

Are Bible Prophecies Really *Predictions*?

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The Bible spoke of Jesus long before He was born. Jesus told the Jews, “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for **he wrote about Me**” (John 5:46). Before He ascended to heaven, He told the disciples, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be **fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me**” (Luke 24:44). The Lord plainly said that Old Testament prophets predicted His life, His work, His death and even His resurrection!

But some tell us those prophecies were not real predictions of the future. They argue that Old Testament prophets wrote about something else or someone other than Jesus and that New Testament writers just used those verses we call prophecies to illustrate something about Him.

You may be thinking that I’m talking about atheists and skeptics. It’s true that they deny predictive prophecy in the Bible. Or, you may say, “He’s talking about Jews because they don’t believe the Old Testament predicts Jesus.”

Would it surprise you to know that some Christians don't believe the Old Testament prophesied about Jesus and the church? Consider this statement:

“There is no unequivocal specific prediction of the coming of Jesus Christ and/or the church in the Old Testament. New Testament speakers reinterpreted and reapplied Old Testament texts to Christ and/or the church.”

This is a serious charge. You would expect these words from an atheist or a skeptic or an unbelieving Jew. But this is from a book published by a *Christian University*! I’ll tell you more about the source later.

What many Christians don't know is that this view of prophecy is common. It's taught in Bible departments of Christian colleges. It is standard teaching in many seminaries and schools of divinity. It’s found in commentaries. And, not surprisingly, this denial of predictive prophecy is circulating on the internet.

These people say that Old Testament prophecies that we believe were fulfilled in Jesus are not really predictions at all. They tell us that New Testament writers used these Old Testament passages as illustrations about Jesus.

This is a dangerous, anti-Christian view. It denies the strongest proof for the divine inspiration of the Bible—the fulfillment of prophecy! And that leads us to ask: How in the world can people who claim to be Christians believe this?

This may be the first time you’ve heard of this view of prophecy. Many preachers I’ve talked to say they’ve never heard of it. They were shocked to learn that it is ***in the church***.

But it is not new. In fact, it is hundreds of years old. In this discussion, you’ll uncover the roots of this thinking. We’ll show where it came from. We’ll look at how so-called scholars distort prophecies and their fulfillment. We’ll examine the Scriptures and respond to the arguments they make. Through a close study of prophecy and its fulfillment you’ll learn how to see fine distinctions and precise definitions related to this subject. In the end, you’ll be better equipped to defend the Word of God.

Let’s get started.

There have always been people who denied biblical prophecies. Origen, who taught in the third century, wrote that a Jew in his day named Celsus said these prophecies could have been about ten thousand things besides Jesus. But the version of interpreting prophecy we’re looking at comes from a more recent time.

I call this interpretation the *postmodern* view of prophecy. The modern period of western philosophy covers roughly the years from about 1600 to 1850. During this time the Bible was publicly attacked with more ferocity than it had been since the days of the Roman persecution of the church.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in Great Britain said when the Bible says God spoke to a man in a dream, it just means that man dreamed that God spoke to him. Hobbes was a materialist. He didn't believe in the Holy Spirit and he denied the inspiration of the Bible. He said even if God did speak to someone in Bible times, only that person could have known it was a revelation. He also said that miracles in the Bible did not prove God had spoken. He said that Moses didn't write the Pentateuch and that the Old Testament had been edited many times through the centuries before Christ.

On the subject of predictive prophecy, Hobbes said the whole idea is useless. He said the people who originally heard these prophecies died long before most of them were fulfilled, so how could they have been proof of God speaking? And when they were fulfilled, how could people know they were being fulfilled unless God spoke directly and told them? We've already addressed these things in a previous lesson. I'm not trying to respond to them here. I'm simply calling attention to the fact that educated men were beginning to attack the idea of predictive prophecy hundreds of years ago.

Today, almost 400 years later, his book *Leviathan* is one of the most widely used textbooks in top American universities. It is a book on political philosophy. Hobbes was arguing for a more secular form of government and insisted that the ruler, not the Bible, should have supreme power over the people. This is why he attacked the Scriptures. That's why he attempted to redefine the meaning of prophecy in the Bible.

In Amsterdam a Jew named Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) released his *Theological-Political Treatise*. In the first 15 chapters he attacked divine revelation, miracles, and the inspiration and authority of the Bible. In some ways he was the father of modern higher criticism of the Bible. He argued that the men we think wrote the Bible really didn't write it. He said the Old Testament was revised countless times by editors. He said that men, not the Holy Spirit, wrote the Bible and that it has mistakes and contradictions. He denied the concept of biblical prophecy.

Spinoza was not an atheist. He was a pantheist—that is, one who believes God is everything and everything is God.

Here is what he said about Old Testament prophets: "I discount the fantastic view that the prophets had human bodies but nonhuman minds." He added, "The prophets were not endowed with a more perfect mind, but with a more vivid power of imagination."

So, according to this renegade Jew, prophecy in the Bible is nothing more than men who had a vivid imagination! The Jewish community at the time excommunicated him. Ironically, many Jewish scholars today hold the same liberal view of the Old Testament Scriptures!

Then there was another source of opposition. Throughout Europe and in America a group known as deists began to attack the Bible. They made many of the same charges against it that Hobbes, Spinoza, and others used. They said the Bible contradicts itself and has many errors. They also argued that the Bible, in particular the Old Testament, had been revised and edited many times.

It's interesting that these men were different in their beliefs about religion, but they were united in their view of the Bible. Hobbes was a materialist. Spinoza was a pantheist. Deists said there is a God but He doesn't intervene in the world with revelation and miracles.

But there was a common thread that tied them together. They despised the way that church-controlled governments were using the Bible to control people. Catholic governments and the church of England and even some Protestant churches were trying to enforce all of the laws of the Bible on the people—not just moral laws against killing and stealing but positive commands like baptism and the Lord’s Supper. *Their interpretation* of the Bible on doctrinal matters became the law of the land. These rulers insisted that the Bible is God’s Word; so, therefore, they must enforce it. The idea of the Bible being a revelation from God gave church-based governments an excuse to claim supreme power over the people.

Hobbes, Spinoza, and deistic thinkers despised this abuse of power. But instead of calling attention to the misuse of the Bible, they tried to destroy the Bible itself. These attacks, especially the attacks of deists, were vicious and blasphemous. But they were aimed at the governments they resented. So the motivation of all these enemies of the Bible was political, not just religious.

Thomas Paine, who was instrumental in the American Revolution, (1737-1809) is a classic example. His book *The Age of Reason* is a vicious criticism of any kind of revelation from God, especially the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures—the Bible. He hated organized religion. Though Paine lived much earlier, his remarks about religion sound very much like Karl Marx. “All national institutions of churches,” Paine wrote, are “set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”

He said, “Each of those churches show certain books, which they call revelation, or the word of God. The Jews say, that their word of God was given by God to Moses, face to face; the Christians say, that their word of God came by divine inspiration: and the Turks say, that their word of God (the Koran) was brought by an angel from Heaven. Each of those churches accuse the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all.”

As to predictive prophecy, Paine said that Old Testament prophecies had nothing to do with foretelling the future. He said the “inventors” of the Gospel (that is, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) had to “*apply or to stretch what they call the prophecies of the Old Testament to the New.*”

Meanwhile in Europe and especially in America belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible was strong. Theological conservatism and religious revivals resisted the progressive view of the Bible. But the pressure was mounting, and Satan unleashed another attack on the Scriptures.

So-called scholars in Germany in the 1700’s and especially the 1800s began to scrutinize the language of the Bible to an extent never seen before. This was the rise of the science of higher criticism of the Bible. Higher critics such as Karl Heinrich Graf (1815-1869) and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) argued that the wording of the first five books of the Old Testament is so varied that they must have been written by numerous unknown authors. They and others scoffed at the idea that Moses wrote these books, and their theory is widely accepted in academic theological circles today. They permanently changed what people believe about the authorship and dating of the books of the Bible.

These higher critics denied the miracles of the Bible. They denied the inspiration of the Bible. They denied the prophecies of the Bible. They were anti-supernatural in their outlook. The Bible to them was just a human book.

Gradually ministers and churches began to cave in to the pressure from these so-called experts. Bible colleges and seminaries in the 1800s began to teach these new views of who wrote the Bible. They accepted the arguments of Hume and Kant who said that no one can know that

God exists. They questioned stories of miracles in the Bible like the great fish swallowing Jonah. And, they turned away from the idea that God inspired the writers of the Bible and predicted the future through them. Educated people didn't believe in those old ideas anymore.

As a result, religious schools adopted this popular thinking. After all, they had to keep up with current scholarship. They didn't want to look ignorant. So ministers of various denominations began to study these theories instead of the Bible. The Bible became just another human book.

This has happened many times since the church began. Put quite simply, in spite of how independent and original these religious professors appear to be, they are notorious for being followers of the latest "intellectual" fad in theology.

Take the example of the theory of evolution. This theory has been the standard view in science for decades. Christians don't want to be embarrassed by appearing uneducated, so they try to blend the theory of evolution with the Bible. They say they believe both and call it theistic evolution. They adjust the Bible to fit in with so-called science.

Ministers have done this with higher criticism. They want to be on the cutting edge of the latest scholarly research. And since these so-called Greek and Hebrew experts deny the inspiration of the Bible and say the books of the Bible have been changed numerous times by men who revised them, schools who train these ministers comply with their expertise. In other words, they compromise their belief in the Bible to agree with the science of higher criticism just as theistic evolutionists compromise the creation account of the Bible to agree with biological science.

This is why many seminaries and Christian universities no longer take Bible prophecy seriously. They don't even believe the Bible is inspired of God, much less that it predicts the future.

These destructive critics were not content with denying the divine inspiration of prophecy. They also worked to change the very *meaning* of prophecy. That's where the focus of religious controversy shifted. Here is a book that was written 300 years ago. It is entitled "A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion." The author was Anthony Collins, a deist in England. He didn't believe the Bible was inspired. Those who defended the Bible in his day pointed to fulfilled prophecies as proof. But some of them had weakened in the face of intense opposition.

Collins criticized these apologists because they said that Old Testament prophecies of Jesus were not known to be *predictions* until New Testament writers *identified them as prophecies*. Collins said if that's true then you can't use them to prove the inspiration of the Bible. You're reasoning in a circle. You're saying you know the New Testament is true because the Old Testament predicts it, but the only way you know the Old Testament predicts it is because the New Testament says so!

Do you remember the quote we read at the beginning of this lesson? This old book talks about that same view of prophecy!

This book written in 1724 is about the idea that Old Testament prophecies are not really predictions at all! And the author is not a Christian. He is criticizing those who identified as Christians. In his day Christians said that prophecy is proof of the inspiration of the Bible. But some made the mistake of saying that the *only* way anyone could know a verse was a prophecy is if the New Testament *says* it was a prophecy.

Collins hammered biblical scholars who said that Old Testament prophets didn't predict anything in the future, that they just described the situation in their time and New Testament

writers used their words to illustrate something similar in the life of Jesus. Collins ridiculed them for saying that Old Testament prophecies are not to be interpreted literally but rather in some kind of “mystical” or “allegorical” sense.

Collins was a deist who didn’t believe the Bible, so he used their interpretation against them. His argument was that if these prophecies are not predictions, then you Christians have given up your main evidence for the Bible!

This is a brief sketch of the thinking that led to this concept of prophecy. Now we’re about to see the influence these old ideas are still having today.

Let’s go back to the commentary I referenced at the beginning. That book is a one-volume commentary written by different authors called *The Transforming Word*. It was published in 2009 by Abilene Christian University, a college that was founded by and is still supported by numerous churches of Christ. Look at those words again: “There is no unequivocal specific prediction of the coming of Jesus Christ and/or the church in the Old Testament. New Testament speakers reinterpreted and reapplied Old Testament texts to Christ and/or the church” (p. 66).

The postmodern slant in this commentary shows even more when it discusses Isaiah. It reads: “The *authors* of the book of Isaiah *in its present form* were addressing a small Jewish community in and near Jerusalem in the mid- to late-*fifth century BCE*, consisting of both faithful servants of Yahweh and counterfeit worshipers. The authors *reapplied* Yahweh’s former activities to this new situation...” (pp. 573-574).

According to this commentator, Isaiah didn’t write the book of Isaiah. We no longer have the original text of the book of Isaiah because the Jews edited it so many times. Isaiah was written in the 400s B.C. (I am not ashamed to use that designation of time instead of the politically correct “BCE”). And notice carefully: these supposed fifth-century authors of Isaiah referred to what God had done earlier and “**reapplied**” it to a new situation. That takes the element of prediction out of the picture! This is what I mean by postmodern thinking!

What does this ACU commentary say about the great prophecy of Jesus in Isaiah 53? It says the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 was probably the faithful remnant of the Jews in Babylonian captivity, not Jesus. That is an old Jewish view we discussed in a previous lesson.

Since this commentary says the book called Isaiah was written *after* the captivity, then Isaiah 53 is not even a prediction about the captives returning home, much less a prophecy about Christ!

Here’s another example in this commentary. This time one of the contributors is talking about the *abomination of desolation* in Daniel 9:24-27. Jesus cited these words when He foretold the destruction of Jerusalem. He told the disciples to flee the city when they saw the “abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet” in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14. This commentator, however, says this cannot be a prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Instead, he claims that “Mark *recycles* the images of Daniel to describe a parallel event, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans...” (p. 662). According to him, Mark just used the words of Daniel as an illustration, not as the fulfillment of prophecy.

These authors say that New Testament writers “reinterpreted,” “reapplied” and “recycled” Old Testament passages to make them fit New Testament events. To them, that is all that is meant by the fulfillment of prophecy. They are used as illustrations, nothing more.

The New Testament explicitly states that Old Testament writers foretold the Christian age. Let’s go back to the passages we cited at the beginning. Jesus told the Jews, “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me” (John 5:46). He said, “All things must be

fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44).

Moses and the prophets wrote *about* Jesus. New Testament writers did not use their words like a preacher uses a book of illustrations.

Jesus said in Luke 18:31: “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.” How could Jesus say this if the prophets actually wrote about *someone else*?

Two of Jesus’ disciples were doubtful of His resurrection in Luke 24. Jesus rebuked them and said, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:25-27). Jesus could not have said this unless the prophets had made predictions about Him.

In Acts 2 Peter cited Joel 2 and said “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel”—the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost day (vv. 16-21)!

Peter also quoted David’s words in Psalm 16:8-11. He argued that David could not have been talking about himself; therefore, his words must be a prophecy of Christ. “Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption” (Acts 2:29-31).

Peter didn’t cite this Psalm to show some similarity between David and Jesus. In fact, he showed their dissimilarity! He didn’t “reapply” or “reinterpret” or “recycle” these Old Testament words. By the force of logic he demonstrated their meaning!

Peter later wrote this about salvation: “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven--things which angels desire to look into” (I Pet. 1:10-12).

Peter says the prophets “testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow.” If that doesn’t indicate predictions, then what would?

Peter was an apostle of Christ. He saw and heard Jesus. He listened to Jesus expound the Scriptures. He was listening when Jesus pointed out Old Testament Scriptures that spoke about Him in Luke 24:44-45. He was an eyewitness of His resurrection and did signs and wonders that proved he was an apostle. He wrote by inspiration and died believing that the Old Testament prophets foretold the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

What about the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8? He believed Isaiah 53 was about some *man* and wanted to know who. He asked Philip, “Of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or some other man?” (v. 34). What was Philip’s answer? If he had believed what some Christians today believe, he would have said, “Well, in the first place, the prophet Isaiah didn’t write those words. And, secondly, that passage is not about an individual. It’s about the Jewish

nation or part of it. But, since Isaiah's language is similar to what happened to Jesus, let's apply it to Christ." This is how absurd and contrary to Scripture this view is.

The Bible is very clear about this: "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him" (v. 35).

In Acts 13 Paul told the Jews in the synagogue at Antioch: "For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb" (Acts 13:27-29). There is no way to fit the postmodern view with this passage.

In Acts 17 Paul went into the synagogue at Thessalonica and "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ'" (vv. 2-3). How could Paul have used the Old Testament to *explain and prove* that Jesus had to suffer and rise again if he was just reinterpreting and reapplying what the prophets wrote?

And how could the people of Berea have "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" in Acts 17:11 unless those Scriptures predicted Jesus?

Then there is the case of Apollos who "vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 18:28). Apollos didn't use the Old Testament like an artist to create a picture of Jesus. He used the prophecies of Jesus as logical proof.

When Paul met with Jewish leaders at Rome, he "explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets" (Acts 28:23). How could he do this if there is "no unequivocal specific prediction of the coming of Jesus and/or the church in the Old Testament"?

How can anyone today have the audacity to say that Peter and Matthew and Mark and Luke and John and Paul and other New Testament writers just "recycled" these Old Testament passages?

Here are some questions for those who say this:

1. *Does God know the future?* (If the answer is yes, then why is it such a hard thing to believe that He talks specifically about it in the Bible? If the answer is no, then there is a deeper issue).
2. *Are there any predictions in the Bible?* (If there is even *one* prediction from God about anything in Scripture, then why is there such opposition to Messianic prophecy?).
3. *Were New Testament writers inspired of Holy Spirit?* (This cuts to the heart of this whole issue. Postmodern interpreters will likely say yes to this question, but when they explain *what they believe inspiration means*, you'll see how why they mishandle the Scriptures the way they do.).

You may be wondering, "How do people who hold this view try to prove it from the Bible? What verses do they use?"

Let's turn to the Bible and look at some examples. Remember that we are talking primarily about those who claim to be Christians.

One example is Matthew 2:13-15: "Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.' When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Out of Egypt I called My Son.'"

That prophet was Hosea. The passage is Hosea 11:1: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son." This verse must refer to God leading the Israelites out of Egypt by Moses. That was hundreds of years before Hosea. But Matthew says this statement about the nation of Israel in the past was "fulfilled" in the life of Christ hundreds of years in the future. How could that event have anything to do with Jesus coming back from Egypt with his parents?

There is nothing in Hosea 11:1 itself prior to the New Testament that would have indicated it is a prophecy about the future. A common Jew who lived before Jesus could only have known that it was a statement about the Israelites coming out of Egypt.

So, in what sense was this verse *fulfilled* in Jesus? Was it a prophecy at all? Whatever you say about this verse, you have to admit that it is not a pure prediction in the usual sense of the word.

Before we respond, let's look at a couple of other examples in Matthew chapter 2. In Matthew 2:16-18 we read: Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

'A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'

This quotation is from Jeremiah 31:15. In chapters 30 and 31, the prophet assured the Jews that God would bring them back to their homeland after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. There was great sorrow among the Jews during those years of exile. Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was the mother of the Jewish people. Though she had been dead for hundreds of years, she is represented as one who wept for her children and refused to be comforted.

That is a symbolic description of the sadness of the Jewish people who were in Babylon. There was in the words of Jeremiah "lamentation and bitter weeping." But Jeremiah tells them to "refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears" because "there is hope in your future" when "your children shall come back to their own border" (Jer. 31:16-17).

Again, we must ask: What did this situation in Babylon have to do with Herod's slaughter of all those children in Bethlehem? *How was Jeremiah 31:15 fulfilled in Matthew 2:17-18?* There was nothing in Jeremiah 31:15 that would have told a Jew living before the time of Christ that it was a prediction of the future. Was it a prophecy then?

One more example. In Matthew 2:23 the Bible says Jesus "came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'"

Where is this statement in the Old Testament? The exact words are not in the Old Testament. One way of explaining this is to suggest that the prophets taught and preached these words, but they are not recorded in the Scriptures. Another possibility that seems more likely is that the Holy Spirit didn't intend to give a word-for-word quotation. Instead, this was the *general idea* the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to write about what the prophets said about the Messiah.

Isaiah said He would be "despised and rejected by men" (Isa. 53:3). David said He would be hated without a cause (Psa. 69:4). Jesus grew up in Nazareth of Galilee. Jews looked down upon people from Galilee and especially Nazareth. That is why Nathanael asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). That is what the word *Nazarene* meant in the New

Testament. Christians were called by this name for the same reason. Paul was accused of being a “ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5).

When Matthew said this saying of the prophets was fulfilled in Jesus, he wasn’t giving a direct, verbatim quotation. He was summarizing and condensing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit what the prophets wrote.

This brings us back to our question. Since this is not a single specific prophecy, does this alter our understanding of what a prophecy is and how it was fulfilled? We’d have to admit that this is not as easy to explain as Micah 5:2 which says He would be born in Bethlehem or Isaiah 53:12 which says he would be numbered with the transgressors.

I would also add another passage: Isaiah 7:14. Matthew cites this verse in Matthew 1:22-23 and says that it was fulfilled in the virgin conception and birth of Jesus. But since we will look at Isaiah 7:14 in the next lesson on Bible prophecy, I will continue with the topic of this discussion for now.

Deists of yesterday and today would say we need to give up the idea of predictive prophecy because of these examples. Postmodern theologians would tell us it’s useless to try to prove the inspiration of the Bible by the evidence of prophecy because of the way these verses are quoted in Matthew’s account.

They would say, “You see, these Old Testament verses were not predictions. No one could have connected them to anything in Jesus’ life before the New Testament. That’s why you can’t use them to prove the inspiration of the Bible. When Matthew says they were ‘fulfilled,’ he just means that what Jeremiah and Hosea described was *like* or *similar* to these events in Jesus’ life. So we could say that Matthew reapplied the point of these Old Testament verses to new situations. He used them as illustrations. That is how they were ‘fulfilled.’”

How should we respond?

Hosea 11:1 and Jeremiah 31:15 would be best described as types rather than purely predictive prophecies. The Bible doesn’t specifically call them either prophecies or types, but the nature of these cases fits the concept of a type better than a prophecy. “Out of Egypt I called My son” in Hosea 11:1 referred to a past situation in Egypt and was fulfilled in the future. “Rachel weeping for her children” in Jeremiah 31:15 referred to the current situation in Babylon and was fulfilled in the future.

These verses are different from the Messianic prophecy of the Christ being born at Bethlehem cited earlier in Matthew 2:1-6. The Jews knew that Micah 5:2 was a prophecy before it was fulfilled. But they did not know that Hosea 11:1 and Jeremiah 31:15 were foreshadows of the Christ before they were fulfilled in the events surrounding the life of Christ.

The problem is that the postmodernist assumes that *all* fulfillments of Old Testament verses in the New Testament are the same as these cases in Matthew 2. But that is a hasty conclusion that does not follow. In fact, that kind of reasoning ignores what we’ve already noticed: the Jews knew that Micah 5:2 was a prophecy of the Christ. Jesus’ being born in Bethlehem was not *like* or *similar* to someone else who had been born there in the Old Testament. Matthew is not using Micah 5:2 as an *illustration* about Jesus. That prophecy was a definite *prediction*.

And it’s interesting that the New Testament does not specifically say that Micah 5:2 was “fulfilled” when Jesus was born at Bethlehem. It says that *the chief priests and scribes* believed Micah 5:2 was a prophecy of the birthplace of the Messiah.

I agree that Micah 5:2 is a prophecy that was fulfilled in that event. I'm simply pointing out that here is a case where the Bible doesn't have to use the word "fulfilled" (or an equivalent expression) to signify fulfillment.

But my main point about this passage is that it is definitely a prediction of Jesus. It is not a type. It is certainly not an illustration.

Then there are quotations of the Old Testament in the epistles. These interpreters ask us, "Why are you surprised to hear this? Didn't Paul use the Old Testament like this in his epistles?"

For instance, Paul used two wives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, to illustrate the two covenants—the new and the old. He said these two women and their sons "are an allegory" (Gal. 4:24). That's the KJV. The NKJV has "symbolic" and the ASV has "contain an allegory."

Paul does not say that the story of Abraham and his wives Sarah and Hagar in the book of Genesis was a prediction. He does not even indicate that these two women were types. When Paul says these things *are* an allegory, he simply means he is using them as an analogy.

The same is true in other passages. For example, in Exodus 16:18, the Bible describes the Israelites gathering manna: "He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack." Paul used this passage to illustrate the giving of the churches to help needy saints in II Corinthians 8:15. He does not intend to say that the passage in Exodus was a prophecy the Corinthians fulfilled.

Psalms 19:4 is another example: "Their line has gone out throughout all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." This is the voice of the creation as it shows the glory of God. Paul quotes these words in Romans 10:18 to illustrate the extent of the preaching of the gospel in the first century. He did not mean that Psalm 19:4 was a prophecy of preaching the gospel.

These are not cases of allegorical interpretation. This method of interpretation was used by ancient writers such as Philo of Alexandria and Origen and has been a part of Catholic interpretation for centuries. It says there is the literal meaning of Scripture but beneath that level there is a "deeper" spiritual or symbolic meaning. Philo applied this approach to the most ridiculous extremes. Catholics use it when they can't find any support from the context. They often call it a "mystical" as well as an "allegorical" meaning that is hidden from the ordinary reader. The Magisterium of the Catholic Church has to bring out that meaning for us.

That is the deciding factor in Catholic teaching. In Catholicism a passage is a prediction because the Pope and the college of bishops *tell you* it is a prophecy. The postmodern view says there are no predictions at all in the Old Testament. So these are opposite ends of the spectrum in one way. Ironically, however, Catholicism is very postmodern in its view of the Old Testament as well.

As to the figure of speech known as an allegory, there is a huge difference between *allegorical interpretation* and the *interpretation of an allegory* in Scripture.

There are times when New Testament writers use Old Testament verses as illustrations. But that is far different from saying that *every time* they quote the Old Testament they are just drawing a general parallel.

In the New Testament, then, there are different senses in which the Old Testament is quoted. There are different senses in which Old Testament passages are said to be fulfilled. Sometimes an Old Testament verse is a pure or straight prediction. The prophecy of Jesus' birthplace in Micah 5:2 and the prophecy of His resurrection in Psalm 16:10 are examples. In other cases the Old Testament reference is a type or foreshadow. The description of the hardened

hearts of the Jews in Isaiah's day in Isaiah 6:9, for example, was fulfilled in the Jews of Jesus' day (Matt. 13:14-15).

Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a passage is a type or a prophecy because the Bible doesn't specifically say which is meant. But we may be building too thick of a wall between types and prophecies. Sometimes the two seem to blend and converge. The Bible does not always make a sharp distinction between them, so why should we?

The New Testament uses the words *tupos* and *skia* to refer to a type, but these words can refer to other things having nothing to do with what we usually call a type. The word *parabole* generally refers to the figure of speech called a parable, but it can refer to a proverb (Luke 4:23) or even a type (Heb. 9:9; 11:19). And the word prophecy, as we have seen, can refer to a divine prediction or to divine revelation in general.

We should look for the idea of the verses we are examining and not try to build a case simply on a word, especially when those passages don't even mention it.

Whether we are looking at prophecies or types in the Bible, we are talking about the foreknowledge of God. The foreknowledge of God is revealed in the Bible in different ways—promises, warnings, scientific foreknowledge, types and prophecies. Prophecies are the more direct expression of God's knowledge of the future. Prophecies are the strongest evidence of the inspiration of the Bible. God didn't predict the future in just one way. He used many forms of expression to convey His foreknowledge.

There is a parallel to the physical creation. In the study of the problem of evil, we consider what is known as the principle of plenitude. This concept holds that when God created the world, His infinite power and wisdom resulted in a multitude of levels to show his glory even more abundantly. He created man a little lower than the angels. He created animals that walk. He created birds and fish and snakes and bugs and flies and ants. He made dust and plants and microscopic organisms of all kinds. He made the sun, moon and stars.

The principle of plenitude holds that God shows His power and glory more fully by making this incredible variety of creatures than He would have by creating only a small array of creatures. For instance, God had the power to create only one kind of four-legged animal. He could have made all trees to look the same and only one kind of flying insect. But He poured out His creative power in countless varieties to display His handiwork to the fullest.

In the same way, God pours out His foreknowledge in the Bible in numerous ways. Sometimes He specifically says what will happen in the future. Sometimes He states what will happen in the future give certain conditions. Sometimes He states a general principle such as the law of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7-8). Sometimes He promises and threatens. At other times He gives foreshadows which were stated to be such in the New Testament. And He delivered detailed prophecies that were fulfilled years later.

It is wrong to look at a few examples where an Old Testament passage is said to be fulfilled in a manner that is different from the way prophecy is often fulfilled and then try to make every fulfillment fit that mold. That is simplistic interpretation. We must study each passage on its own and not put every prophecy and type in the same box.

There is another parallel in this analogy. God not only shows His wisdom and power by creating this fascinating array of creatures and systems in nature, but He also makes them work in harmony!

The same is true of the different kinds of prophecies, types, foreshadows, promises and warnings in the Old Testament. There are many differences in these indicators of the future. Many are highly symbolic and others are more straightforward. Some are brief glimpses of the

future that a prophet delivered as he spoke to the people of His time about their situation. Others are found in long discourses that are clearly about the future. Like the stars, some of these shine brighter than others.

But all of these different signs of future events serve the same purpose. They all point to Jesus and His kingdom the church. They harmonize perfectly just as the various parts of the creation work together.

This means that the evidence of the foreknowledge of God in the Bible in the form of prophecies and types is like the argument for the existence of God based on the order of the creation. They are both design arguments. One is based on physical design and the other is based on conceptual design. The predictions of the future in the Old Testament and the harmony between them indicates an ultimate Designer just as the elements and systems of nature prove an ultimate Designer.

That is why we shouldn't discount the value of Old Testament types as part of the evidence of prophecy. Just because we depend on the New Testament to tell us what those types are—after the fact—doesn't mean they have no weight as evidence.

For instance, what about scientific foreknowledge? People in Bible times didn't know that some statements and rituals in the Old Testament were based on facts of biology and geography. Those facts were discovered hundreds and in some cases thousands of years later. But now that we have that understanding, we can look back at those verses and see the foreknowledge of God at work.

What about the use of archaeology to support the record of the Bible? These discoveries were after the fact, and yet they shed valuable light on the history recorded in the Bible.

We also use the unity of the books of the Bible as evidence that God wrote it. How else can we explain the amazing harmony of 66 books written by over forty authors over the space of 1600 years? But Jews living when those books were being written couldn't see this harmony—at least not to the degree that we can.

The evidence of the unity of biblical books is basically an argument from design to the Designer who is God.

In the same way, the New Testament identifies types in the Old Testament. Just because we see them after the fact doesn't alter the harmony and unity we now see. The fact that we needed help to see those connections doesn't change this truth. In this way an argument for the Bible could be based upon its types and antitypes—not the mere fact of them, but their unity. This evidence is not as strong as the case from prophecy, but it probably deserves more credit than we might realize.

But we don't have to wonder about the role of types and antitypes. They are inseparably joined to prophecies. When we look at predictive revelation as a whole—the amazing number and the diverse kinds of prophecies, types, and promises—we can see how all these fit together in incredible agreement.

It would be easier for us if there was a single section in the Bible that contained all of the prophecies of the future instead of them appearing here and there in the Old Testament. But that wouldn't be good. For one thing, given man's obsession with knowing the future, many would study that section and little if anything else.

The purpose of prophecies in the Bible is not merely to give us the intellectual understanding that God knows the future. It is not to satisfy our curiosity about what will happen tomorrow. These prophecies are designed to lead us to trust and serve God through His Son Jesus Christ.

