

Prophecy: A History of Failure?

Christopher M. Hays

Introduction

What if Jesus was wrong? Blunt though it be, this is the question we are left with after the last chapter's survey of historical Jesus scholarship (chapter 1, pp. 4–18). Having maneuvered through the exegetical intricacies of Jesus scholarship, we concluded that Jesus did indeed prophesy his second coming and the consummation of the kingdom of God sometime within a generation of his preaching. But the years after his ascension turned into decades and centuries, and insofar as we long ago laid to rest the apostles, it is now difficult to skirt the conclusion that Jesus' prophecy did not come true. This is not a point that Christians can afford to gloss over.

After all, Christians proclaim in Jesus the arrival of the long-awaited "Prophet like Moses" foretold in Deuteronomy (Deut. 18:15–17; cf. Acts

3:22; 7:37). That being the case, we cannot overlook the fact that almost immediately, Deuteronomy explains how to judge between a true and a false prophet: “If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken” (Deut. 18:22). The penalty for failing this litmus test was nothing short of death (Deut. 18:20).

We believe this problem is too grave to ignore. Christian hope is shot through with the expectation of Christ’s second coming, and Jesus himself identified the return of the Son of Man as the climactic moment of all redemptive history. It would be a disservice to the people of God not to communicate the poignancy of this problem upfront. For the health of the Christian faith, those most keenly aware of the Church’s problems should be among her ranks, serving as effective defenders of that faith against the most informed of detractors. We, the authors, believe, after much research and deliberation, that a compelling and indeed edifying explanation can be given regarding the problem of the delay of the Parousia. It is precisely because of that confidence that we will devote this chapter to providing a sharp critique of the Christian hope in the Parousia.

We will do so first by narrating the commonplace historical-critical belief that the half millennium prior to Jesus’ advent was riddled with failed prophetic promises. Then, we will turn to the New Testament and show that the canonical epistles and Apocalypse also evince a belief that Jesus was to return in glory in a very short time period, likely within the first century itself. These views, though routine in historical-critical scholarship, also present poignant challenges to Christian hope in the Parousia, and any compelling account of Jesus’ deferred return would need to give serious attention to them. In that spirit, allow us now to play the adversary of Christian prophetic hope.

The Failure of Jeremiah’s Prophecy of Seventy Weeks

There is a distressing bitterness to the idea that Jesus was just wrong about his proclamation. But this problem is hardly a novelty of Christian hope; prophetic failure is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition.

To anyone who has paid close attention to the history of Jewish eschatological hope, the awkward silence and chagrined mumbling that follow prophetic failures should sound familiar. Perhaps no Scriptural tradition so helpfully illustrates this embarrassing phenomenon as Jeremiah's prophecy that the exile would last seventy years (Jer. 25:8–14; 29:10–14). This line of prophetic tradition commends itself to us because it is testable—either the exile does end after seventy years, or Jeremiah was wrong. But in addition to being conveniently explicit, Jeremiah's promise of the return from exile is arguably the paradigmatic Old Testament prophecy of restoration.¹ What's more, in his capacity as a prophet of destruction and subsequent restoration, Jeremiah may be seen as a model for the Gospels' portrayals—especially, perhaps, Matthew's portrayal—of Jesus' prophetic ministry, with his own prophecy of the destruction of the Temple akin to Jeremiah's "Temple sermon" (Jer. 7:1–15).² Thus, if we are exercised about the reliability of Jesus' promises of subsequent restoration, Jeremiah's quite specific prediction would provide us with an important and telling precedent.

Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. . . . This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. (Jer. 25:8–9, 11–12)

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. . . . I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the

1. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 135.
2. Ross E. Winkle, "The Jeremiah Model for Jesus in the Temple," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 24, no. 2 (1986): 155–72; cf. ch. 3, p. 52 and ch. 5, pp. 85–86.

places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (Jer. 29:10–14)

So, Jeremiah prophesied that Babylon would conquer Judaea and rule the Israelites and their land for seventy years, after which God promised to restore them. But did things turn out as planned? Not exactly. The Old Testament is littered with texts trying to account for the way in which subsequent history *did not* line up with Jeremiah's timeline. Initially, the biblical authors needed to explain why the exile began to wind down too early; then, they had to reverse their tactics and explain why restoration from exile was taking too long; and finally, some of them just threw up their hands and denied that the prophesied restoration was ever even inaugurated (however abortively or impartially). In short, the Hebrew Bible seems a veritable cacophony of voices trying to explain why things did not turn out as Jeremiah had prophesied. For a sample of this confused prophetic "witness," we need only lend an ear to Zechariah, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Daniel.

Zechariah, Ezra, and the Early Fulfillment of Jeremiah's Seventy Years

Admittedly, if one were simply to read the prophet Zechariah, without knowing much about Israelite history, Jeremiah's prophecy might appear to fare reasonably well. "In the second year of Darius" (Zech. 1:7)—i.e. around 519 BCE, 68 years after the invasion of Judah—Zechariah preached to the exiles and predicted the imminent fulfillment of this prophecy.

Then the angel of the Lord said, "O Lord of hosts, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which you have been angry these seventy years?" Then the Lord replied with gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, Proclaim this message: Thus says the Lord of hosts; I am very jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. . . . Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion; my house shall be built in it, says the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Proclaim further: Thus says the

Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity; the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem. (Zech. 1:12–17)

This prediction is repeated and intensified in chapters 7–8, set two years later (see especially Zech. 7:4). So, Zechariah expected the restoration of the Israelites to occur rather shortly after the completion of seventy calendar years. This all seems very neat.

Still, the neatness of Zechariah's calculation glosses over a rather significant point. Jeremiah did not just say that the exile would last seventy years; he said that the *Babylonian* exile would last for seventy years. But Babylon's reign proved rather more ephemeral than Jeremiah had anticipated. The other Old Testament documents credit the liberation of Judah to the Lord's anointed, Cyrus, and not Darius (Isa. 44:28–45:1; 2 Chron. 36:20–21; Ezra 1:1); Cyrus defeated Babylon in 539 BCE, only 48 years after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. And it was Cyrus who first sent the Israelites back to Jerusalem with instructions to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:2–4; 2 Chron. 36:2–23), a mere half century after the Temple's destruction. One might say that history unfolded ahead of schedule, pre-empting Jeremiah's prophecy. Even if we were so generous as to calculate the beginning of the exile from the first deportation in 597 BCE, then the exile appears to have lasted sixty years—still a decade short of the prophetic mark. Things are not so clean as they appear at first glance.

The editor of Ezra is aware of this problem, so he has to scramble a bit. Ezra makes the case that the end of the seventy years is marked not simply by the return to Jerusalem, but the *completion* of the Temple's reconstruction (on this point, Ezra's interpretation is compatible with the predictions of Zech. 7:1–8:23, where it is the return of *the Lord* to Zion that is about to take place). Thus, the first five chapters of Ezra are dedicated to explaining how the exiles returned to Jerusalem, only to have their restoration interrupted, waylaid for the duration of Cyrus' rule (Ezra 4:1–23). It is only under Darius that the Temple reconstruction can be resumed, explains Ezra (Ezra 5:1–6:11).

Ezra tells us that rebuilding of the Temple was completed “in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius” (Ezra 6:15), seventy-two years

after the invasion of Judea. In this, Ezra and Zechariah adopt a fairly literal reading of the seventy years, and in so doing, they shove aside the pesky fact that Cyrus's decree came ahead of schedule.

Ezra-Nehemiah and the Late Fulfillment of Jeremiah's Seventy Years

But just as soon as the editor of Ezra-Nehemiah seems to have accounted for the premature beginnings of the restoration, he has to make a complete about-face and explain why the restoration from exile had been so sluggish! Even seventy years after the invasion of Judea, things still hadn't come together as Jeremiah had prophesied. Jeremiah 29:10–14 (cf. 25:11–12) promised that after the seventy years, God would return the Israelites from exile and restore their fortunes. But it is not as if *all* the Israelites had returned to the Promised Land by the time the Temple had been rebuilt. Only a portion of the Israelite population hobbled back to Judaea under Cyrus's decree (Ezra 2:1–65). When Ezra's ministry began around 458 BCE, a solid 130 years into the exile, he was still only leading a modest contingent of Israelite exiles to Jerusalem (see Ezra 8:1–20), and even then, their travel required the gracious permission of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:11–28). A dozen years after that, Nehemiah undertook his ministry (Neh. 2:1–10), and he too lamented that the exile was far from over (Neh. 1:1–11). Thus, in about 446 BCE, some 141 years after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, Nehemiah was still in Persia; the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins; and those who had supposedly escaped captivity remained “in great trouble and shame” (Neh. 1:3). To compound matters, Nehemiah 5:14–15 reveals that, in the years prior to Nehemiah's appointment as the governor of Judah, Nehemiah's predecessors had been exploiting and oppressing the Israelite residents. To put it mildly, the restoration of Israel after seventy years that Jeremiah promised had proven an overstatement; God's “plans to prosper them and not to harm them” (Jer. 29:11) were not coming to pass as advertised.

So, the editor of Ezra-Nehemiah had to back-pedal. Although he wanted to read the prophecy of Jeremiah as being fulfilled in more-

or-less literal, chronological terms, he was obliged to see 515 BCE as the beginning of a fulfillment that remained quite incomplete even seventy additional years later. The editor of the book, summoning a pitifully quixotic optimism, seemed to hope that, with men such as Ezra and Nehemiah at the helm, Israel might steer a course toward complete restoration. But then again, writing sometime in the fifth or fourth century, perhaps he could get away with being so sanguine.³ Later authors, however, found Ezra-Nehemiah's interpretation to be less than credible.

Recalculating Jeremiah's Seventy Years Altogether

The author of Dan. 9:1–27 was one such discerning interpreter of prophecy. He rejected the opinion of 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zechariah that God had made good on Jeremiah's promise, and instead, he tried to re-calibrate the prophetic timeline.

Most critical scholars think that the author of Daniel 9 wrote in the second century, during the reign of the mad Seleucid Antiochus IV (175–163 BCE, thus a date of 167–164 BCE for Daniel 9).⁴ The author of Daniel 9 (henceforth "Daniel") did not accept Ezra-Nehemiah's reading of Jeremiah, because, from where he was sitting, life was a disaster. The Jews who made it back to Palestine in the previous centuries never regained national autonomy, but were simply vassals shuffled from one kingdom to the next, like orphans in the foster system of imperial history. In this respect, Daniel did agree with Nehemiah's lament that "we are slaves to this day" (Neh. 9:36). Even the semi-tolerable pseudo-freedoms they had been tossed by rulers such as Darius and Artaxerxes had given way under the reign of Antiochus "Epiphanes." That demented pagan tyrant turned their Temple into a shrine to Zeus, defiling the sacred precincts with the blood of slaughtered swine and compounded his villainy by compelling the pious to participate in the

3. On the dating of Ezra-Nehemiah, see Hugh G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 (Waco: Word, 1985), xxxiii–xlvi, esp. xxxv–xxxvi.

4. John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary 30 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 237–38; John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 61, 360.

blasphemous offerings, on pain of vile tortures and excruciating deaths. From this vantage point, Jeremiah's prophecy seemed nothing short of a cruel illusion. So, the author of Daniel 9 made a counter-claim to that of Jeremiah and Ezra-Nehemiah, and said that God had revised his plans.

The author adduced a new prophecy to supersede the previous schema. He alleged that back in the mid-sixth century, the "historical" Daniel had also been expecting the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy in terms of seventy literal years. So, being one of the exiles himself and praying "in the first year of Darius" (Dan. 9:1), Daniel questioned how much longer it would be before Jeremiah's prophecy was fulfilled. Alas, the archangel Gabriel told him that it would, in fact, be seventy sevens—seventy lots of seven *years*. The extra wait notwithstanding, Gabriel promised that after 490 years, Israel's fortunes would surpass all previous expectations: there would be "everlasting righteousness" (Dan. 9:24). Even though Gabriel admitted that the last several years of the 490 would be undeniably ghastly, he promised that in the end, it would all be worth it.

The overall effect of the 490-year timeline outlined in Daniel 9 was to put the contemporary situation of the author's community into eschatological perspective, such that the community's suffering under Antiochus Epiphanes was understood as the tail-end of a much longer story, which (the author thought) would soon be concluded.

Still, even with the significant extension in the prophetic timeline that the author of Daniel contrived to help deal with the appalling deeds of Antiochus Epiphanes, history did not deliver the kind of good news for which he hoped.⁵ Even within the book, one observes a growing nervousness about the accuracy of this prediction that motivates a recalibration of the prognosis. As events made the prediction more tenuous, the author of Daniel 12 created some

5. The timeline is "contrived" because, as Anderson explains, one is forced to squeeze 490 years into a span of 423 years or less (starting from 587 BCE and spanning to 171, 167, or 164 BCE, as interpreters variously do). For detailed discussion of these difficulties, see Robert A. Anderson, *Signs and Wonders: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 110–18, especially 115–16; cf. Collins, *Daniel*, 400–401; Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 479–89, especially 483–87; see further ch. 4, pp. 12–12.

ambiguity by linking the final three and a half years—the last half-week of the seventy weeks—to two different events, namely, the rededication of the Jerusalem temple and “the end” (i.e. the culmination of all things that would come sometime after the temple was restored). In this way, Daniel 12 builds some elasticity into the prediction (cf. Dan. 8:14). Although Daniel 12 offers this cagey qualification, soon enough, all the prognostications in Daniel succumbed to history and disappointed hopes; Daniel’s seventy weeks of years, stretched well beyond the mathematical and chronological tearing point, lay limp atop the wreckage of prophetic history.

Judaism’s Habit of Relocating Prophecy

Daniel was not alone in picking up a bit of unfulfilled prophecy and refashioning it to bolster the religious and nationalist hopes of his contemporaries. The *Habakkuk Peshar* (found among the Dead Sea Scrolls) and *4 Ezra* (a book of the Old Testament Apocrypha, also called *2 Esdras*) exemplify this tendency (or capacity) to relocate the referent of prophecy.

Way back in the seventh century BCE, Habakkuk had prophesied that God would send the Babylonians to punish the evil rampant in his day. Several hundred years later, in Qumran, an enthusiastic sectarian cherry-picked Habakkuk’s comments about the Babylonian exile, and applied them to his own era, to the Romans (whom he calls the “Kittim”) and to his own Jewish adversaries in the late first century BCE.⁶ The author of the *Peshar* may well have felt that the approach was veritably invited by Habakkuk, who said, “For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Hab. 2:3).

The “end” in question for the prophet Habakkuk was probably the *beginning* of the Babylonian conquest, which would finally bring divine judgment on the previously unpunished wickedness rampant in

6. See further William H. Brownlee, *The Midrash Peshar of Habakkuk: Text, Translation, Exposition with an Introduction*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 24 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979), 23, 95–98.