

The Hebraic View of Prophecy and History

Reggie Kelly

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The phenomenon of Biblical prophecy rises out of a profound philosophy of history. A philosophy of history that by means of the prophetic unction interprets its past, illumines its course, and predicts its ultimate goal.

In prophetic perspective, the future is shaping the present rather than the reverse. This is why the powers of the eschatological future in both judgment and salvation is ever penetrating the contemporary circumstance as men are brought into encounter with God's future through the word of prophecy. Whether for salvation or judgment, the future is already "at hand."

The imminence of the prophetic future initiates a crisis of decision, not on the basis of chronological proximity, though this perspective, because of the nature of existential proximity to eternity, would not be inaccurate. Rather, there is a constant proximity that all persons have to the end that justifies the concept of an "existential imminence" in the sense of the moral claims contained in the inexorable approach of God's future. Hence, unfaithfulness will draw near the judgment of the great day as will righteousness its salvation.

Israel's religion, unlike that of her contemporaries, was grounded in a revelation that is mediated through the prophetic interpretation of historical events, but an interpretation that is grounded in the covenant. Israel's calling and election establishes the bonds of a relationship of mutual faithfulness and moral obligation. This helps to explain why the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are designated the "Former Prophets" in the Hebrew canon.

The authors of these books, like the later prophets, saw that the history of Israel was in itself a revelation of God.

When a writer recorded Old Testament history he was not interested simply in writing history as history, but in tracing the revelation of God in and through that history. This history, however, is selective according to what is revelatory in the context of covenant and salvation. But because salvation history is controlled by God's "purpose according to election," it is distinctively the history of Israel.

Apart from the prophetic key of Israel, history is a hopeless enigma. Human futility can be traced to its failure to accept Yahweh's challenge to test His the reality of His existence and personality through the miracle of prophecy. God has chosen that His existence and nature be verified through prophecy concerning Israel. Prophecy is the sign that God has chosen as witness to Himself. Throughout the second half of Isaiah's prophecy, the "ancient people" and their peculiar role in history as Yahweh's ("my") witnesses are set forth as the true key to the meaning of history. Through the evidence of prophecy, Israel is the sign of God's sovereign and purposeful design in history. No apologetic for the faith can improve on this formula; and if we would be witnesses to the God that predestines history according to a revealed will and plan, we cannot neglect the witness that God Himself invokes, Israel in the light of prophecy and history.

The meaning and destiny of history and even the purpose of creation has been set along side of God's self-revelation through His prophetic purpose for Israel and the nations through His covenant of salvation in the Messiah redeemer ("the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy;" Rev 19:10). If we would receive the message of God through His acts in history, we must see it reflected in large part through the prophetic drama of Israel's sojourn through time.

From the Biblical perspective, the historical role and destiny of nations receive significance only in relationship to the prophetic future of Israel. In the New Testament, Paul discusses this concept of history in Romans chapters nine through eleven. It is not, however, meant that the purpose of God in His providential workings in the arena of history is by any means for Israel's sake only. Though Israel's election remains central, both testaments declare the universal scope

of God's redemptive intention for all nations.

The prophet was the bearer of a special message from God, particularly addressed to his own nation or contemporaries, and usually at a time of national crises. He would diagnose the nation's true condition before God, interpret the cause of present ills, declare and interpret the divine will according to the covenant, exhort and comfort the remnant, and warn the impenitent of the wrath that draws near in the always imminent Day of the Lord.

The future toward which the divine will is moving all things is unchangeable and its swift approach inexorable, but every man's relationship to this future is determined now by his response to the word of revelation in the prophet's mouth. For this reason it may be said that all prophecy whether forth telling or foretelling has an ethical thrust on the basis of the covenant, and is intended to expose the heart, effect repentance, and create faith in a context of promise and hope.

The prophet was the guardian of the covenant, the enforcer of Moses, maintaining the law of the blessing and the curse as announced between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal (Deut. 27-28). But conscious of the inability of human nature to fulfill the righteousness required in the law, the prophets would mingle their stern charge with the balm of promise and overtures of love to the penitent and believing. Israel is promised an immediate aversion of the present distress if she responded faithfully to the prophet's message, but the ultimate and everlasting redemption comes only through the Messianic deliverance of the Great Day of the Lord. However, if the prophets message is spurned and Jehovah is rejected, then already the Day of the Lord is "at hand," already beginning to exact its awful judgment, and if the first-fruits of "that Day," already making itself felt, is insufficient to dissuade Israel from her ill-fated course of impenitence and rebellion, then judgment will be final, complete, and fatal in the consummation of that great and dreadful day of which the preliminary judgments are but the foreshadowing. In this sense, the near fulfillment of the Day of the Lord in Israel's historic captivities are the advance visitation of the powers of the climatic Day reaching into the present. It is the impingement of the future, the presence of the future.

Thus the prophets as inspired interpreters of history have given us a philosophy of history that derives from Israel's experience in that history. The past is not only a promise, but also the pattern of the future, a prophetic point of reference that discloses the ethical and redemptive purpose of God unfolded in the progress and future of salvation history. The meaning of Israel is the meaning of history. The Lord of history and of all the earth, and of all nations, has for a profound reason chosen to identify Himself uniquely as the God of Israel.

Finally, the prophetic awareness is that God has chosen to educate mankind through his unique revelatory dealing with Israel. If we would understand the meaning and message of history we can be successful only so far as we submit our hearts to learn of God in His self disclosure through the prophets of Israel, who present to us Israel as the great object lesson of history.

"I will set My glory among the nations; all the nations shall see My judgment which I have executed, and My hand which I have laid on them. So the house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God from that day forward. The Gentiles shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity; because they were unfaithful to Me, therefore I hid My face from them. I gave them into the hand of their enemies, and they all fell by the sword. According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions I have dealt with them, and hidden My face from them. Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Now I will bring back the captives of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I will be jealous for My holy name – after they have borne their shame, and all their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, when they dwelt safely in their own land and no one made them afraid. When I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them out of their enemies' lands, and I am hallowed in them in the sight of many nations, then they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who sent them into captivity among the nations, but also brought them back to their own land, and left none of them captive any longer. And I will not hide My face from them anymore;

for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel,' says the Lord GOD."

Ezekiel Ch 39:21-29

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