events could be regarded as foreseeable so long in advance of their occurrence.<sup>6</sup>

In the overall perspective adopted by the New Testament writers this claim that prophecy has been 'fulfilled' performs a dual role. First it affirms that Jesus really is the long foretold Saviour-Messiah and Deliverer of Israel. Because so many prophecies are held to have been fulfilled in his life and work his divine origin is held not to be in doubt. Secondly, and in close connection with this, the claim is upheld that the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth which have given rise to the Christian Church have been truly planned and intended by God. The evidence for this is shown in that they

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have been foretold earlier by prophets so that, at one stroke, both the divine origin of the prophecy and the divine plan latent in the events of its fulfilment are made plain. Only the God who controls all history can have foreseen its development so far ahead. In this fashion the long interval of time which has elapsed between the prophetic utterance and its fulfilment is used to intensify the claim to its divine origin.

We can see that both of these features concerning the biblical argument from prophecy raise difficulties for us in the modern world. The belief in the extraordinary interval of time evaporates away once we see that it is really a kind of 'coincidence'—a case of history repeating itself—which brings about the sense of a remarkable foretelling being fulfilled. Similarly, over the question of the person and status of Jesus of Nazareth, a very mixed range of images, titles and situations has provided the basis for the claim that in him prophecy has been fulfilled. Although we now know little of other rival claimants who were held to have fulfilled prophecy, it is evident that the whole expectation that biblical prophecy was about to be fulfilled in a remarkable way was a widespread belief in New Testament times, as a number of writings show. The very existence of collections of messianic prophecies among the Qumran secretaries shows this to have been the case.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately the question here resolves itself into one concerning which figure most worthily and appropriately can be held to have served as such a fulfilment. Altogether therefore it is not surprising that modern scholars have had great difficulty in coming to terms with this argument from prophecy in the New Testament. It appears as a very outmoded way of thinking and to be too dependent on a type of biblical interpretation which we would regard as unscientific and lacking in critical control. A person may believe that a given prophecy has been fulfilled in a particular manner, but no specifically logical, or critically historical, arguments would be capable of proving this.

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<sup>6</sup> The belief that the fulfilment of a prophecy could take place more than a century after the original pronouncement is already evident in 1 & 2 Kings; cf. G. von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (SBT 9), Eng. Tr. D. Stalker. London. 1953. pp.78ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, Harmondsworth, 1962. p.245.

What an individual believed a specific prophecy to foretell would determine how he understood its fulfilment to have occurred. Furthermore many prophecies would not become clear as to their meaning until the fulfilment had taken place, thereby lessening their character as genuine foretelling. We may suggest therefore that, although there are good reasons for arguing that the attempts to replace the older form of the prophecy / fulfilment argument by one concerning history and its 'fulfilling' development are unsatisfactory, there can be little hope either of resuscitating the older form of the argument in anything like its New Testament form.

## II. MEANING IN THE PROPHETIC LITERATURE

What then are we to make of the early Christian claims that, in Jesus of Nazareth, prophecy has been fulfilled? This requires that we go back to a number of very fundamental questions relating to the nature of biblical prophecy. First of all this prophecy exists in a written form, and it already possessed this written form by New Testament times. Yet written prophecy is in some respects an anomaly within man's experience of prophecy in the ancient Near East. It is true that there are a number of omen-texts from Mesopotamia, as well as a great many accounts both from Egypt and Mesopotamia of the activities of prophet-type figures.<sup>8</sup> There are also a great many letters from the Mesopotamian kingdom of Mari which record the contents of prophetic dreams and revelations.<sup>9</sup> Yet Old Testament prophecy

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is of a fundamentally different kind from all these since it consists of large collections, generally initiated by major prophetic individuals, recording prophecies and setting them in a historical context. The prophet's original preaching activity was already an earlier stage of his work in conveying divine messages to the people of Israel and Judah. Although therefore there are a great many important links between the Old Testament prophets and divination techniques, dream interpretation and various kinds of inspired utterance, what we are faced with as biblical prophecy is a collection of sayings, combined with some narrative accounts of prophetic actions and experiences which record the work of specific prophets over the period from the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C.

This brings to our attention the fact that written prophecy is different, in a very subtle way, from the prophet's earlier preached word, even if we may deduce that it was the prophet himself who first committed his messages to writing. When we ask how a prophet intended, or expected, his prophecies to be fulfilled we must note a number of important points. Essentially, both in its form and its content, prophecy was a declaration of what God was about to do. Hence it was either in the form of a threat, warning of coming judgement and disaster, or a promise, declaring that deliverance and better times were coming. By its very nature therefore prophecy required some sort of fulfilment in order to be vindicated and sustained. It could never have been in the form 'You deserve to fare badly, no matter what happens', but expressed itself more categorically: 'I will rise up against you, says the LORD...'. Without a proper fulfilment therefore prophecy would have appeared gravely prejudiced and devoid of effective meaning. Yet, in a paradoxical fashion, the prophet's very intention in uttering threats and warnings of this nature was to alert people to the danger they were in and to incite them to repent. Thereby the danger might be averted and the people

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. R. R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, Philadelphia, 1980, pp.89ff.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. F. Ellermeier, *Prophetie in Mari und Israel*, Herzberg, 1968; H. B. Huffmon, 'Prophecy in the Mari Letters', *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, Vol. 3, eds. E. F. Campbell, Jr. and D. N. Freedman, Garden City, N.Y., 1970, pp.199-224.

spared, as happened to the men and women of Nineveh according to the book of Jonah, after Jonah had preached to them.

This highlights a very striking fact about all our Old Testament prophetic books: they reflect a sense that the prophetic threats which are a central part of their content have been fulfilled through disastrous events. It is no accident therefore that the heyday of biblical prophecy was the period in which Israel and Judah were destroyed and ruined, first by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. Written prophecy is, in a sense, 'fulfilled' prophecy, because its written form already shows awareness of the catastrophic events which provided its historical backcloth. This is not, of course, to claim that the whole disastrous course of Israel's and Judah's downfall had taken place before any prophecy came to be written. On the contrary this was clearly not so, but it is true that the first painful taste of tragedy had been felt, even by the time that the book of Amos, the earliest of the canonical prophets, had come into being. When we come to ask what a prophecy 'means' therefore, we must first of all make some examination of the circumstances when it was given and the events which must have been felt to provide it with some essential fulfilment. In this sense, questions of 'meaning' in prophecy and questions of its 'fulfilment' are closely intertwined. Yet this immediately leads us to note a number of other relevant facts of a literary and theological kind.

Even though we can isolate individual prophecies and make very plausible

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reconstructions about when they were first given and the situations to which they were addressed, as they are now preserved, all such prophecies have been combined with others to form very large collections, making some of the longest books of the Bible. This combining of prophecies with each other must also then have played some part in establishing for the biblical scribes and editors a significant aspect of what prophecy was thought to mean and how it was to be fulfilled. Quite dramatically we must insist that it cannot possibly have been pure chance which led to the extraordinarily widespread phenomenon of combining prophecies of hope and assurance with threats and warnings. Certain obvious patterns have been built up. Prophecy therefore, in the written form in which it exists for us in the Old Testament, has a kind of twofold setting, or context. On the one hand we must see it, and interpret it, against the historical background and situation to which the original prophet addressed it. On the other hand all such prophecies have now been given a literary setting which separates them to some extent from this primary historical situation. Threats of doom and disaster have become amplified and elaborated by their being conjoined with prophecies of hope and restoration. In this way certain very marked and frequently repeated patterns have been built up. Threats will not last for ever, but times of renewal and hope will come. The meaning, and with this the fulfilment, of individual prophecies has to be understood in relation to this preserved literary context which anticipates a larger fulfilment of prophecy than that relating to specific individual sayings.

We can illustrate this point by looking at a notable example and by considering the remarkably complex structure of the four great prophetic books of the Old Testament. At a key point in the book of Isaiah there is a powerful general indictment of Israel, set out in allegory form, in the Song of the Vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7). In this the vineyard, which signifies Israel, is to be devastated and laid waste, with the result that 'briers and thorns shall grow there' (Isa.5:6). By the use of such a poetic image within the general form of the vineyard allegory a general impression is conveyed of the oppressive and ruinous situation with which Israel is threatened. There is no need to suppose that the image of 'briers and thorns' was intended as a cryptic reference to any one group, even though it is the Assyrian conquests

which provide the broader fulfilment of the threat implicit in the allegory. Yet it is not difficult to see that such a verbal image could be applied in all sorts of ways. Hence we find that there are a further five references in the book of Isaiah to these 'briers and thorns', interpreting the image in different ways (Isa. 7:23-25; 9:18; 27:4). The last of these is to be found in a passage which we can call 'The New Song of the Vineyard', which is intended to serve as a kind of supplement and extension of the original prophetic allegory. It affirms that the time of judgement is shortly about to pass. the 'briers and thorns' will be removed, and a new age of happiness and peace will come.<sup>10</sup>

All of this has a bearing on the idea of the 'fulfilment' of prophecy, since it shows how a single, very prominent, prophecy could be applied and adapted to interpret particular situations. Such situations would be related to each other in incidental and circumstantial ways and the original prophetic image then provides the link between them to establish their particular significance and meaning. The belief that a given prophecy can only have one single fulfilment, therefore, and this defined by the situation to which the original

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prophet addressed it, is too simple a way of proceeding. Precisely because a prophecy was felt to have received a striking fulfilment through events, it was felt to be capable of application and meaning in relation to other events.

The case of the 'briers and thorns' of Isa. 5:6 is a noteworthy one, but it is certainly not an isolated instance. We find in the well-known words of the commission given to the prophet Isaiah at his call that he is to make the people of Israel, to whom he addresses his prophecies, blind, deaf and devoid of understanding (Isa. 6:10). This theme, of the nation's blindness and deafness, then reappears in sayings that must derive from at least two centuries later (Isa. 32:3; 35:5; 43:8; 42:18-20). The latest of these, which is that in Isa. 35:5, affirms that the period of blindness and deafness will soon be past and a new age of salvation will dawn for Israel. We could go on and multiply further examples, perhaps very usefully concentrating on such instances as Amos's prophecy of the coming of the 'Day of the LORD' (Amos 5:22f.) which was undoubtedly taken up and applied later, supremely to the belief that the day of Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 B.C. provided the fulfilment of this threat (cf. Ezek. 7:10ff.).

In such cases as these we can see how it was possible for the original prophetic saying to convey a very wide range of meanings precisely because it was in the form of a terse poetic image. The 'briers and thorns' of Isa. 5:6 could be interpreted both literally and allegorically without any sense of mutual incompatibility of meaning. Similarly more than one catastrophe could be described as 'the Day of the LORD'. In these cases it is the particular poetic character of prophecy that has made it possible for its imagery to be applied to more than one situation. This might be felt to have been a purely arbitrary and random process, yet I think this is in fact not so. By this type of scribal and theological application of prophecy a certain connectedness was seen to link events together and a certain divine purpose and intention was discerned within them. Historical events thereby acquired intelligibility and perspective.

So far the examples we have chosen are interesting instances where a distinctive prophetic poetic image has been taken up and developed beyond the literal meaning and intention which

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<sup>10</sup> I have sought to show the importance of such sequential developments of prophetic images and themes for the formation of the book of Isaiah in my essay 'The Unity of the Book of Isaiah', *Interpretation* 36 (1982), pp.117-29.

we can suppose the original prophet to have given to it. Prophecy could be developed in other ways than this, however, for one of the simplest and most straightforward of the techniques which we can discover in the prophetic books was by the elaboration and extension of a particular subject or theme. The most obvious instances of this kind of development are to be seen in the prophecies concerning Babylon in Isa. 13-14. The earliest of these sayings is a very brief one, perhaps as a consequence of editorial 'cutting', in Isa. 13:2-3. Subsequently a whole series of further prophecies covering Judah's painful treatment at the hands of the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C. has been added, culminating in a triumphant satire over Babylon's ultimate downfall (Isa. 14:4-21). By way of digression we may note in this connection that the section Isa. 13:9-16, with its key theme 'Behold the Day of the LORD comes' has provoked considerable scholarly discussion. It reads like a piece of apocalyptic, building upon prophetic imagery, and if this is the case then the unit must be regarded as a late addition, made at a time when the images and themes of prophecy were being remoulded into apocalyptic.

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The prophecies in the book of Isaiah regarding Babylon are simply one instance of what have come to be called 'Foreign Nation Prophecies', and it does not take any very great literary and theological insight to see that, in all of the four great collections of such prophecies, certain patterns have been used in formulating the sequences. The same nations tend to be dealt with and there is a surprising degree of inter-connectedness between them all. Quite certainly here we must conclude that the editors who have been responsible for building up the prophetic literature of the Old Testament have been guided by an interest in the fortunes of Israel's immediate neighbours and the fate of the great imperial powers—Egypt, Assyria and Babylon.

We can find further instances where an interest in a specific major institution of Israel's life has provided a thread by which a series of prophecies can be tied together. This is most notably the case in the book of Isaiah with regard to the fate of the royal Davidic monarchy of Judah-Israel. In Isa. 9:2-7 we find a well-known prophecy regarding the coming of a new king upon the throne of David in Jerusalem. This can best be understood as a coronation prophecy for a new king who would have been Hezekiah, if the prophecy is authentically from the eighth-century prophet Isaiah. Yet this has provided a reason for introducing a number of further prophecies dealing with the subsequent fate of the Davidic Monarchy in Isa. 11:2-5 and 32:1-2, this latter incidentally proceeding to allude yet again (Isa. 32:3) to the ending of the era of Israel's blindness and deafness which began with the words of commission to Isaiah at his call (Isa. 6:10).

It could no doubt be argued that the book of Isaiah is a particularly rich one so far as this phenomenon of elaborating and developing prophecies in such a striking way is concerned. Yet it is not unique in this, since both Jeremiah and Ezekiel show a similar type of editorial formulation and development, albeit of subtly different kinds. Strikingly too, however, both these prophets exhibit in good measure the feature of alluding back to earlier prophecies of other prophets, as we have already noted in respect of Ezekiel's allusion to 'the Day of the LORD, which is further linked by an allusion to Amos's threat that 'the end' has come upon Israel (cf. Ezek. 7:5-9 with Amos 8:2). In the case of the Book of the Twelve Prophets we have yet another instance of the combination of a number of prophecies from different individual prophets at different periods into a single connected book. It is not difficult to see that this possesses a loose general plan and chronological outline. Furthermore, as the range of written prophecies has become more extensive so it appears that the phenomenon of

making allusions back to earlier prophecies and of forming thematic links between prophecies has gained in momentum.

It is not practicable here to follow up these various lines of exploration into the interests and assumptions which have given to our prophetic literature its extant shape. It is sufficient to note that it was because prophecies were believed to have been 'fulfilled' that they were preserved and linked with other prophecies so that they might shed light on further potential fulfilments in the future. Of foremost importance here is the perception that, because prophecies of doom and disaster were believed to have been fulfilled, so did this lend added strength to the conviction that the fulfilment of prophecies of hope would soon take place.

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### **III. PROPHECY AND FULFILMENT IN RETROSPECT**

We may summarize the main points of our argument so far: prophecy required a fulfilment in terms of historical events in order that its meaning should become established. Yet such a fulfilment in events did not exhaust the significance of the prophecy, but could in reality enhance it so that it could thereafter be applied to yet other events. Secondly, it is apparent that many of the key images and themes which have played a formative role in the development of written prophecy—the Day of the LORD, the new Saviour-King, Babylon, etc.,—did so because they were not narrowly circumscribed or defined as to their application, but could be used in relation to a number of situations. Thirdly, we have noted that the process of collecting prophecies together and building them up into comprehensive books established for them a wider context of meaning. Thereby there emerged the belief in the possibility of a completely comprehensive and self-authenticated fulfilment of all prophecy. The fulfilment of 'Prophecy' as a whole therefore came to be envisaged as something that would be far greater than the simple fulfilment of individual prophecies. This was not, of course, to deny that individual prophecies would be seen to be fulfilled at this time, since it was thought to be precisely this feature which would show that the age of fulfilment had dawned.

This was quite evidently the intellectual situation that prevailed in Palestinian Judaism in New Testament times, and it is that to which the writers of a number of the New Testament documents address themselves. It is very evidently the intellectual milieu of the writer of St Matthew's Gospel. To this extent it is not of such very great importance to us that many of the proof-texts cited, or the incidental details of the so-called fulfilment appear strained and artificial. Behind the attempts to demonstrate that a number of specific individual instances of prophetic fulfilment have occurred lies the more fundamental conviction that it is the era of 'Fulfilment' more comprehensively that has dawned. It is noteworthy too that this was not a claim that there had not been earlier fulfilments of a prophecy, but a more far-reaching contention that such prophecies had now been 'filled full': i.e. they had reached the full extent of their inherent promise.

All of this may still appear a very 'un-modern' way of thinking, and one to which we can only feel a very limited degree of attachment and respect. Yet I would venture a number of reasons for arguing that this is not in fact a necessary reaction on our part.

The belief that the hand of God controls events and is to be seen working in the destinies of individual people and of nations is one of the most fundamental of all religious convictions. Forms of divination, oracle-giving and inspired utterance are part and parcel of all the main



forms of ancient religion. If human life is an encounter with the ultimate reality that manifests Himself behind, within and through our daily adventures, then it was not unreasonable that man should seek to discover what this Ultimate Reality had in store for his creatures. Biblical prophecy is a very developed and sophisticated form that has been produced out of such simple convictions and practices. Where it differs from them is in its comprehensiveness and profundity. It is not interested in such questions as whether a pregnant mother will give birth to a boy or a girl, nor what strange omens can be interpreted to signify when twins will be born. Rather it has become

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concerned, even totally preoccupied, with the dimension of human tragedy and suffering. Written prophecy appeared against the backcloth of the appalling catastrophes that befell Israel and Judah in the eighth to sixth centuries B.C., when an entire nation was reduced to ruins and had found itself caught in the crucible of suffering. When all other reasons for hope had disappeared, save the conviction that man could hope in God, then prophecy provided a medium for seeing the hand of God at work in such events which neither trivialized the realities of human life and feeling, nor relegated God to a neutral no-man's land. It held fast to the conviction that God truly was at work in these events, yet it did not abandon its belief that his ultimate purpose was loving and good, and recognized that these events were every whit as terrible and frightening as they appeared.

In recent years R. P. Carroll<sup>11</sup> has canvassed the claim that prophecy 'failed' and that the comprehensive processes of development and reinterpretation that we find in the prophetic books are the outcome of the experience of 'cognitive dissonance'—a process of failing to match received tradition and conviction with the realities of life. I could not be more greatly in disagreement with such a view. Far from prophecy manifesting an unrealistic disharmony between faith and the realities of life and history, it shows at so many points an extraordinary ability to touch upon fundamental features. It manifests 'a tragic sense of life', if we may borrow a phrase from the Spanish philosopher Unamuno. Furthermore it is certain that there was never a period when prophecy was 'silent', as traditionally understood. What happened was that the form of prophecy itself underwent a subtle change, with the more innovative and creative aspects of it being increasingly carried out in the form of new interpretations of old prophecies. This is the situation that we find pertaining in Qumran, where commentaries upon the prophetic books of Habakkuk and Nahum are effectively new works of a prophetic-apocalyptic nature.

We have accustomed ourselves for more than a century now to speaking of the 'theology' of the prophets, and yet this is a far from clear and helpful way of proceeding. It would not be entirely wide of the mark to claim that it is virtually impossible to offer anything that might properly be called a 'theology' of prophecy. As soon as we recast the imagery and texts of prophecy into abstract ideas we effectively destroy them. So it is that, although we can rightly argue that the prophets deal with such themes as 'the judgement of God', 'the universality of the divine purpose', 'the redemptive value of human suffering' and 'the theological grounds of hope', they never do so in such abstract and detached language. Rather prophecy has a poetic quality, and it makes use of a complex kind of poetic imagery which we have noted. Its themes are 'the Day of the LORD', 'Babylon', 'Return to the Wilderness', and even 'briers and thorns', in one instance, as we have seen. What these images mean, and how they find fulfilment in given historical situations, was capable of treatment with a remarkable degree of

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<sup>11</sup> R. P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed. Reactions and Response to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Traditions*, London, 1979.

flexibility. The elasticity of the imagery is disconcerting and baffling to us, since in some cases the same image can convey a sense of both judgement and hope. as we have noted in regard to Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard.

All of this points us to the realization that prophecy has started from a very different base line from that intellectual pursuit which we might properly call theology. Yet this does not mean that prophecy does not have theological

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meaning and importance for us. Precisely because it was a way of discerning the hand of God at work in human lives and human history prophecy has very far-reaching theological implications. Because it conveyed its sense in relation to specific personalities and events it has a surprisingly impressive vitality and relevance. It possesses an existential quality which shunned a God of abstractions and preferred rather to see God's activity at work in human life discerned in terms of images, metaphors and parables. It is precisely this sense of directness and concrete relevance to specific situations which is lent to prophecy by the conviction that every prophecy has its fulfilment. It is not an abstract doctrine about the eternal nature of God, even though it has implications regarding this. Instead it is a finger pointing to God at work in individual lives and concrete situations.

Lastly we may say a further word regarding the claim of the New Testament that, through the work of Jesus of Nazareth, prophecy has been fulfilled. If we think in terms of incidental, and relatively peripheral, features demonstrating that Jesus has 'fulfilled' prophecy, our regard for prophecy will remain at a superficial and unsatisfactory level. It is only when we recognize that the very process of forming prophetic collections has brought together a large variety of prophecies to deal with major themes of human experience that such a claim can command respect. It is those deeply moving realms of man's experience of bewildering tragedy, a sense of the redemptive and purifying value of suffering, a stripping away of false grounds of hope, and a belief that life can attain a creative wholeness which only the imagery of a Primal Paradise can convey, which brings the notion of prophetic 'Fulfilment' close to what the New Testament means by salvation. Although the literary paths by which this haven was reached may often appear to us strikingly bizarre, yet it is not an outmoded, or misguided, claim of the early Church that Jesus has 'fulfilled' the prophecies of the Old Testament.

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