Prophecy and the Newspaper

In the thinking of many Jews and Christians the return of Jewish people to their traditional homeland from the end of the nineteenth century, and other events in the Middle East over the past century, have been the fulfillment of prophecies in the First Testament. In what sense is this so? What understanding of prophecy does it imply, and what counts as proper interpretation of prophecy?

## 1 Prophecy as God’s “No” and God’s “Yes” to Israel

When people think of “the prophets,” they commonly have in mind the people whose words are preserved in the books called “The Prophets,” plus one or two illustrious others such as Elijah and Elisha, but there were many other Israelite prophets whose words never became Scripture. While some falsely claimed to speak Yahweh’s words, others truly so claimed. We can only guess at the process whereby Israel came to generate the particular prophetic books we have and to preserve them so that they became Scripture. We can only guess at the criteria that led them to preserve and include these and to omit others, though I shall guess at one of these criteria in a moment, but we can see the implication of the process. While the words in these books may be no truer than the words of some other prophets and may be no more words of God than some other words (not all God’s words and not all true words are in Scripture), they count for more in later Israel and thus in the church. They count in a way that the words of those other prophets do not. They were taken as not merely words for their own day but words for succeeding days. One New Testament way of making this point is to say that they came into being “in the Spirit”: that was a way of saying that they had a mysterious capacity to speak beyond their own day, and specifically that they illumined Jesus and the life of the church. It meant that they are able to make people wise for salvation “through faith in Christ Jesus” even though they were written long before his day, and that they are able to contribute to the maturing of people who believe in him (2 Tim 3:16). That is what prophecy is designed to mean to us.

How do these prophets do this? The comment in 2 Timothy applies not only to prophecy but to the First Testament Scriptures in general, and in principle all the Scriptures fulfill their task in the same way, or in the same three ways.

First, they tell us how God related to Israel in that once-for-all history that took place from Abraham to Jesus. Our life with God in the present depends on what God did back then; we can relate to God because Christ died for us and rose for us. Israel is God’s people because God chose it and made promises to it back then, and the church is God’s people because it became part of Israel’s story. The prophets are part of that story. God’s speaking to Israel through the prophets is part of that shaping of Israel through which God set about working out a purpose.

Sometimes their work contributed positively to that process: it was in part because of the prophets and their promises that there were people such as Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon, ready to welcome Jesus when he came. Often they played a more paradoxical part in this process. Rudolf Bultmann has called the whole First Testament the story of the failure or miscarriage of God’s plan,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the prophets are key to seeing Israel’s story that way. It was they who declared that God’s plan was miscarrying and that Israel risked being written out of God’s drama. It was in fulfillment of Yahweh’s strange work through the prophets (cf. Isa 28:21) that other priests than Zechariah and other craftsmen than Joseph and other expectant people than Anna rejected Jesus and thus found themselves rejected. There are varying ways in which the prophets are part of the story of how God brought about our salvation.

Second, the Scriptures reveal to us how God regularly relates to Israel and to the world. The stories of God and Abraham, Hagar, Deborah, and David form not only part of unrepeatable history but examples of recurrent patterns. God’s relating to people in the First Testament is not random but principled, and we learn about God’s relating to us through accounts of this First Testament relating. Prophecy tells us how God regularly relates to Israel and to the church in warning and promise. It tells us how God relates to the nations in the prophets’ day and gives us clues to see how God might be relating to the nations in our day.

The patterning of this promise within the First Testament reflects how God regularly relates to the world and to Israel. The prophets’ warnings and promises go back to promises God made to Abraham. Humanity had set course for disaster by turning aside from God’s way, but God began to put into effect a plan to restore the world, by taking hold of one family. God promised to make them into a nation and give them a land to dwell in. Trouble will come on any who are against them, but God’s aim for the world in general was that they should seek the blessing Abraham’s family enjoys. These promises began to be fulfilled in the story told in Genesis to Joshua. Then two further promises were added. God made a commitment to be faithful to Israel’s king, David, and his descendants, and to take as a home Israel’s temple in Jerusalem (2 Sam 7; 1 Kings 8). These promises lie behind the message of the prophets, who in different contexts in different ways warn of exile, decimation, shame, rejection, and the loss of king and temple, and/or promise the reversal of all these. The age-old promises are principles for God’s working with Israel over the centuries.

Third, the Scriptures tell us God’s expectations of Israel and of the nations. As they do this in the blocks of teaching in Exodus to Deuteronomy, so they do in the prophets. Sometimes this instruction is timeless: the worship of Yahweh alone and the refusal to misuse Yahweh’s name apply straightforwardly in any century. Sometimes this instruction varies from century to century. There are differences between the expectations expressed in Isaiah and in Ezekiel or in Amos and in Haggai, reflecting the way God’s challenges need to change in different circumstances. Sometimes people need to be told to focus not on worship and prayer but on caring for the poor; sometimes they need to be told to focus on worship and prayer. Sometimes they need to be told to repent, not to assume that they are all right with God; sometimes they need to be told to trust that they are all right with God and not to assume that God will always be displeased with them. The prophets’ task is commonly to summon the people of God away from one set of emphases into a different set or into a more multi-faceted life.

Prophecy, then, relates to us today as part of God’s once-for-all relationship with Israel on which our relationship with God depends, it illustrates how God keeps working with Israel on the basis of foundational promises and commitments and with the nations, and it illustrates the kind of behavior and priorities the people of God is expected to embody in its life.

God’s expectations in this connection were not fulfilled, and for much of Israel’s history the prophets were busy declaring that because of this, Israel was finished. Prophecy constituted God’s “No” to Israel. Prophets asserted that the end had come upon the people of God. Admittedly the small print in their prophecies indicated that this was not all that needed saying. Every prophetic book also refers to some positive future for the people, even if such promises are held back for the final reel (and, indeed, may come from the work of a different director from the first cut). But the bulk of the ministry of the eighth- and seventh-century prophets warns of imminent calamity that will decimate the people, devastate its land, destroy its sanctuary, dethrone its monarchy, and terminate its relationship with Yahweh.

With Ezekiel that changes. The fall of Jerusalem is the hinge of his ministry and of prophecy in general. Henceforth the minor theme in earlier prophecies becomes the major theme. The people will be restored, the land replanted, the temple rebuilt, the monarchy reestablished, the relationship renewed; all this is set in the context of the intention announced in the promise to Abraham that Israel will thereby shine God’s light to the entire world. The prophets’ promises are thus not random or novel. They do not come out of the blue but relate to the whole divine purpose narrated in Scripture. Ezekiel’s message is a reaffirmation of these commitments, promising that Israel will be restored in such a way as to bring it to acknowledge Yahweh.

If a woman has children, she will characteristically find that the bond between her and them is so strong that there is no way she could ever throw them out or cease to care for them.[[2]](#footnote-2) No matter what they do or how old they are, they remain her children, and she remains committed to them. The bond may seem even stronger than that between husband and wife. The latter relationship is created and can be uncreated (often is). The former is generated and cannot be undone. God’s relationship with Israel and then with the church is like marriage in that it comes into being by conscious decision, in time, but it is like motherhood in the way it becomes integral to God’s being as well as to Israel’s. Perhaps it is significant that in the course of his book Hosea moves from the first image to the second, from a husband’s experience (chapters 1 – 3) to a mother’s (chapter 11). Even with the first analogy Yahweh breaks the rules, marrying the same woman for a second time. The second analogy makes it possible to indicate that Yahweh has surrendered any freedom to terminate the relationship. Yahweh is more like Israel’s mother than its husband.

## 2 The Significance of the Prophets after Christ

In principle, then, Yahweh has said “Yes” to Israel once-and-for-all. “Replacement theology” or “supersessionism” (the view that the church replaced Israel in God’s purpose) cannot be right.[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, the promise to Abraham stands: the people will be blessed and will become a blessing. The aspects of God’s promise to Abraham, expanded to David, are an outworking of God’s “Yes” that the prophets take up and reaffirm as Israel makes the transition from being a monarchic state to being an imperial colony during the Second Temple period. The First Testament speaks of the renewing of God’s special relationship with Israel and of the inner renewal of Israel, and this happens in the Second Temple period.

Do God’s promises still stand when the Second Temple is on the eve of destruction? What insights on this does the New Testament offer? Without using the analogy of marriage or parenthood, in Romans 11 Paul expresses the same theology as Hosea. God does not go back on calling Israel and is not finished with the Jewish people. The time will come when they acknowledge Jesus and then become the means of further blessing for the gentile world. The fundamental promise God made back at the beginning (Gen 12) still stands: God will so bless Israel that it will become a means of blessing for the entire world. Paul speaks of “Israel,” but in our terms we should think of the Jewish people as the heirs of this promise and not merely the Israeli state. There are more Jews in New York than in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, and it is to U.S. or U.K. Jews as much as to Israeli Jews that the promise belongs.

While the New Testament makes clear that God is still committed to the Jewish people, the way it talks about God’s promises concerning the monarchy and the temple is rather different. It reworks those promises. The First Testament promises a new David to be king over Israel, and for short periods in the Second Temple period a descendant of David leads the people in Jerusalem, but the New Testament then sees Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise. He is a very different kind of king from the one envisaged by the promise to David, yet we look for no further fulfillment of Ezekiel 34 than the one it has received in Jesus, except the final appearing of this same Jesus.

Likewise the First Testament promises a new temple, and the temple is rebuilt after the exile and more gloriously by Herod, but Jesus subsequently speaks of his person as God’s temple, as the place of God’s dwelling, and the New Testament addresses Christians as the Holy Spirit’s temple. Revelation in turn offers a picture colored by Ezekiel of God’s dwelling in a new Jerusalem. There seems to be no room for a rebuilt stone temple here. The incarnation, the coming of the Spirit, and the new Jerusalem fulfill all that the temple stood for. Temple, like, kingship becomes a metaphor for understanding aspects of Jesus and his significance.

Yahweh’s promises concerning the monarchy and the temple were the two promises that were additional to God’s original commitment to Abraham. Both emerged from human desires and ideas rather than from divine initiative. Both are more dispensable than the elements in that original commitment.

What of the promise of the land? The New Testament sometimes takes up the image of land, like monarchy and temple, as a metaphor for aspects of the significance of the Christ event through which God’s people enjoy the restthat never came about in Canaan (1 Peter 1:4, Heb 3 – 4), and it does look forward to a new Jerusalem, though a heavenly one (Rev 21). This might suggest seeing the promise about the land as fulfilled in Christ, in a metaphorical sense, like the promises concerning David and the temple. On the other hand, the way Mary and Zechariah, for instance, speak of what God will achieve through Jesus (Luke 1:46-55, 67-79) looks as if it presupposes the people enjoying freedom and blessing in their land. The New Testament never suggests questions of principle concerning the land as it does about kingship and temple. Whereas it systematically reinterprets God’s commitment to David and less systematically reinterprets God’s commitment to the temple, it offers relatively few hints of a reinterpretation of Israel’s relationship with the land.

When it makes occasional typological use of a First Testament motif such as the land, it does so in order to utilize the First Testament material to help it answer its own theological questions, questions such as “What is the significance of Jesus and what is the Church about?” It is using the same methods of interpretation as other Jews of its day to find answers to other questions. Its aim is different from the aim of seeking to learn theologically from the First Testament itself, which will involve learning from the sense attaching to the First Testament when God inspired it as a means of communication with people in the time before Christ. An involvement with the First Testament in this connection will imply more than an interest in a theme such as the land as a symbol for helping Christians think through the significance of Jesus. God’s original purpose involved a blessing of the people in its land that would enable it to become a blessing to others in the context of its relationship with Yahweh. That is still part of God’s “Yes” to Israel.

All this fits with the fact that land is integral to the notion of peoplehood as monarchy and temple are not. The notion of a people that does not have a relationship to a land does not make very good sense. It is for this reason that land appears in God’s original promise to Abraham. In turn, this particular land became intrinsically linked to the story of this people and its Messiah. Any old land would not do as the home of the Jewish people; the story of the fulfilling of God’s purpose links the people to this land. We might further then infer that the New Testament takes for granted Jewish enjoyment of the land.

In turn, that would suggest that we might indeed see the extraordinary return of Jews to the land of Palestine over the past hundred years as reflecting God’s abiding intention to let Jewish people live there (ultimately as a base for their testimony to Jesus as Messiah). This return is not a mere political accident, and the parallels between this event and First Testament prophecies are not mere coincidence. First Testament prophecies were expressions of God’s longstanding commitments and purposes. On the other hand, monarchic statehood was not part of the promise to Abraham, and the twentieth century reestablishment of the actual state of Israel is not a fulfillment of God’s promise in the same sense as is the rebuilding of a Jewish population in the land. The state of Israel does not have the same theological significance as the people of Israel. The Abrahamic promise is quite compatible with Jews and Arabs both living freely in the land, especially in light of the fact that the Arab peoples trace their ancestry to Abraham and many are also the spiritual children of Abraham as they have come to believe in Jesus.

## 3 Foretelling and Forthtelling; Hearing Prophecy in its Context

It is sometimes said that the prophets were forthtellers rather than or more than foretellers.[[4]](#footnote-4) Their main task was not to predict events but to challenge their contemporaries about the will of God that needed implementing in their community, to confront Israel with the demand that it should embody Yahweh’s fairness and compassion in its life. This claim is right in what it affirms but wrong in what it denies, or in the strength of its denial. The prophets were both foretellers and forthtellers, and the two activities were integrally linked in a variety of ways. It was because Yahweh purposed to bless Israel (foretelling) that it was called to a life of faithfulness (forthtelling). That life was designed to embody the vision for Israel that Yahweh purposed to implement. It was also a condition of the promise coming true. Yahweh’s promise and Israel’s commitment could not be separated.

When we ask how the Scriptures in general and the prophets in particular are designed to address us millennia after their day, the third of the three ways I suggested they speak to us interweaves with the second.[[5]](#footnote-5) The prophets’ words challenge Israel, the church, and the world about their lives, as well as illustrating how God relates to them. Arguably it is not gentile Christians’ business to tell the Jewish people or the state of Israel how to run its life and how to read its prophets; if we might ever have had any such right, we long ago forfeited it. But if we are to think about prophecy’s implications for Israel, we have to hold together the wondrous promises that commit God to an ongoing faithfulness to Israel with the far-reaching demands that expect of Israel an ongoing faithfulness to God expressed in a mirroring of God to the world. Further, the prophets require of us a commitment to be as concerned for the fair treatment of the non-Jewish people living west of the Jordan as we are for Israel’s fair treatment. Part of the tragedy of that land is that it is loved by two peoples; the prophets refuse us the option of short-circuiting a solution to this problem by a commitment to one of these peoples that ignores the love, needs, and history of the other.

So the prophets tell forth; they also foretell. They do indeed speak about the future, so that Ezekiel (for instance) announces coming events that affect rulers such as the Egyptian Pharaoh. But there is a jump involved in reckoning that a prophet such as Ezekiel issues promises or warnings that find fulfillment in twentieth-century events. An example is the belief that the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 began to be fulfilled in twentieth century Israel. In the vision, bones first become bodies and then Yahweh’s breath is breathed into them. In history, the nation has been brought back to political life; it will in due course be brought back to spiritual life. A more specific example that I recall from my teenage years is the prophecy envisaging the Pharaoh declaring, “My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself” (Ezek 29:3, KJV). This was said to be fulfilled in President Nasser’s nationalizing of the Suez Canal in 1956. The suggestion does not work so well in modern translations, which make clear that the word for “river” is the word for the Nile, though this has also encouraged the idea that Ezekiel’s prophecy refers to the building of the Aswan Dam. Rather, the coming events that Ezekiel announces relate to the people he addresses. The political events he announces are ones to unfold in his day. He speaks of them in order to enable his people to respond to what Yahweh is doing in their midst. He specifically denies that he speaks about “far off days” or “distant times” (Ezek 12:21-28).

It coheres with this that prophetic books generally open with a paragraph telling us who wrote them, what period they belong to, and which countries they relate to. At the very beginning they indicate that we have to understand them as God’s word to particular people in particular circumstances. As the books unfold, the same fact is continually made clear by the references to specific situations, needs, and sins. Their message is one that relates to these particular people. Ezekiel could indeed have foretold the distant future. Many people have had and do have accurate previews of events to come one day, and not all such people are charlatans. The First Testament assumes that false prophets sometimes utter prophecies that come true (Deut 13:1-2). The “Mystic Meg” phenomenon (a British newspaper calls her “the world’s greatest astrologer”) was as familiar in Ezekiel’s day as it is in ours. Ezekiel does not want to be reduced to someone who merely impresses or reassures people by predicting the distant future. He has a much more important ministry. He would not be pleased at the suggestion that his prophecies had been fulfilled 2,500 years after they were given. These prophecies were part of his ministry to the people in exile about 590 BC. He wanted *them* to hear God’s message to *them*; he did not want them to push it onto some other epoch. Nor can any other generation like our own steal it from them.

The prophets’ messages about coming events in their day do also speak beyond their day. They do this on the basis of the second of the three ways in which Scripture as a whole speaks. That is, they provide concrete instances of the way Yahweh related to Israel and to the world that provide us with a basis for discerning how God may be relating to Israel, the church, and the nations in other ages. If Cyrus is Yahweh’s anointed (Yahweh’s Messiah), the chosen king through whom God’s purpose is furthered in international relations for the benefit of Israel and its restoration (Isa 44 – 45), in our age, too, we may look for ways God is working through specific world rulers to fulfill a purpose that will bring blessing to the people of God and to the world. It is in this way that we discover from the prophets what God is doing in our world, not by treating their words as coded forecasts of events in our own century.

To discover the prophets’ significance for later generations, then, we pay attention to the meaning they had in their original context. The question is what these prophecies meant for people such as Ezekiel through whom they were given and for the people whom they addressed, to whom they came as God’s good news or bad news. That is true of the promises about the restoration of the land to Israel as much as any other prophecies. They are given, for instance, through Jeremiah to Judeans on the verge of exile, to assure them that God’s judgment will not be the final word to them. They are given through Ezekiel to people actually in exile to reassure them that God has not finished with them.

Further, they are messages from God that have to be understood as these particular people would understand them, supposing that they had the required intelligence and spiritual insight. When a prophet promised that the desert would blossom, he was not referring to the agricultural miracles that Israelis have performed in the Negev. When a prophet spoke about the earth shaking or about fire and brimstone, he was not referring to nuclear explosions. He passed on messages that God intended to be heard and understood by people of his day, and we have to ask what such talk meant then. The chapters in Ezekiel that detail these promises are ones that have been reckoned to refer to events in the Middle East in our own day, or events to come, but this understanding ignores the promises’ own rationale. Our own age does not see those concrete prophecies fulfilled; events in such a different context could not be the fulfillment of those prophecies. It does see the fulfillment of the same longstanding commitments and purposes on God’s part. There is an inner link between First Testament prophecy and modern event, but not one that makes it possible to see the concrete details of modem history as the fulfillment of the specific details of prophecy.

The prophets also speak about another kind of future, one that we know to be far distant from their day whether or not they knew this. They speak of events to take place “in that day,” the day that may come beyond the lifetime of their hearers but is relevant to these hearers because it is the day of restoration, the day of fulfillment, and therefore a day that shapes the lives of people who will not live to see it. It encourages them to live in light of the eventual consummation of God’s purpose. As the New Testament emphasizes the importance of Christ’s final appearing to people who will not live to see it but are called to live in light of it, so the prophets emphasize how the day of Yahweh is important to people who may not live to see it but are called to live in light of it. But this kind of envisioning of future events is very different from the way of speaking about the distant future often attributed to a prophet such as Ezekiel.

## 4 Finding Prophecy Fulfilled in the Newspapers

The prophets bring God’s word to their day, and we learn from them by listening to them in that context as a way of seeing how it might transfer to ours. A failure to work in this way is a fundamental problem about books such as Hal Lindsey’s best-seller *The Late, Great Planet Earth*[[6]](#footnote-6)and more recent volumes of a similar kind.

These writers are right to assume that when we read the Bible, we are listening to God’s words. The First Testament came into existence by God’s inspiration and God’s providence; its prophecies and visions were God-given, and they were not just significant for their own day. They were written down and included in God’s book, and they are important far beyond their own day, important to the people of God AD as well as BC. They are indeed significant (for instance) for the Middle East today. There is no question *whether* they apply to today, but only *how.* They have things to say to us about contemporary world events and contemporary church life. They reveal God’s will to us by revealing God’s will embodied in particular contexts. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, and our history is to be read in light of the Scriptures God inspired. Part of the reason why the Scriptures are given to us is to live in history and not to be overwhelmed by it.

God inspired the prophets and could have revealed to them things God intended to do in the twenty-first century. Granted that God could have done so, would God have done so? Is that the kind of thing God does? And didGod do so? Is that the kind of function that prophecy fulfills? Actually, the God of the Bible is not inclined to give signs or reveal dates: see especially Jesus’ teaching about the final consummation in Mark 13:32‑37 and Acts 1:7. Further, when God does make statements about the future, they do not constitute detailed information on events that are predetermined to unfold, a kind of fixture list of coming events that we can tick off as they take place, but promises, warnings, and challenges designed to call people to decision now. The God of the Bible does not generally bolster people’s faith by revealing to them exactly what is to come but calls them to a trusting faith and hope in the one with whom they can face an unknown future confident that they are safe in God’s hands.

God does sometimes grant special revelations to people who cannot believe without them, and we could not exclude the possibility that the prophets include such revelations for us to profit from. But in his conversation with “doubting” Thomas, Jesus declared a blessing on people who would believe without such special privileges (John 20:29). That is how he usually deals with people. So we can assume that the prophets do not contain such revelations unless there is evidence in a particular case that God has here given an exceptional revelation because of some specific need.

When Ezekiel declared to the exiles that a return to the land or a particular battle was to take place, he was not telling his audience that certain events were scheduled for two and a half millennia after their day but addressing and bringing God’s word to these people, warning them of calamities and promising them blessings that could come about in their time. He was not revealing a timetable of events that had to unfold over thousands of years but bringing a specific message to a particular context. The idea of a fulfillment in 1948 of a prophecy given by Ezekiel to people living in the 580s BC thus does not make sense: it is not a fulfillment of promises and warnings that were part of God’s relationship with thosepeople. The prophecies that get applied to the recent history of the Jewish people are prophecies relating to the circumstances of their ancestors in particular contexts. The words of the prophets were part of their ministry to their contemporaries.

We cannot say they are being fulfilled 2,500 years later, because they were not statements of what was bound to take place but promises or threats to particular people for particular reasons. Whether or not they actually took place would be determined (at least in part) by the response they met. Jeremiah and Ezekiel specifically indicate that their threats will not be fulfilled if people return to God, and their promises will not be ful­filled if people do not respond to them with trust and obedience (Jer 18:1‑11; Ezek 33:1‑20). It is not that prophets sometimespreach a message whose fulfillment depends on people’s response to it. That is regularly the case, even when there are no “ifs” and “buts” in their words.[[7]](#footnote-7) The story of Jonah reflects this. Jonah simply says Nineveh will be destroyed; there is no hint of escape. But when the Ninevites repent, the threat is withdrawn, as Jonah knew it would be (Jonah 4:2). God’s warnings of catastrophe are given to us because he wants us to accept responsibility for what happens and to act so that the catastrophes do not take place. If we assume that he has prophesied inevitablecatastro­phe, and expect one to happen, it probably will.

Understanding the significance of First Testament prophecy involves treating it as an act of communication between God and people in the contexts in which they lived. We have to work out its implications for us in a way analogous to the way we seek to see the significance of material in Leviticus or Deuteronomy. It does not mean treating it as a coded preview of things to take place in the far future that were not in any direct sense God’s significant for the people to whom they were announced. It means asking how these promises and threats embodied Yahweh’s purpose in the context and seeking to perceive how that purpose might then find embodiment in ours. Events of recent decades in Palestine are not directly the fulfillment of specific biblical prophecies, nor do such prophecies tell us about events of coming decades. These prophecies are part of a living relationship between God and people in the periods to which they belong. They are not forecasts of things to take place in thousands of years’ time, but warnings and promises about events that will affect the people to whom the prophecies are given. This means that if a prophecy does not find a fulfillment in its original context, the right inference is not that it will be fulfilled in some future day, but that it never will be fulfilled, perhaps for reasons explained in a passage such as Jeremiah 18:1–11. The same considerations also work against the idea that prophecies such as Ezekiel’s declaration about the river in Egypt might have a fulfillment in his own day and one in the twentieth century.

So we cannot simply assumethat warnings and promises addressed to people living 2,500 years ago can be transferred directly to people living today. That is to ignore the fact that they were part of a personal, moral relationship between God and Israel. Twentieth century Jews are a part of the same Israel as Jews of the exile and therefore have a continuing place within the people of God, but this does not mean that First Testament promises (or warnings) apply directly to them. After all, in First Testament times many different promises and warnings were given to Israel; they did not all apply to Israel at the same time. Some­times the difference between true and false prophets (for instance, Jeremiah and Hananiah) was that the latter were en­couraging Israel to trust in prophecies that did not really apply at the moment. One has to consider whether the exilic prophecies of the restoration of the land are opento being reapplied to the state of Israel, or whether to do so is the act of a false prophet.

How would one decide that? The prophets assume that God deals with Israel and with the peoples it lived among on the basis of how they treated the needy and how they treated each other; whether they took people away from their homelands, whether they lived in brotherhood (see Amos 1 – 2). The prophets were concerned to be fair to Israel and to other people. In the twentieth century context, that would involve considering what is fair for both Israeli Jew and Palestinian Arab. While Palestinians have been responsible for many moral atrocities within Palestine and in other parts of the world, the Israeli record in this regard is not spotless, and this does not alter the fact that a century ago the Palestinians were the longstanding “legal” inhabitants of this land that they viewed and still view as their historic homeland. It is difficult to imagine that God would be fulfilling promises to the Jewish people at the expense of being unfair to other peoples who were simply in the way. Indeed, the First Testament suggests that God would not do so, because it tells us that the original fulfillment of God’s promise of the land was delayed for four genera­tions to avoid being unfair to the people who inhabited the land in Abraham’s day (Gen 15:16).

While God will never go back on that “Yes” to Israel, this does not provide answers to contemporary political questions in the Middle East, certainly not by overriding questions about the destiny of other peoples who live in the land in question. While Jewish freedom to live in the land is a fulfillment of God’s longstanding commitment to Israel, this is not a basis for contemporary political attitudes (“God has promised the land to the Jews, so we support their cause against the Palestinian Arabs”). The promises’ concern is with blessing for other nations as well as blessing for Israel, and the prophets apply the same standards to Israel as they do to the nations. The peoples of the land west of the Jordan, like other nations, are destined to recognize that the Jewish people is in a special sense the people of God, and the Jewish people is destined to be a blessing to those peoples as to others.

## 5 Taking Prophecy Literally

In speaking through Ezekiel, God spoke via human words designed to make sense to Ezekiel’s hearers, and when we seek to understand them, we do so as we do any other human words. We hear and obey God’s word by listening to the human words God inspired. The use of prophecies in a book such as *The Late Great Planet Earth* ignores the meaning these prophecies had for their author and his audience. Ezekiel 38:14‑16, for instance, “describes” how “when the Russians invade the Middle East with amphibious and mechanized land forces, they will make a ‘blitzkrieg’ type offensive through the area.”[[8]](#footnote-8) There is no comment on Ezekiel’s mention of horses in this passage, which illustrates how selective this interpretation of prophecy is; one can be very impressed by particular close correspondences and not notice the elements in the prophecies and the aspects of modern history that are ignored. In the verses that follow, “Ezekiel sounded the fatal collapse of the Red Army.”[[9]](#footnote-9) At the opening of Ezekiel 39, “the description of torrents of fire and brimstone raining down upon the Red Army, coupled with the unprecedented shaking of the land of Israel could well be describing the use of tactical nuclear weapons.” [[10]](#footnote-10) This is not what Yahweh was saying through Ezekiel to the people Yahweh sent Ezekiel to. Earthquake and fire is biblical symbolic language for the devastating effects that accompany and follow God’s intervention in human history. It is not a picture of nuclear explosion.

Now the interpretation of prophecy is not limited to what the prophet meant. The New Testament often ignores the meaning of First Testament passages it quotes. Such prophecies turned out to have a significance for a future context that was unknown to their human author.[[11]](#footnote-11) If prophetic interpreters claim similar inspiration, we shall have to test their claim, as we would test the claim of a prophet. This will not merely involve look­ing at whether their modern interpretation matches historical events. To meet the test for prophecy in Jeremiah 23, it will involve asking whether it fits the theological and moral test of consistency with the rest of Scripture.

Ezekiel’s prophecies were given to Israel in the exile. Its relationship with God had been broken and its temple burnt down. As a nation it had been defeated and shamed; its kings had been humiliated and deposed. Its land had been devastated and captured and its God apparently discredited. It was experiencing at every point the opposite to the promise of blessing to Abraham. Through Ezekiel God asserts that, nevertheless, these promises are not finished. Indeed, they are reasserted in more glorious technicolor.

These promises found some fulfillment very soon, when Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and encouraged the Judeans to return to Canaan to rebuild their community and their temple (see Ezra 1 – 6). But they were not fulfilled in the technicolor Ezekiel suggests. So what happens to these promises? Do they stand anyway, bound to be fulfilled someday in precisely the form in which they were given? So the *Late Great Planet Earth* approach assumes. But we have noted that whether or not a prophecy is fulfilled depends at least partly on how people respond to it.

Consider a human parallel. Many years ago, I might say to my two sons on a Saturday morning, “Would you like to come swimming?” Suppose they were not interested, because they prefer to watch something interesting on TV, but then on Sunday decided they now wanted to go swimming. “You said we could – can we go now?” The answer might well be, “No, that was an offer for yesterday. It doesn’t apply to today.” Yesterday’s promises cannot be assumed to apply to today. Similarly, if a prophecy is part of a living relationship between God and Israel, we cannot assume that it will be fulfilled someday, if for some reason it does not find fulfillment in the day to which it originally relates.

On the other hand, because it was never­theless a promise that expressed the mind of God, it will still be a significant indica­tion of God’s purpose and thus suggest events that will take place. To my boys I might well say, “No, we can’t go swimming today, even though I said we could go yesterday. But we can go on Wednesday after school.” The same reasons that made me make the offer in the first place make me repeat it, though in a form that is necessarily modified now that the moment of the original offer is gone. So even though we cannot assume that the actual promises in Ezekiel will be fulfilled in another age, the attitude and purpose they express may find embodiment in some way.

First Testament prophecy is not a coded preview of modern history. It is an affirmation of God’s moral will, and it is as such that it needs applying to the Middle East today (as to Britain or the United States). It is a promise of how God plans to renew the Jewish people, and to bless the world through the Jewish people, and the largely gentile church can still look forward to the fulfillment of that promise. It is a warning about God’s activity in judgment, and a challenge to the church that does not escape the world’s judgment if it is in­distinguishable from the world. It is a portrait of the salvation God intends for the Jewish people and the church and an invitation to enjoy the abundance of riches that are ours now in Christ and in the Spirit, and that will be ours in fullness in the new Jerusalem.

The whole story of Israel is part of the tortuous plot that will reach the den­ouement God planned from the beginning, whatever convolutions it may perform on the way in response to human willfulness (Israel’s or that of others). It is for this reason that the same themes recur in different parts of the First Testament and that there are striking parallels between some passages in Scripture and some experiences of modem Israel. The reason is not that modern events fulfill ancient prophecy, but that both are part of one over­arching purpose that links the God of Israel to modern and ancient people.

1. See “Prophecy and Fulfillment,” in C. Westermann (ed.), *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond: Knox, 1963) = *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1963), pp. 50-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See further chapter 22 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See further the chapter “What is Israel’s Place in God’s Purpose,” in *Questions about an Old Testament Faith* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See e.g., Walter N. Owensby, *Economics for prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. x. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See section 1 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. H. Lindsey, *The* *Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970/London: Lakeland, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See further John Goldingay and Michael Moynagh, “Prophecy and Futures Studies,” *Theology* 102 (1999), pp. 416-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Again, see chapter 14 (section 2) above. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)