

X. THE APOLOGETIC VALUE OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

A. Does biblical prophecy have apologetic value? Preliminary considerations.

It seems to me that there is good reason to answer this question affirmatively, yet there are those among evangelicals who would answer it negatively. An example of the negative response is G. Ch. Aalders.

G. Ch. Aalders (De valsche profetie in Israel, 190) has said: "From the beginning spokesmen for the Christian church have occupied themselves with attempts to indicate the grounds on which the truth of Christianity rests. In the course of time a number of criteria have been proposed for evidencing the truth of divine revelation given us in Scripture, by which it was felt that the evidence of the Scripture's divine character could be demonstrated Among these criteria is that of the fulfillment of prophecy"

Aalders then mentions some positive factors with respect to this function of prophecy.

1. Aalders concedes that the Christian church is in a better position to utilize this argument than was the ancient Israelite. The Christian church is able to make a much better judgment on prophecy and fulfillment than the Israelite was because the church exists now long after the proclamation of the prophecies and a great number of the prophecies have gone into fulfillment (esp. with respect to the coming of the Messiah), even though there remain many which are yet to be fulfilled. Nevertheless the great objection against the application of this criterium by the Israelite himself - namely that fulfillment would come later - is now for the most part done away with.
2. Aalders notes that it is certainly impossible for unaided human foresight to predict so many things so clearly so far in advance. Even though in a few instances a strong divination ability may be found among men, the multiplicity of the Scriptural predictions offers a strong evidence in favor of the working of a supernatural power.
3. The LORD himself points in his Word to his ability to proclaim the future as contrasted with the dumb idols: Isa 41:22-29; 42:9; 44:7; 46:10,11; 48:3-8.
4. For us then the few true prophecies of the false prophets sink into nothingness when compared with the unanimous fulfillment of so many prophecies of the true messengers of God.
5. Aalders also notes that the conditional character of prophecy can no longer form an objection to the prophecy fulfillment argument since this is valid only for the contemporaries of the prophet.

Aalders concludes that it is not surprising then that apologetics normally places great emphasis on the fulfillment of prophecy. He refers to Calvin, Institutes I; 8; 7,8 pp. 78,79; I. Newton, Dissertations of the Prophecies; A. Keith, Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion Derived from the Literal Fulfillment of Prophecy; J. Davidson, Discourses on Prophecy, J. Urquhart, The Wonders of Prophecy.

Yet, Aalders also claims that there are serious objections to the appeal to the fulfillment of prophecies as a criterium for demonstrating the truth of the Scripture. And in his view these objections show that the apologetic value of this argument is not as great as one might think.

Among his objections are the following:

1. Disputes on fulfillment.

The question of whether or not prophecies have indeed been fulfilled often depends on the interpretation of the prophecies. And here there is not always agreement. While Keith, Davison, and Urquhart regard most prophecies as having been literally fulfilled, A. Keunen (The Prophets and Prophecy in Israel) gives lists of unfulfilled prophecies. Kuenen has even turned the apologetic argument around and on the basis of the non-fulfillment of prophecies built an argument against the supernatural origin of prophecy, and thus made an end to the boast of Keith in his 37th edition that no answer or refutation from the side of unbelief against his work had ever appeared.

2. Disputes on dating and on subjective factors in assessing the connection between the prophecy and its fulfillment.

Aalders says in addition that the question of whether or not the prophecies are fulfilled depends on one's judgment on such factors as the dating of the prophecy, and the way in which one views the nature of the connection between the prophecy and its fulfillment. For example, Davison (p. 276) says that if the argument of fulfillment will really have evidential value it must adhere to the following conditions:

"first the known promulgation of the prophecy prior to the event. Secondly the clear and palpable fulfillment of it. Lastly the nature of the event itself if, when the prediction of it was given it lay remote from human view, and was such as could not be foreseen by any supposable effort of reason, or be deduced upon principles of calculation derived from probability or experience."

Aalders says that it is clear with regard to a number of these points that subjective value judgments will differ so that a real convincing proof can never be found. He adds that naturally the reverse is also true so that no convincing proof against the divine origin of prophecy by her non-

fulfillment can be given as Keunen attempts. The prophecy-fulfillment argument is ultimately then simply derived from a difference in perception of the prophecies themselves.

3. Symbolic language nullifies apologetic value. Aalders points out that in prophetic literature image and symbol play an important role. He says that it is clear that with many things in prophetic literature a literal fulfillment should not be expected because one is dealing with symbolic language. He says this would be admitted by all. Yet then he says that this creates a particular difficulty for appealing to prophecy and fulfillment as an apologetic tool. Aalders says that the literal approach of men like Keith does not do justice to the symbolical nature of many prophecies. He says that prophecies often speak of Jerusalem, Zion, and the temple in order to indicate spiritual realities of the new covenant; or of Egypt, Assyria or Babylon in order to typify sinful and destructive directions. He adds that he cannot see how one who adopts the more literal method of interpretation such as Keith, can keep himself free from the chiliasm error. When one, for example, regards the prophecies concerning Babylon to be fulfilled literally down to the details one cannot propose a different manner of fulfillment for the prophecies with regard to Jerusalem, Israel, etc. One should then also expect the detailed literal fulfillment of these prophecies. It is thus clear, says Aalders, that appeal to the literal fulfillment of prophecy entangles apologetics in great difficulties. But if one abandons this method for a spiritual fulfillment - then one loses his weapon: the spiritual fulfillment is difficult to explain to those who oppose the Christian faith . . . Thus fulfillment of prophecy cannot be regarded as a convincing criteria for the truth of Scripture.

Aalders thus concludes that it is not the fulfillment of prophecy that brings the conviction of the divine truth of the scripture, but the reverse - the conviction of the divine truth of the scripture leads to belief in the fulfillment of prophecy.

He argues that the certainty of the revealed truth of God does not rest in any outward evidences but in itself. God does not force men to believe. It is therefore also his will that the fulfillment of prophecy should not stand outside of all doubt as something incontrovertible, but rather it should render only such certainty that the believer can find in it support for his faith. For the one who recognizes the Bible as the Word of God the fulfillment of prophecy is clear as day and therefore it can serve as a confirmation of his faith. Thus the fulfillment of prophecy is not without value in a secondary sense. But for the one that does not believe in the Scripture, it does not speak so clearly that he is forced to recognize the being and truth of the divine origin of the Scripture. Aalders says it thus comes to the internal principium: one believes the Scripture to be God's Word or one does not believe it to be God's Word. This belief is the fruit of the working of the Holy Spirit. The final ground for the certainty of Christian truth is to be sought in the

testimony of the Holy Spirit. Apologetics then, is better off not to involve itself too much with the seeking for objective evidence for the truth of the Scripture, but it should retreat to this subjective standpoint and then demonstrate that the non-Christian world view, in spite of her pride to the contrary, also cannot justify itself with objective ground of evidence, and it has its starting point in the subjective just as much as the Christian position.

Here one encounters a difference that is found between presuppositionalist and evidentialist approaches to apologetics. Discussion of this would take us beyond the purposes of this course.

Notice, however, the comments of J. G. Machen ("Christianity and Culture," see Bibliography):

"A man can believe only what he holds to be true. We are Christians because we hold Christianity to be true. But other men hold Christianity to be false. Who is right? That question can be settled only by an examination and comparison of the reasons adduced on both sides. It is true, one of the grounds for our belief is an inward experience that we cannot share - the great experience begun by conviction of sin and conversion and continued by communion with God - an experience which other men do not possess, and upon which, therefore, we cannot directly base an argument. But if our position is correct, we ought at least to be able to show the other man that his reasons may be inconclusive It would be a great mistake to suppose that all men are equally well prepared to receive the gospel. It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power of God. That can overcome all lack of preparation, and the absence of that makes even the best preparation useless. But as a matter of fact God usually exerts that power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create so far as we can, with the help of God, those favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel I do not mean that the removal of intellectual objections will make a man a Christian. No conversion was ever wrought simply by argument. A change of heart is also necessary. And that can be wrought only by the immediate exercise of the power of God. But because intellectual labour is insufficient it does not follow, as is so often assumed, that it is unnecessary. God may, it is true, overcome all intellectual obstacles by an immediate exercise of His regenerative power. Sometimes he does. But he does so very seldom. Usually He exerts His power in connection with certain conditions of the human mind. Usually He does not bring into the Kingdom, entirely without preparation, those whose minds and fancy are completely dominated by ideas which make the acceptance of the gospel logically impossible."

Machen, Christian Faith in the Modern World, 61-63. (CC, 33,34)

It is the Holy Spirit's work to open the heart. It is ours to present the evidence.

See also, R. J. Neuhaus "Why We Can Get Along," First Things 60 (1996)27-34 [CC 35], and Donald Fuller and Richard Gardiner, "Reformed Theology at Princeton and Amsterdam in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Reappraisal," Presbyterion 21 (1995) 89-117 [CC 35-38].

B. The revelatory claim of the Bible.

The Bible presents itself as the Word of God, not simply as a product of human thought or reflection. Much of the Bible concerns itself with human history, and in its prophetic sections the Bible claims to sketch broad lines of future history that are determined by the sovereign will of the God who speaks through it. This unique claim calls for, and is certainly open to, verification and testing. Whether one believes the Bible or not, its historical statements (both predictive and non-predictive) are something that to a great extent can be submitted to verification. The Bible indicates that much of its revealed plan for history has already been realized in the history of Israel and in the appearance of Jesus Christ.

It is our contention that in the connection between prophecy and fulfillment, particularly in that between the OT and Christ there is to be found an objective prophecy/fulfillment structure that is clearly visible or recognizable. The existence of this prophecy/fulfillment structure points to the existence and veracity of the God who has spoken in biblical revelation. This prophecy/fulfillment structure is not characterized by what might be termed a religious or pistical quality. Rather, it is something that breaks through religious subjectivism by its very nature, because it stands as a recognizable entity that points to the reality and veracity of the God of biblical revelation apart from the necessity of religious commitment to that God (Cf. Isa 41:22,23; 42:8,9; 48:3-6; Calvin's Institutes, Bk I, Chapt 8, Para 7,8, pp. 78-82).

In the Old and New Testaments we notice that demonstration of the existence of God is based primarily on clearly recognizable signs and the coherence of prophecy and fulfillment. While it is true that intellectual recognition of the "existence" of God is not belief in an existential sense (which is only possible as the Spirit of God works in a man's heart to bring him into fellowship with God) it is, nevertheless, a corollary to, if not a prerequisite for, genuine faith. In all this it is necessary to remember that there is an objective revelation that is there, and that is recognizable. This objective revelation exists apart from the response of the faith that is worked in a given individual by the Holy Spirit when that individual submits himself to the God of biblical revelation. This distinction is that of a distinction between what might be termed an internal revelation and an external revelation. In order to avoid misunderstanding, we must make it clear that when we speak of the apologetic value of the prophecy/fulfillment structure of biblical revelation we are concerned only with the external revelation.

C. Prophecy and fulfillment

In the OT we are confronted with a unique and surprising form of divine revelation. This revelation entails components that are adequate to demonstrate in an objective and recognizable way the reality of the God of Israel.

These components include the following:

1. God makes his existence and power recognizable among many witnesses through signs, wonders, theophanies, etc.
2. God makes known a plan for future history through his spokesmen, the prophets.
3. This plan for future history is brought into fruition as had been specified in advance.

Notice that the first component of revelation is the sense perceptible presentation of something in which Yahweh claims to reveal himself. The second two components are intended to evidence a connection between plan and execution.

I think we can say that the OT distinguishes itself from all other "religious revelations" by not promoting belief simply on the basis of what certain persons claim they have received by divine revelation. Rather, belief is founded in a revelation connected with external signs and the progression of redemptive history according to a previously announced plan.

See for example: Exod 6:6-8; 7:3,5,17; 9:29; 14:13,30,31; Josh 3:10-13; 4:24; 1 Kgs 20:13,20-22,28; John 14:29; 20:30,31.

The signs that God gave, as well as the progression of historical development according to a previously announced plan, are open for all to see as recognizable objective historical realities. The God of the OT is a God who speaks and acts to legitimize himself in events connected with the history of his chosen people. The OT does not simply announce what a certain primitive people believed about a particular deity. The OT does not present a mythological or metaphysical God concept. Rather, Israel experienced the presence and reality of the living God who led her out of Egypt and through the wilderness by signs that were visible and perceptible by all the people. Yahweh spoke on Sinai with Moses, gave his people numerous evidences of His care for them and of His power over history and nature. Through the prophets he gave numerous predictions that were fulfilled in Israel's subsequent history.

The signs that God gave to authenticate the words of prophets and make his own presence visible to his people served an immediate and direct authenticating purpose in connection with the historical progress of revelation and redemption.

With the completion of revelation we should not look for the continuation of such signs. Signs, therefore do not play the same direct authenticating purpose for us today as they did for those to whom the signs were originally given. The connection between prophecy and fulfillment, however, is of such a character that its value as an evidence of the existence and veracity of the God of biblical revelation continues to function in a direct way even among succeeding generations.

Bloom, Gauch, and Newman argue that fulfilled prophecy is an accessible kind of a miracle - a testable miracle rather than a reported miracle. This character of prophecy serves to bypass the difficulties of reported miracles (such as faulty observation or interpretation of what happened). Prophecy is different than a private experience of a miracle, because its fulfillment is open to any interested person, whether that person is sympathetic to the Bible's theistic worldview or not (see bibliographic note at end of this section).

Israel's God is then one who claims belief on the basis of the things that the people have seen and experienced of Him. I believe we can say that the OT demonstrates that logically or rationally speaking Israel could not do anything else other than believe, because Israel could know from objective facts that Yahweh IS and that none of his words return to him void or empty. But Israel could and did willfully turn her back on the things that were clearly made known to her (cf. Isa 48:3-8).

The LORD gave his people "many infallible (convincing, NIV) proofs" to use the wording of Acts 1:3 of his veracity, and of existence and power. In our own witnessing we should do no less, and simply adopt the method that God himself employed to demonstrate to his people that he exists, and that he was active in their history to bring about their redemption.

It is thus important for us to give our attention to the connection between the OT prophecies and their fulfillment in subsequent events of history. It is also important to see if this connection is attributable to human construction. If not, then here is something in which resides real apologetic value. B. Ramm (Christian Evidences) says: "In essence this is an argument from the principle of omniscience, manifested by a knowledge of the contingent future."

D. Conclusion

In broad lines the Bible contains a structure of prophecy and fulfillment that extends from the beginning of human history to its yet future consummation. The prophecies of Scripture concern themselves for the most part with significant advances in the progress of God's plan of redemption. These prophecies are an integral part of the unfolding of redemptive history. Our conclusion is that in the special connection between prophecy and fulfillment there is something that transcends religious subjectivism because it entails an objectively recognizable structure that points to the existence and veracity of the God of biblical revelation.

The intent of the prophecy fulfillment structure of Scripture is to demonstrate or evidence the existence and veracity of the God who has worked in history to redeem His people.

P. Fairbairn (Prophecy, p. 198) points out that the evidence from prophecy is of a cumulative nature. Scripture does not present us with a few remarkable predictions, but rather with a series of predictions that are closely related, and that form a united and comprehensive whole. He goes on to say (p. 199): "Any one may see, on a moment's reflection, how great a difference this serial and connected character of Old Testament prophecy forms, in an argumentative respect, between it and the isolated, occasionally happy prognostications of uninspired men. The difference is such, as to secure for the argument founded on the fulfillment of Scriptural prophecy a conclusive force, if it is fully entered into and fairly dealt with"

He later notes (p.202) that "prophecy, it must be remembered, with its manifold accomplishments, is still but one branch of the Christian evidence. So far from having the whole weight to bear alone, there are several others equally important to be coupled with it - the miracles of the gospel, the originality of Christ's character and scheme, the sincere and self-sacrificing spirit of His apostles, the sublime morality of their teaching, with its profound adaptation to the wants and emotions of man's moral nature, and the blessed results it has accomplished in the world. All must be taken together; they are so many distinct but converging lines; and it is the combined force and operation of the whole, not the strength merely of a particular part, which must decide the claim of Scripture to be received as the authoritative revelation of God to men."

He concludes this section of his treatise by discussion of how the argument from prophecy may be most advantageously conducted. He says (p. 202): "our position should be chosen at a point where the ground is comparatively clear as to the main question, and no preliminary difficulties can be raised, or brooding suspicions entertained, regarding the possible occurrence of the events that fulfilled, before the utterance of the prophecies that foretold them. The interval between the prophecy and its fulfillment should be such as to leave no proper room to doubt that the one had been spoken and recorded before the other had come into operation. On this account many of the most explicit prophecies, whose deliverance and fulfillment are recorded in the same book, should be passed over in the first instance; as in the case of such, the adversary is ready with the answer, that he doubts the formal existence of the predictions till after the events themselves had taken place."

For a selection of prophecies that fulfill these qualifications see Josh McDowell, Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Chapter 11, "Prophecy Fulfilled in History," where he gives and discusses twelve such predictions. See further: R. C. Newman, editor, The Evidence of Prophecy. IBRI, 1988; K Barfield, The Prophet Motive. Gospel Advocates, 1995; R. C. Newman, "Fulfilled Prophecy as Miracle" in In Defense of Miracles, R. D. Geivett and G R. Habermas, Editors,

IVPress, 1997, pp. 214-225; J. A. Bloom, H. G. Gauch, R. C. Newman, "Public Theology and Scientific Method: Formulating Reasons That Count Across Worldviews," Philosophia Christi 4 (2002), 45-88; A. Bloom, H. G. Gauch, R. C. Newman, "Public Theology and Prophecy Data: Factual Evidence that Counts for the biblical World View," JETS 46/1 (2003) 79-110.