

## God's Foreknowledge and Prophecy: An Application—Part 2

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### Prophecy and its Nature

As John F. A. Sawyer states, 'prophets are first and foremost "proclaimers"' as indicated by the accepted meaning of the Hebrew word *nabi*. This seems to have been the vocation of the Prophets in the Hebrew bible, beginning with Moses and moving through to Malachi. Here we are concerned with the foretelling aspect of prophecy (prediction of the future) which has become the most recognised aspect of prophecy and is seen as particularly important in Scripture. The fulfilment of the foretelling prophecy is to be the criterion by which one can distinguish true prophets from false prophets (Deut. 18:22). It has been suggested by many that a number of the 'fulfilled' prophecies were written *ex-eventu*, such as the concluding verses of Amos which talk of the raising up of the booth of David, presupposing the fall of Jerusalem. This has also been suggested of Daniel, Isaiah and Micah, but it has little relevance for this work as we are looking at how prophecy is presented within the narrative as it is fulfilled.

Not all occurrences of foretelling are relevant to the issue of human responsibility for a number of predictions do not relate to man's actions at all (such as the prophecy of Jesus' birth understood in Matt. 2:1-12) and cannot be changed. It is only prophecy concerning a man's future that is of concern here for it would appear that if the future occurrences that are predicted cannot be averted, man cannot have freedom for his future is determinate, but if the occurrences can be prevented then God is not fully in control.

The type of prophecy that we will be concerned with is a prophecy which is available to the human subject of the prophecy as it has been directly revealed to him by God or as it has been written down in the Scriptures perhaps centuries before the birth of the subject. This prophecy concerns some action that the man will perform or that God will perform as a result of man's actions. These prophecies, if they are true, would appear to diminish man's freedom if God is wholly truthful and completely sovereign, knowing and fore-ordaining all situations and actions (see Eph 1:11). It would appear that if God can know what will happen and has even decided what will happen then the future is

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already written and there is nothing we can do to prevent the outcomes that have been decided. An extra dimension is added when prophecy comes into play, for here, not only is there a future that appears to be written, but also the subject has been made aware of it and 'is no longer under the illusion of his freedom' but bound to do what he has been told that he will do, or so it would seem to many. These prophetic predictions are based upon and dependant upon D (the description of the subject's cognitive mechanism), with God knowing the brain state of the subject. Even if D is not explicitly used in the formulation of the prophecy we must remember that it is implicitly present because that is how prophecy and humans operate.

In Scripture we can see two particular ways in which prophecy is formulated and two forms of outcome of the prophecy. First, the prophecy can be formulated in a specific and detailed manner when the subject of the prophecy and the outcome are clear to all before it takes place (e.g. 2 Kings 20). Alternatively, the prophecy could be formulated in an opaque and non-specific manner such as prophecies of Jesus' death and the decisions by various people (the Jews, Romans, etc.) to kill him, which serve the purpose of allowing us to see how God was in control in all of those situations and that it happened for his good purposes (Acts 2:23).

Secondly, concerning the question of outcomes, either the prophecy does not come about as one expects and God appears to change his mind, often as a result of a human being becoming aware of the prophecy and acting upon it, or the prophecy comes to fulfilment because the person has not believed or was unaware of what was predicted of him (e.g., Judas, except in John 13), the outcome providing an opportunity for us to see something of God's sovereignty.

One of the major questions that is raised is whether the intention of the prophecy is an influence on the form that it takes; i.e., if God is wanting a response that requires action on the part of the subject of the prophecy (probably the recipient of the prophecy) is the form specific and detailed? Or when God wants another type of reaction, perhaps an act of faith in his promises beforehand or some reaction after the event, does God formulate the prophecy in an opaque manner so that the subject will inevitably (for the logical court) do what is predicted?

Does MacKay's principle of logical indeterminism help us to understand prophecy? We would like to suggest that it does. MacKay originally intends to

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deal with an agent (A) who 'is *not actually interfered with until after* the events in question'.<sup>48</sup> However, in terms of prophecy we must look at A who is interfered with, that is, with a *specific and detailed* description (or prophecy) of the future events and an A interfered with, with a *general and non-specific* description of his future.

**General and non-specific prophecy**

To begin with we shall look at general and non-specific prophecy. This can be likened to MacKay's category of a specific and detailed prediction that is not presented to A. Although the prophecy is available, and may even be at hand for A, A is not aware that the prophecy applies to him, and can glean little knowledge of his actions and particularly his decisions from this prophecy. The situation here is simple: A, unaware of what God knows he will do (or indeed what God has determined him to do) makes the decision to do X, the prediction of which had a claim to the unconditional assent of God and any detached observer made aware of the prediction. It did not, however, have a claim to A's unconditional assent because he was not made aware of it. This type of prophecy can be seen throughout the Scriptures, and particularly the fulfilment of these is made clear in the New Testament. Predictions of people's decisions are made but these people reach the decisions by themselves unaware that what they are doing has been predicted by a sovereign God, albeit couched in vague and non-specific language. This can be seen throughout the Gospels and Acts. In Matthew 27: 9 we see the prediction of the sum of money that Judas would receive for betraying Jesus and what would be done with it; many would argue that because the prediction is so vague it is difficult to see how the freedom of the Chief Priests has been diminished at all. It seems unlikely that even with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures one would realise that this could be a prophecy about one's actions.

To understand this better let us turn to another example of general and non-specific prophecy found in Acts 3:17-26. Here Peter talks about how the prophets foretold and spoke of 'these days', not only about the Messiah and the blessings and judgement that he would bring but what would happen to him while he was on the earth. In verse 17 he makes it quite clear that the audience and their leaders 'acted in ignorance', that is, they were unaware that what they were doing was prophesied and perhaps ignorant of who they were actually dealing with. If they 'acted in ignorance' then we think that we can say that they did not think that what they were doing had been predicted and was determined at all but simply an

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exercise of their own freedom, that is, nothing was inevitable for them. Peter also makes it clear that God had foretold this in the Prophets, that 'his Christ would suffer'. This involved them disowning the 'Holy and Righteous One' and killing the 'author of life' (vv. 13-14). It was written in Scripture hundreds of years before it took place but because of its opaque nature it was not recognised as a prophecy of the actions of particular individuals until after the event.

The question raised, however, is 'why is this prophecy couched in such vague terms?' After all, it is not because God was not aware of what these people would do, for as we see in Acts 4: 28, God had decided beforehand that it would happen. There must be some other reason for it. We propose we can understand it in terms of the intentions of God. As we have already seen, according to MacKay's criterion, no specific and detailed prediction can be presented to the agent (A) without causing a change in his cognitive mechanism. A has to deal with the prophecy of his actions and decisions; we have also seen that only unaltered predictions can be produced, for altered ones are of little value, unable to lay claim to the unconditional assent of anyone. Not only this, but the unaltered prediction, if A chooses to believe it, will become invalid itself for it is made assuming that A does not hear it or believe it. No prediction can lay claim to the unconditional assent of A, he can act contrary to the prediction if he so wishes, he is not logically bound to fulfil it. If, however, he is not presented with this unaltered prediction it is inevitable from the perspective of unattached observers that he will do it; that is, A will not and cannot (from the perspective of the observers) act contrary to it; S and the observers know that he will do it.

If the leaders had been presented with a specific prophecy which described the precise times, action and persons involved, then what would have happened? Well, the prophecy could only have been conditional, no-one could be certain that what was predicted would take place; it certainly could take place but the prediction has no unconditional claim to the leaders' assent. If we asked a logical court what they would be correct in believing they would have concluded that the leaders were free in their decisions concerning what to do, for the prediction becomes false if they believe it; it holds no unconditional claim to the leader's assent because no prediction can. It holds no unconditional claim to the observers assent because it has now been revealed to the leaders and the prediction depended upon them not being aware of it. Even if the prediction had been altered to take into account their reaction, it

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still would have no unconditional claim to anyone's assent.

It seems that on a compatibilist rendering of things, if God wants man to do what he knows he will do, that is, fulfil the prediction that can lay claim to God's unconditional assent, then he cannot reveal the detailed and specific prediction to them, because it then ceases to be a prediction that lays claim to his unconditional assent. So on this understanding, why does he bother with opaque prophecy if it would cause problems if man became aware before the incident that it was about him? We would like to suggest that it is in order for man to become aware of God's sovereignty *ex-eventu*, so that we can see that, for example, 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done in the saving of many lives. So then don't be afraid.' (Gen. 50:20-21). Our freedom is not diminished, for we do not know the prediction, but God's Sovereignty and purposes can be seen to be fulfilled after the event.

Many would argue that it is irrelevant whether A hears or understands the prophecy or not; what matters is that God knew exactly what A was going to do, and therefore A was not free, even though he was unaware of this. But let us look at MacKay again: what happens after the prediction is fulfilled and A realises that the prophecy was about him and therefore an accurate prediction (even if it was not set forth in the prophecy) has been made? Must A conclude that his actions were indeed inevitable for him? MacKay would rightly answer, no. For, when A is presented with the prediction (D) of his actions after the event he can conclude that the predictor and any detached observers were quite right to accept D and would have been wrong to reject it. However, A would also have to concede that D was not binding upon him and he would have been in error to believe D if only he had known it. Not only was A unaware of D but had he been aware of it, it would still not have had any claim to his unconditional assent. Whether A knows it or not, the prediction cannot lay claim to his unconditional assent. A's freedom is not diminished even if there is an accurate description of his future. In Acts 2:37, after hearing that '[Jesus] was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross' (Acts 2:22-23) and hearing a prophecy from the Old Testament concerning Christ's resurrection, the hearers do not respond as though they had no control over what happened (and what was predicted), but instead ask 'Brothers what shall we do?' They accept their responsibility and seek a solution for their guilt.

**Specific and detailed prophecy**

We have discussed above why God uses general and non-specific prophecy and it appears that we run into problems if we are presented with detailed and specific prophecy. The general and non-specific prophecy can be likened to the predictions that A is unaware of what MacKay concerns himself with, but, for the purposes of discussion, he looks at the possibility of the predictor confronting the agent with a specific and detailed prediction. We are now going to look at how we can understand the use of these sorts of predictions in Scripture.

This form of prediction can be seen in 2 Kings 20:1-11. The question that is raised is 'how is it that these prophecies function?'. It would appear that these predictions, if fulfilled, would show God's foreknowledge and sovereignty to be true, but man has no choice in the matter, for it is not simply that man is unaware of the prediction and just proceeds with his life which may allow for freedom, but he is told what will happen and if God is sovereign, surely what he says will happen is inevitable and beyond our control. However, if these predictions are not fulfilled, does this show man to have freedom at the expense of God's sovereignty and infallible foreknowledge? It would appear that way, and indeed many have taken this to be the case. The prediction in 2 Kings 20 is not fulfilled, but the prediction in 1 Kings 20:14ff is. Was God not aware of the future in 2 Kings 20, or was he lying?

**Hezekiah's prayer**

In the light of MacKay's hypothesis we think that we can say that neither God's sovereignty or man's freedom is compromised in either 1 Kings 20:14ff or 2 Kings 20. First of all, what can we glean from 2 Kings 20? Hezekiah is ill and at the point of death; then the Lord tells Hezekiah through his prophet Isaiah that he is going to die, and will not recover. This statement contains no escape clause, indeed, Hezekiah is told to put his house in order because of his impending death, one would assume that there is nothing that Hezekiah can do: Yahweh has decreed his death and it is now inevitable. With this understanding of the situation one would assume that Hezekiah would begin to put his house in order and accept the prophecy, but instead he prays to Yahweh, asking him to remember that he has been a faithful servant. This appears to be an incredibly bizarre understanding of the sovereignty and truthfulness of Yahweh. If he is all powerful and all truthful then surely what he has said will happen, will happen. Even more suprisingly, Hezekiah does not

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die, Yahweh again speaks through Isaiah and tells Hezekiah that he will add fifteen more years to his life. How may these problems be solved?

We propose that one can understand this incident by looking at MacKay's criterion. Granted MacKay deals with predictions concerning the cognitive mechanism, and we will deal with a more explicit example below, but we think that we can say that this prophecy does deal with cognitive mechanisms, because Hezekiah's actions become involved in it, even if the prediction itself does not explicitly describe an action or a decision.

Let us assume then, that this specific and detailed prediction of an outcome is a prediction based upon Hezekiah's actions (to put it simply, based on the assumption that he will not pray to the Yahweh, perhaps put more strongly, that he will not believe the prediction, i.e., it would take place if either he doesn't believe and so does not act on it or he is not presented with the prediction). Was Yahweh lying or compromising his sovereignty? Let us test it by MacKay's criterion. As we have already shown, adjusted predictions are not acceptable, for they cannot claim the unconditional assent of any party, connected or unconnected, thus we can and should only work with unadjusted predictions, and therefore we should conclude that Yahweh's prediction was an unadjusted one, dependant upon the fact that Hezekiah would disbelieve it.

So, was Hezekiah unable to do anything to change this outcome? As we have seen, he was capable of changing the outcome, and this can also be shown using MacKay's criterion by appealing to a logical court. The logical court, MacKay suggests, would conclude that Yahweh (or any non-participant onlooker) would be correct to believe and in error to disbelieve what D (the description of Hezekiah's future [if it was not revealed to Hezekiah]) specifies. We must then ask the logical court 'how binding is specification D upon Hezekiah?' One would assume that if it is binding upon Yahweh and laid claim to his unconditional assent it should also be binding upon Hezekiah, but the logical court returns a different verdict. If T is the present or the near future then Hezekiah would be in error to believe it, for no change in his belief could take place without a correlate in his CM. Therefore D has no unconditional claim to Hezekiah's assent; that is, he would not be correct to believe it and in error to disbelieve it. If he disbelieved it, then it seems that it would have taken place, but as it is he believed the specification, acted upon his belief and

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prevented it from taking place. But then this suggests that Yahweh was, in fact, in error by believing this prediction. However, if we return to MacKay's work we see that a true specific and detailed prediction that will inevitably take place cannot be given to the participant. If it is revealed to A it immediately takes on a conditional nature, and so we must conclude that this has to be the case with specific and detailed prophecies in the Bible. We must assume that Yahweh (as He is all-knowing) is aware of this fact and so Yahweh knew that he was not telling Hezekiah something that would inevitably come true, but simply a prediction that would be true *if* Hezekiah did not believe him, even though Yahweh, being all knowing, knew that he would believe it.

Therefore, if we say that this was not the true, specific and detailed prediction, was Hezekiah bound by the true prediction which Yahweh must have known but did not reveal to Hezekiah? Again, no, because this prediction has no claim to Hezekiah's unconditional assent if only he knew it, only a claim to the assent of unattached observers. If it is revealed to Hezekiah then it becomes like the prediction that was revealed, merely conditional. How are we to understand God then, if he knowingly gives people conditional predictions, which can turn out to be false? Is he a liar manipulating man?

First it should be noted that God could not give specific and detailed predictions that were not of this nature, it is quite clearly logically impossible, as MacKay has shown. Secondly, Scripture itself warns us of the true nature of what appears to be unconditional prophecy; in Jeremiah 18:7-8, Yahweh warns that what he predicts is dependant upon the actions and reactions of the nations, as we see with Nineveh, and we presume, it can apply more specifically to individuals. They are predictions depending on the nations not knowing or not believing and so not acting upon the prophecy that they receive. Thirdly, we can look at this problem in a way (alongside the other two ways) propounded by Paul Helm in his essay 'God in Dialogue'.<sup>49</sup> This not only helps us to understand the problem and the solution but it also points us to the intentions behind the prophecy, something which we think is key in understanding specific and detailed prophecy.

Helm looks at the story in 2 Kings pointing out that it is 'a case not simply of God changing His mind, but of Him changing his mind, having implied that He will not change his mind'.<sup>50</sup> Helm notes the importance of belief in the whole

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situation for 'only if it is believed to be sincere could it cause Hezekiah to pray for his own recovery.'<sup>51</sup> Helm suggests that we have to think of the whole situation in terms of intentions and he suggests that we ask, 'could the entire incident of Hezekiah and his recovery be encompassed within one indivisible divine intention, or must we resort to a series of intentions formed as God reacts to successive circumstances?'<sup>52</sup> Helm suggests that if we understand it within a framework of conditions or promises (perhaps the covenantal framework or in terms of Jer. 18:7-8) then what God intends 'might be (rather clumsily) expressed as, "that Hezekiah will recover from sickness, having expressly indicated that Hezekiah will die if his recovery is not requested, knowing that as a matter of fact his recovery will be requested".'<sup>53</sup> From this Helm concludes that if we place this into a covenantal framework, then to talk of the change of God remains consistent with his unchangeableness, that is the unchangeableness of his covenant. 'What God says to Hezekiah is sincerely intended, but it is not irrevocable if Hezekiah prays for some other outcome within a covenantal framework such as that suggested.'<sup>54</sup> It is basically a case of relativity of standpoints, from the human standpoint it looks as though God's intentions are changing, but, from the divine standpoint, his intentions remain the same but are not necessarily simple and could present an appearance of change. This helps shed some light on our understanding of God's intentions when he provides a prophecy and it helps us reconcile what appears to be the deceitful or at least changing character of God with the goodness and unchangeableness of God.

Again someone may still hold the objection that Hezekiah was not free in terms of God's overall intention, for as we have already said, God knew that as 'a matter of fact his recovery will be requested', but yet again, as we have argued above, this knowledge is not knowledge for Hezekiah and could not be until after the occasion, for he could not possibly be correct to believe it and in error to believe it even in the sovereignty of God.

**Peter's Denial**

Now let us look at a situation when a specific and detailed prediction is made of an action and is made known to the subject of the prediction. It can be found in all of the Gospels but for the purposes of this discussion we shall look at Matthew 26:31-35 and 69-75. In this incident Jesus quite explicitly says to Peter: 'I tell you the truth, this very night, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.' In this specific and detailed prediction we have the

subject (Peter) being told what he will do (disown Jesus), how many times he will do it (three) and when (that evening before the cock crowed). Some, such as Stump and Kretzmann<sup>55</sup> would argue that this still allows for freedom for Peter, for it does not give the precise times that he will deny Jesus or the precise words that he will use; but we think that most people would accept that this prediction appears at least to diminish Peter's responsibility, if not making it inevitable for him to do this; anyhow, the knowledge of exactly when must still be available to God. Let us assume, however, that this is specific and detailed enough that if it were possible for it to claim the unconditional assent of Peter it would render the actions inevitable for him. As we have seen, according to MacKay this prediction cannot have an unconditional claim to Peter's assent, so that he would be correct to believe it and in error to disbelieve it, and so in this sense we have little to learn from this incident. However, there is something interesting with regards to MacKay's criterion, for here is an example where the subject does what is predicted and we are given an insight into the state of Peter's cognitive mechanism. As we have already discovered, the only predictions that are of any use are unaltered ones, and these predictions will be valid *if* the subject is not aware of the prediction and so is not able to believe it *or* if he is made aware of it and *does not believe* the prediction,<sup>56</sup> it is in these cases that a logical court can say it will take place. So if we were to turn to a logical court during this incident we would ask if it is inevitable from their standpoint, they would first answer that it is not inevitable because Peter has been made aware of the prediction, so it should be embodied in his cognitive mechanism as with Hezekiah. But, Peter has been made aware of the prediction and not believed it for he says, 'Even if I have to die with you I will never disown you' (Matt. 26:35). It still has no claim to Peter's unconditional assent. However, we know (as does the logical court) that an unadjusted prediction is made assuming that A does not believe it, and here Peter does not believe it. Thus, the prediction can now lay claim to the unconditional assent of the logical court while Peter does not believe it. In verses 69-75 we see that what Jesus predicted took place exactly as he said. That is, despite the prediction still laying no claim to the unconditional assent of Peter and so preventing it from being inevitable from his standpoint, because he did not believe it, it took place because the conditions upon which the prediction had to be made remained the same. This incident shows us how MacKay's criterion still allows for Peter to have freedom even though the prediction takes place as described. From Peter's point of view his denial was

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at no time inevitable for himself. Jesus' prediction could not lay any claim to Peter's unconditional assent, but because of his unbelief it was inevitable from the perspective of any detached observer.

**Conclusions**

We have looked at examples of each of the types of prophecy and each type of outcome and tested the cogency of MacKay's criterion for each. We have seen that in the case of specific and detailed prophecy and non-specific and general prophecy that is fulfilled, the predictions were not inevitable for A. At no point (except after T) would A have been correct to believe the prediction and in error to believe it and so by this understanding of freedom A was always free. In the case of specific and detailed predictions, that did not take place (for we have seen that this cannot be the observable, or indeed logical, case for non-specific and general prophecy) again nothing was inevitable for A. Not only that, but God's sovereignty and truthfulness were also retained for revealed specific prophecy becomes conditional by nature and so cannot be said to be a definite description of the future, its fulfillment depends upon A.

**General Conclusion**

The debate concerning the tension between creaturely freedom and the omniscience of God will no doubt continue because of different understandings held by a variety of scholars regarding freedom and sovereignty. As we have seen, one's understanding of the nature of true freedom can colour the discussion to such a large extent that no solution can be possible except a denial of one of the central tenets of the discussion. Not only does one's understanding of freedom influence one's perspective but so do the controlling priorities that one has when entering into such a debate, whether it be the priority of Scripture or the priority of 'perceived' experience.

In an attempt to hold together the scriptural picture concerning the nature of God and the nature of man's freedom, along with experience of our own freedom and responsibility, together with the findings of mechanistic brain science, we have proposed a way in which we might proceed in this debate. The result has been a compatibilist approach which seems to succeed in maintaining a form of the sovereignty of God which in no way diminishes man's responsibility, and maintains a form of freedom for man which in no way compromises God's sovereignty or makes him contingent.

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By applying MacKay's criterion to the realms of human freedom before a sovereign God we have been able to show that a man's actions are by no means determined by God in a way that makes man's actions inevitable from that man's standpoint, even if God has determined that man's actions and revealed them to him in the form of a prophecy. For there can be no prediction that can lay claim to the unconditional assent of that man. Therefore, man remains free in the sense that he has no rational obligation to believe any prediction or description of his future actions and God remains sovereign in the sense that he can determine any action while man remains wholly responsible for the subsequent action. This understanding of freedom may not be acceptable to some scholars, such as Hasker, but it seems to us that it remains consistent with the biblical picture and indeed MacKay's understanding of freedom and so our proposal can be an acceptable solution to the problem of God's foreknowledge and prophecy and man's freedom and responsibility.

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## ENDNOTES

48. D. M. MacKay, "Responsible mechanism or responsible agent? A response to William Hasker" in *Christian Scholars Review*, Vol.VIII No. 2, (CSR, 1978), p. 144.
49. Paul Helm, "God in dialogue," in *Interpreting the Bible: Historical and theological studies*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, (Apollos, 1997).
50. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
55. See *Prophecy, Past Truth and Eternity in Philosophical perspectives*, 5, Philosophy of Religion ed. James E. Tomberlin, (Ridgeview Pub. Co., 1991).
56. Admittedly, MacKay does not really allow for A to hear the prediction and not believe it because it does signify some change in the cognitive mechanism, however, in effect, this change is negligible. This is the case because in rejecting D it becomes as though A did not hear the prediction at all, it does not alter his decisions or awareness of his own freedom. However, this only remains the case while A truly does not believe it, when it begins to have some bearing on his thoughts the unaltered prediction, which is based on him not hearing or believing it becomes false.