

Multiple Fulfilment of Prophecy

P.G. Nelson

When we think of a Biblical prophecy, we usually think of it as having a *single* fulfilment. For example, the prophet Isaiah foresaw that the Messiah would lay down his life to secure the forgiveness of sins (Isa. 52:13–53:12), a prophecy that was fulfilled when Jesus died on the cross (Acts 8:26–35). Not all Biblical prophecy is like this, however, as the following examples show.

Example 1: Immanuel

When Matthew describes the birth of Jesus, he adds the comment:

Now all this took place to fulfil what was spoken by [the] Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’, which means ‘God with us’. (Mat. 1:22–23)

The birth of Jesus, however, was the *second* fulfilment of this prophecy. In its context, the prophecy has to do with the threat posed to Judah by two neighbouring kings. To reassure the king of Judah (Ahaz) that they would not succeed, God gives him a sign:

‘Behold, the maiden¹ shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel². He shall eat curds and honey until he knows [how] to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows [how] to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land you vex over shall be forsaken by both her kings.’ (Isa. 7:14–16)

The prophecy will thus have been fulfilled in king Ahaz’s lifetime. Matthew evidently regarded Jesus as fulfilling it more fully.

Example 2: desecration of the temple

The prophet Daniel foresaw that a time would come when an enemy would desecrate the temple in Jerusalem and set up an ‘abomination that desolates’ (Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11). This was fulfilled in 167 BC when Antiochus Epiphanes, having plundered the temple, set up a pagan altar in it (1 Maccabees 1:20–24, 54–61).

But Jesus foresaw another fulfilment of this prophecy when he spoke to his disciples about the future destruction of the temple and warned them:

¹ Heb. ‘*almâ*; LXX *parthenos*, ‘virgin’.

² Heb. ‘*immānû ’ēl*, meaning ‘with us [is] God’, as at 8:8, 10.

‘So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet stand in [the] holy place (let the reader understand), then let those in Judea flee to the mountains.’ (Mat. 24:15–16).

The desecration and destruction of the temple took place when the Romans put down a revolt by the Jews in AD 67. Roman soldiers set fire to the temple and, in AD 70, completely destroyed it and the rest of the city.³

Example 3: water and the Spirit

Ezekiel, prophesying to God’s people when they were in captivity in Babylon, foresees a time when they are in their own land:

‘I will take you from the nations, and gather you out of the lands, and bring you to your own terrain. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean: from all your filth and all your idols, I will cleanse you. I will also give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you: I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, give you a heart of flesh, and put my Spirit within you, and enable you to follow my rules, and practise my judgments.’ (Ezk. 36:24–27)

This prophecy was fulfilled when Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon, and allowed the Jews to go back to their own land under the godly leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah (2 Chron. 36:22–23).

Jesus, however, cites Ezekiel’s prophecy in his conversation with Nicodemus:

‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and [the] Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’ (John 3:5)

Jesus evidently takes Ezekiel’s prophecy as being fulfilled again under the new covenant, something he expected Nicodemus to know (v. 10)

Example 4: fall of Babylon

Sometime after his commissioning in 740 BC, Isaiah foresaw the fall of Babylon (Isa. 13:1–14:23, 21:1–10, 46:1–2, 47:1–5). This was while the city was under Assyrian domination (745–626 BC). There were several rebellions, including a major one in 689 BC, which the king of Assyria (Sennacherib) put down. When Assyria declined, Babylon itself became powerful, until Cyrus, king of Persia, captured it in 539 BC. There followed a long period of Persian rule, during which several rebellions had to be put down, including a major one that led the king of Persia (Xerxes) to destroy much of the city (478 BC). Then in 331 BC, the Greeks under Alexander the Great captured the city and started to rebuild it. When he died, in 312 BC one of his generals (Seleucus)

³ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Books 5–7.

took charge of the city. He built another one further north and left Babylon largely in ruins and deserted.⁴

In history, therefore, Babylon fell several times. In broad terms, Isaiah's prophecy applies to all of these. He wrote in poetry, much of which pertains to any fall. He does refer to attack by the Medes and the Elamites (13:17, 21:2), who helped the Persian army under Cyrus, but he also speaks about complete desolation (13: 9, 19–22), which did not literally take place until Seleucus.

Here then is another example of multiple fulfilment of prophecy (or at least, of multi-staged fulfilment).

Example 5: cosmic disturbances

In connection with the fall of Babylon, Isaiah foresaw disturbances in the cosmos itself:

For the stars of the heavens and their constellations shall not give their light; the sun shall be dark at its rising, and the moon shall not shine its light. (Isa. 13:10)

Isaiah foresaw similar disturbances in connection with God's judgment of the nations (Isa. 34:4), as did Ezekiel when Babylon conquered Egypt (Ezk. 32:7–8), and Joel in his prophecy that was fulfilled at Pentecost (Joel 2:28–32, Acts 2:16–21).⁵ Jesus himself spoke of such disturbances in connection with his coming again (Mat. 24:29), and John in the book of Revelation (Rev. 6:12–14, 8:12, 12:4).

These prophecies are doubtless all poetic – they do not describe literal happenings, but are a way of expressing the *enormity* of the events taking place. Nevertheless, they constitute another example of repeated fulfilments.

Discussion

The concept of multiple fulfilment of prophecy helps in the interpretation of the book of Revelation. As is well known, there are four main ways in which the book is interpreted:⁶

- *Preterists* take it to describe events taking place in the first century.
- *Historists* take it to describe events taking place over the course of world history.

⁴ See D.J. Wiseman, 'Babylon', in *The New Bible Dictionary (NBD)* (eds. J.D. Douglas, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, R.V.G. Tasker, and D.J. Wiseman; London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962), 117–9; 'Babylonia', *ibid.*, 120–8.

⁵ Joel speaks earlier of the sun, moon, and stars being darkened (2:10), but this is in connection with a plague of locusts, which do darken the sky.

⁶ See, e.g., Leon Morris, 'Revelation, Book of,' *NBD*, 1093–5.

- *Futurists* take it to describe events taking place in the end times.
- *Idealists* take it to describe imaginary events that show that God will triumph in the world.

A fifth alternative is that the book describes prophecies that have *multiple* fulfilments.⁷ This embraces the other interpretations. We might call this the ‘pluralist’ view.

⁷ See my article, ‘Towards an understanding of the book of Revelation,’ to be published.