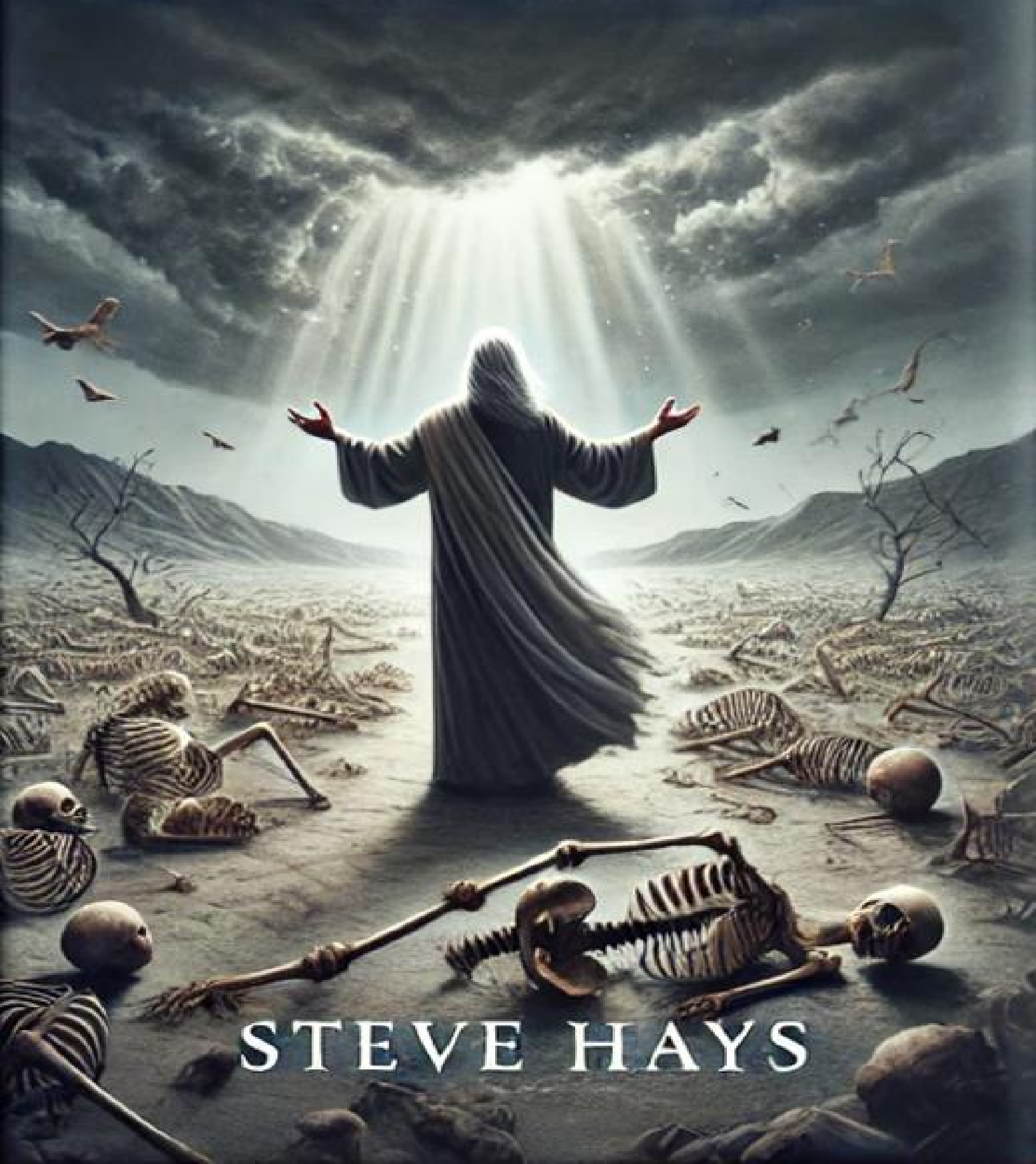
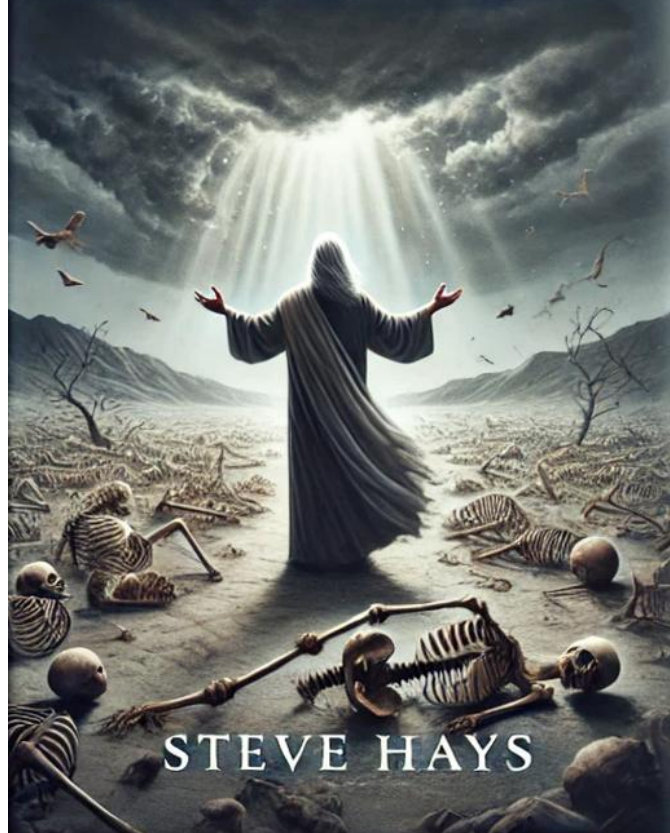


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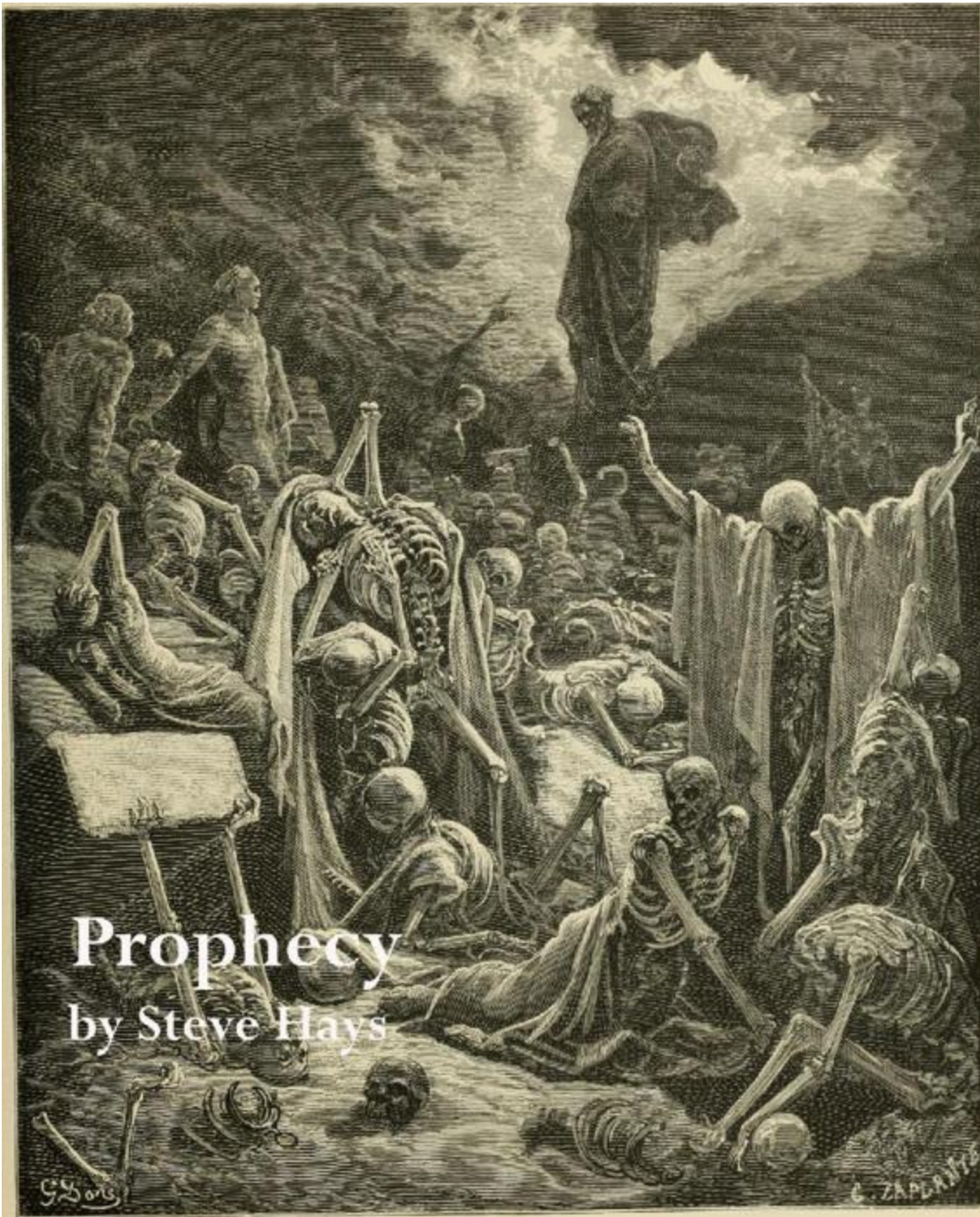


STEVE HAYS

PROPHESY



STEVE HAYS



Prophecy
by Steve Hays

Preface

This is mostly about the philosophy and hermeneutics of Bible prophecy.

Contents

Preface

..... 2

Unfulfilled prophecy

..... 5

Inspired foresight

..... 7

When is Jesus coming?

..... 10

As it was in the days of Noah

..... 13

What does the future look like?

..... 15

Countdown to judgment

..... 18

Where is Jesus coming?

..... 20

Through the hidden door

..... 22

Multiple
fulfillments

..... 23

<u>From temple and Transfiguration to Pentecost.....</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>The Bible for modern readers</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>Expository gaps</u>	<u>28</u>
<u>Prophetic blanks</u>	<u>30</u>
<u>Thunderstorm</u>	<u>31</u>
<u>You are here</u>	<u>32</u>
<u>Seeing double</u>	<u>33</u>
<u>Was Jesus a failed prophet?</u>	<u>34</u>
<u>The end is at hand!</u>	<u>35</u>
<u>Can prophetic fulfillment be staged?</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>Agabus</u>	

..... 40

Seers and time-travelers

42

Prophecy and hermeneutic

43

In retrospect

..... 45

Time lag

..... 49

Dreams and divination

.. 54

Wheels within wheels

... 56

Intermission

..... 57

Desert storm

..... 60

Some standing here will not taste death

61

Foresight and insight

..... 62

Did you see Superman?

65

Models of visionary revelation

68

Soon for whom?

..... 70

He is coming soon

..... 73

Unfulfilled prophecy

If, then, fulfilled prophecies are evidence for Scripture's reliability, then don't

unfulfilled prophecies have to count as evidence against its truthfulness? It would

certainly seem so, especially when we remember that a lot of these prophecies

were given two thousand years and more ago. If some modern-day astrologer

made a prediction that didn't come to pass even in a hundred years, would we

still believe the prediction was correct? I doubt it, but then the skeptic is likely to

tell us that if these prophecies about the end times were really true, they would

have been fulfilled by now. Certainly, these prophecies can't be used as evidence

that Scripture is reliable. J. Feinberg, Can You Believe It's True: Christian

Apologetics in a Modern & Postmodern Era (Crossway 2013), 403.

I find this argument odd on several levels:

i) In principle, an unfulfilled prophecy is not equivalent to a failed prophecy. Of course, there can be some overlap. But even though some unfulfilled predictions are failed predictions (i.e. short-sighted psychics), not all unfulfilled predictions are failed predictions. After all, every fulfilled prophecy was unfulfilled before it was fulfilled. There was an interval during which it was unfulfilled.

ii) If a prophecy says something won't happen until something else happens first, then the nonevent can be a confirmation of the prophecy. Some nonevents are surprising.

We normally expect some things to happen. If something hasn't happened, that sometimes calls for special explanation. Some prophecies predict more than one thing, where a later event is contingent on an earlier event.

iii) Whether we'd expect a prediction to come to pass by now depends on the wording of the prediction, as well as the nature of the problem which the fulfillment is intended to solve. There's nothing antecedently improbable about long-range prophecies.

iv) As a matter of fact, the OT contains some messianic prophecies which weren't fulfilled for centuries or millennia. So there's precedent for long-range unfulfilled prophecies.

v) Some prophecies are conditional. Contingent on repentance. If you do A, B will happen—but if you don't to A, C will happen.

vi) If Jesus returned in 500 AD or 1000 AD, you and I wouldn't be here. Our parents wouldn't be here. Our children wouldn't be here. Whether we should expect endtime prophecies to have been fulfilled by now depends on how many fallen generations God intends to save. The sooner Jesus comes, the fewer the number of fallen generations who were given the opportunity to enjoy eternal life. Even if there's procreation in the world to come, those are different generations. Different people.

Is the objective of the new covenant for Jesus to return as soon as possible? Or is the objective to save more people?

The new covenant is more expansive than the Mosaic covenant. A missionary faith directed at all people-groups. Expansive in time as well as space. Diachronically as well as geographically.

Inspired foresight

I'm going to integrate in one post some of my reflections on the nature of prophecy: Critics of Bible prophecy raise several objections: (i) they claim that Scripture contains failed prophecies. (ii) Conversely, they claim that Scripture contains retrodictions.

Prophecies after the fact (*vaticinia ex eventu*). (iii) Finally, they sometimes complain that if Scripture were truly inspired, it would contain anticipations of futuristic technology.

Something that couldn't be known by an ancient writer, apart from revelation.

By way of response:

1) The challenge of long-range prophecy is that it risks generating temporal paradoxes.

In classic time-travel scenarios, when someone from the future travels back into the past, he carries his advanced knowledge and know-how with him into the past. If he shares that, he will kick-start a primitive culture. That, in turn, will retroactively erase the future he came from, and replace it with an

alternate future. But in that event, he couldn't travel back into the past in the first place.

Suppose you have a Wall Street banker with a legendary reputation for accurately predicting the stock market. If he puts his predictions in an envelop, mails it to himself, and opens it afterwards, that is feasible. If, however, he publicizes his predictions ahead of time, he prediction will, itself, affect the stock market. It may cause a bull market or bear market, depending on the prediction. The very act of publicly forecasting the outcome may sabotage the prediction.

If the Bible were to predict scientific breakthroughs or advanced technology, the very prediction would generate an alternate timeline, mooting the prediction by making the outcome happen sooner than predicted.

2) There's a further complication. In principle, God could show a prophet the distant future. Say, give him a preview of the 9/11 attack. Problem is, an ancient seer wouldn't know what he's seeing. Planes flying into skyscrapers would be incomprehensible to him.

Moreover, he wouldn't have the vocabulary to describe what he saw. There are no Classical Hebrew words for "car," "subway," "airplane," "skyscraper," &c. Technical vocabulary develops in tandem with technological developments.

Furthermore, even if God dictated the vocabulary to him, these foreign words would be meaningless to him and his audience. It would be difficult for scribes to accurately copy them.

3) Apropos (2), long-range prophecies are analogical. They take two forms:

i) They depict the future in archaic terms.

ii) They depict the future in symbolic terms.

In both cases, that makes it harder to identify the referent in advance. Take the case of allegorical premonitions:

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, 2 and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. 3 And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. 4 And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke (Gen 41:1-4).

How could you tell ahead of time (apart from inspired interpretation) what this refers to?

In principle, it could denote so many different events.

Yet, seen in hindsight, this was obviously predictive. The emaciated cows represent famine and drought, in contrast to the well-fed cows. The numbers represent years. The sequence represents years. The fact that the dream is situated on the Nile represents an Egyptian setting for the famine. As does the fact that the dreamer is an Egyptian.

Take another example:

9 Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me" (Gen 37:9).

Once again, this is pretty opaque from a prospective viewpoint, but obvious from a retrospective viewpoint.

By "archaic," I mean a Biblical prophet will depict the distant future in terms of the present. What the world looked like to the prophet and his contemporaries.

4) Apropos (3), a lot of Bible prophecy has its origin in visionary revelation. Most Bible prophets were seers. It's a two-step process:

I) VISIONARY REVELATION

God discloses the future in images

II) VERBAL INSPIRATION

The seer either translates the imagery into verbal descriptions of what he saw or else he prosaically states the outcome. More Bible prophecy may have its origin in visionary revelation that we're aware of if the prophet merely summarizes the results of his vision

rather than describing the experience. Yet that's the process which generates the oracle.

Of course, the reader can't directly experience what the prophet saw. At most, we read his verbal description of his visionary experience.

In theory, someone in the future might recognize what he saw, even if it was unrecognizable to the seer himself, viz. if someone in 2000 AD saw airplanes crashing into the Twin Towers.

But in Scripture we don't have that. What we have are either symbolic depictions of the distant future or archaic depictions of the distant future. The challenge is matching the imagery to their future analogues. That can be difficult or impossible to figure out in advance, yet it may be obvious after the fact, viz. Joseph's dream and Pharaoh's dream.

Some OT prophecies were clearly fulfilled in NT times. But other OT and NT prophecies remain outstanding.

When is Jesus coming?

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place...3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near (1:1,3).

i) Liberal preterists view this as a clear case of failed prophecy. John expected Jesus to return "soon," for the time is "near." What could be plainer? 2000 years later, that can't be true.

Up to a point, conservative preterists (e.g. Gentry, Mathison) agree with liberal preterists, but they salvage the veracity of the prediction by

redefining the terms of fulfillment. According to them, it refers, not to a personal return of Christ, but the fall of Jerusalem.

ii) However, even in the text, the timing is more ambiguous. Soon for whom? In relation to whom is the time near? According to the text, in relation to the reader (or lector). But that's not a fixed frame of reference. Which reader? Which lector? The text itself makes the timing relative to the timeframe of the lector. But different lectors read Scripture aloud at different times. They belong to different churches. The public reading of Scripture doesn't occur at just one time and place. Rather, whenever the church meets for corporate worship, Scripture is read aloud.

The time-marker is indexed to the reader. But that's a relative rather than absolute frame of reference.

iii) In addition, there's a further complication. In Revelation, there's more than one kind of dominical coming. There are at least two, or maybe three, different ways or senses in which he comes. For instance:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen (1:7).

i) That's a classic reference to the Second Coming. Notice the universal language.

"Every eye." "All the tribes of the earth."

ii) Moreover, this has its background in Zech 12:10. Yet John adds totalizing language to stress the universality of the event. This is a global, one-time event, involving the physical return of Christ.

iii) Notice, too, how difficult this is to square with conservative preterism:

a) To begin with, "every eye" didn't witness the fall of Jerusalem. "All tribes of the earth"

didn't mourn over the fall of Jerusalem. Even most inhabitants of the Roman Empire didn't witness the fall of Jerusalem, much less inhabitants of India, China, Japan, Australia, Northern Europe, North and South America, &c. Only a tiny fraction of the human race was even alive in 70 AD. And of those, only a tiny fraction of humanity witnessed the fall of Jerusalem. Fractions of fractions of fractions.

Perhaps a preterist would say John's language is hyperbolic. However, that's dubious, since John adds totalizing language to Zech 12:10 to accentuate the universality of the event.

Moreover, even if the language is hyperbolic, it's one thing to exaggerate for rhetorical effect—quite another when the truth of the matter is nearly the opposite. The number of humans who witnessed the fall of Jerusalem is statistically insignificant in relation to the whole.

b) In addition to the spatial mismatch (i.e. failing to match the biogeographical scope of the claim), the preterist interpretation also succumbs to a temporal mismatch. If this refers to the fall of Jerusalem, then those who "pierced him" must be still be alive about 40 years after the fact to mourn that calamity. Minimally, those who "pieced him" must refer to the Jewish and Roman authorities in Jerusalem (i.e. Pilate, the Sanhedrin) who were party to the execution of Christ. It might also include the mob, which demanded his death.

But is there any reason to think that all, or even most, of those who were complicit in the death of Christ were still alive to witness the fall of Jerusalem? Surely many of them died in the intervening years.

If, however, this refers to a future advent, which is roughly synchronized with the general resurrection, then they will be in a position to witness the return of Christ.

iv) In addition to a universal, one-time coming of Christ, Revelation also refers to one or two different kinds of local, repeatable comings. Take, for instance, the Christophany in 1:9ff. Jesus makes a personal appearance to John. He comes to John on Patmos.

That's clearly different from the Second Coming. It's unlikely that Jesus appeared to John in the flesh. It's a vision. The details are surreal. Yet it's a case of Jesus coming back.

v) And we have similar examples in the letters to the seven churches:
Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent (2:5).

Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth (2:16).

Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you (3:3).

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (3:20).

a) In context, these refer, not to the Second Coming, but to localized comings. For one thing, Christ's coming in these situations is contingent on whether or not the churches are penitent. But it's incongruous to suggest that the timing of the Second Coming is conditional on the behavior of a particular church in Asia Minor.

Since, moreover, these are different churches, the Second Coming can't be synchronized with their behavior inasmuch as the behavior of one local church isn't synchronized with the behavior of another local church. What if Ephesus repents, but Sardis does not? What if Philadelphia repents at a different time than Pergamum or Laodicea?

In Rev 2-3, Jesus can't come back at one time or the same time (i.e. the Second Coming) if his return is contingent on events which happen at different times. So this must refer to local, repeatable comings of Christ.

b) There's also the question of whether this involves a personal appearance/reappearance (e.g. 1:9ff.) or Jesus "coming" to them indirectly in the sense of visiting judgment on them or restoring fellowship with them.

If so, that would be a different type of coming than 1:9ff.—both of which differ from 1:7.

v) The larger point is that when Revelation says Jesus is coming "soon," or the time is

"near," you can't just assume that that denotes the Second Coming, for in Revelation, Christ "comes" in different ways. When is Christ coming? In Revelation, that depends on what kind of coming is in view.

As it was in the days of Noah

i) I'm going to make a few brief observations about the Olivet Discourse. I'm not going to discuss all the exegetical twists and turns of this complex text.

I take the traditional position that this refers to two distinct events: the fall of Jerusalem and the return of Christ. I view the former as past and the latter as future.

ii) One objection to the traditional interpretation is that it allegedly inserts a large temporal gap between the two events. To that objection I'd say several things: **a)** It's inaccurate to say the traditional interpretation inserts a temporal gap. Rather, the text itself is indefinite on the duration of the interval.

b) Apropos (a), at the time Jesus spoke, both events were future in relation to the disciples. And assuming a pre-70 date for the Gospels, both events were still future in relation to the original reader.

But obviously there's a shift in the viewpoint of a modern reader. At least one of the events is past in relation to the modern reader. So there's a sense in which we're bound to see it somewhat differently than the original audience.

c) There's an unspecified interval between Christ's prediction and the fall of Jerusalem.

The disciples had no idea how soon that would take place. To make allowance for a temporal gap between the fall of Jerusalem and the return of Christ is no more ad hoc than making allowance for a temporal gap between the prediction of Jerusalem's downfall and the fulfillment. One way or another, the disciples, the original reader, and later readers must all take a wait-and-see attitude. We find out when they will happen after they happen.

d) The objection to a temporal gap presumes that if, in fact, there were such a gap Jesus or the Gospel writer would give some indication, perhaps by filling the gap with intervening events.

However, ever so many things happened in the decades between the prediction and the fall of Jerusalem which Jesus and/or the Gospel writers don't bother to detail. If, therefore, there was a gap between the fall of Jerusalem and the return of Christ, there's no reason to expect Christ or the Gospel writers to spell out a series of intervening events.

e) This also goes to the nature of Biblical priorities. From a theological or eschatological perspective, after the fall of Jerusalem, what's the next big event? Sure, lots of things may happen between then and now—things which you and I may think are important—but

do they rise to the level of the next big event? If we're waiting for the coin to drop, that's the Parousia. Nothing in-between measures up.

iii) Why do the Gospel writers record both predictions? How does the general reader benefit from having that information?

Let's put it this way: why should the reader believe Christ's prediction about the end of the world? Well, for one thing, because he accurately predicted the fall of Jerusalem.

In fact, in the Olivet Discourse itself, we have a similar principle concerning Noah's flood, where a past event sets the precedent for a future event (Mt 24:37-39). Likewise, Christ's ability to predict the fall of Jerusalem attests his ability to predict the end of the world. If the former came to pass, we can expect the latter to eventuate as well. We can't directly

verify the future. But if he made a verifiable prediction about what is now a past event, then that corroborates his foreknowledge.

What does the future look like?

1) There are different ways of interpreting the Olivet Discourse. Some view it as all in the future. Some view it as all in the past. Some view it as partly past and partly future.

Of those who view it as all in the past, we can break that down into three subdivisions: **i)** Those who think it was a failed prediction.

ii) Those who think it was a retrodiction.

iii) Those who think it was a true, but figurative prediction.

Even if we rightly discount the liberal interpretations, conservative, capable scholars struggle to present a consistent interpretation. Why is that?

2) Let's take a step back and ask how Jesus knew the future. How was he in a position to answer the disciples? What was his source of information?

i) One explanation is divine omniscience. And in the Gospels, Jesus certainly makes statements which dip into his divine omniscience.

However, a problem with that explanation in this case is his admission of ignorance regarding the timing of the event (Mt 24:36; Mk 13:32). He knows what will happen, but not when it will happen.

ii) In light of (i), it seems more likely, in the case of the Olivet Discourse, that Christ's foreknowledge is based on revelation. In principle, this could be indirect. It could be based on his understanding of OT prophecy. Or it could be direct. He himself was the recipient of divine revelation.

3) Let's explore the latter option. Assuming the source of his foreknowledge was revelation, what mode of revelation would that be? Well, in principle, it could one of two different modes:

i) It could be propositional revelation. He was given true ideas about the future.

ii) It could be visionary revelation. He saw the future.

Certainly, visionary revelation has ample precedent in the OT, as well as NT counterparts.

4) Suppose his foreknowledge (in the Olivet Discourse) was based on visionary revelation.

i) To begin with, what does the future look like? If you could see the future, would it look futuristic? Let's consider some examples:

a) As a kid I saw a short-lived SF series called *UFO*. The series actually began in 1970, but was set 10 years ahead in 1980.

Problem is, 1980 came and went, but 1980 didn't look anything like the projection. It only took 10 years for the series to appear hopelessly anachronistic.

b) Even if I didn't know for a fact when *Bullitt* was made, or who the actors were, I could tell from the cars (e.g. Mustang, Dodge Charger) that it was either made in the late 60s or else it was set in the late 60s. The film contains datable artifacts. Datable technology.

However, even that depends on the background knowledge of the viewer. I was a kid when the film was made, so I remember cars like that. But, of course, you could have a viewer who doesn't recognize period cars.

c) Suppose I had a vision of a Siberian forest in 1000 BC. Suppose I had a vision of a Siberian forest in 1000 AD. Could I tell, by what I saw, whether I was seeing the past or the future? Does the image contain any chronological clues? Or is it too generic?

d) If I saw a vision of a London in the middle ages, and I knew enough about historical architecture, I could place it somewhere in the middle ages. But suppose I saw an image of the Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde. Could I tell

if that was earlier or later than the image of London? Presumably, Cliff palace didn't change as much over the centuries.

5) My point is not that a prophet can't know if he's seeing the past or the future. My point is that, taken all by itself, what he sees may not be time-indexed. Over and above what he sees, God would have to tell him if it was past or future.

6) Then there's one additional complication. That's reducing a prophetic vision to a verbal description. Suppose I foresee a Siberian forest. Suppose I describe what I foresaw: "There were lots of fir trees and snow on the ground."

The verbal description doesn't contain any chronological clues. That would have to be supplied by an editorial comment.

What makes that vision a vision about the future? Basically, the intent of the writer. I intend it to refer to a future scene or future event.

7) Now, it's possible that this is why some of the descriptions in the Olivet Discourse are chronologically ambiguous. Visions of the near future may be indistinguishable from visions of the distant future, or vice versa. And that same ambiguity may carry over to a verbalized vision.

Unless you have an editorial aside or parenthetical comment, it may be hard to sort them out.

Countdown to judgment

24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. 37 For,

“In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay” (Heb 10:24-25,36-37).

11 And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light (Rom 13:11-12).

18 Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour (1 Jn 2:18).

Did NT writers entertain a false expectation regarding the imminent return of Christ?

1. For John, the "last hour" is a way of saying we're in the final stage of human history, prior to the final judgment.

2. In Rom 13:11-12, Paul plays on a metaphor. For Paul, the fallen world is analogous to night. The conversion of his readers lies in the past. They came to Christ after dark.

There's their present situation, which is still at night. So the next big event will be the dawn of the Second Coming. The metaphor creates an artificial compression between past, present, and future.

3. Modern readers need to put themselves in the mindset of ancient readers. Mortality was sky high in the ancient world. You could die at any time, at any stage of life. In the prime of life. Fatal disease. Fatal accident. Crime. Famine. Warfare. Martyrdom. The threat of death was omnipresent. You could run out of time without any advance notice (cf. Lk 12:20; Jas 4:13-14).

4. In addition, divine judgment wasn't confined to a universal one-time event at the end of history. The OT is chockfull of divine judgments in the here and now. And you have that in the NT (e.g. Acts 5:1-11; 12:23; 1 Cor 11:30).

5. So the notions of death and judgment shade into each other. In practice, there's no sharp line (Heb 9:27). These hortatory and admonitory statements are directed at an audience conditioned by the imminence of death, as well as divine judgment breaking into the present. A foretaste of the final judgment. The clock of God's judgment has a minute hand as well as an hour hand.

Where is Jesus coming?

This post piggybacks on my prior post:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/07/revelation-inside-and-out.html>

i) Amils, premils, and classic postmils believe the return of Christ is future. Indeed, the future Parousia is a benchmark of orthodoxy. However, certain well-known passages in the Gospels and Revelation are preterist prooftexts. Not only does Revelation refer to Jesus coming but to his coming "soon" (Rev 1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 22:6-7,12,20; cf. 1:3). On one reading, that would suggest that Jesus was expected to return in the lifetime of the 1C readers. But since that seems to be manifestly false, either the predictions are mistaken or else our interpretation is mistaken. If the predictions are mistaken, this wouldn't be some marginal error. We're waiting for something that will never happen, and that raises questions about the promises of Scripture generally regarding the world to come and our participation in the world to come.

ii) One face-saving explanation is that Jesus came symbolically in God's judgment on Jerusalem in 70 AD. But that raises the question of whether promises about the world to come in general should be given the same treatment. If they can be symbolically construed to stand for earthly events, then is there an intermediate state? Is there a future resurrection of the just? Do we go to heaven (or hell) when we die? Or is that a symbolic depiction of this life, this world? Is that in the past or present—with no future hope that things will ever get better?

iii) Another problem is that whatever the merits of that interpretation in reference to the Olivet Discourse, there are no clues to indicate that Revelation is alluding to the fall of Jerusalem.

iv) Suppose we take a different approach. Revelation consists of an introduction (1:1-8), followed by a continuous series of visions. Almost all the action takes place in John's vision, from 1:9-22:21. So that raises a logical question: when Revelation says Jesus is coming soon, is he coming soon inside or outside the visionary world? Within the world of John's vision, Jesus may be coming soon. It's like John is watching a movie in his head. He sees the plot unfold.

At one level, John sees this happen in the vision. At another level, John sees this happen on Patmos. Where does it happen? Depends. There's the real world. The penal colony on Patmos, surrounded by the Aegean sea. That's outside the vision. Then there's "where" he is within the vision, as an immersive observer. There are places

outside the vision, in the 1C Roman empire, as well as places inside the vision. In a sense, that shifts the question from when Jesus is coming to where Jesus is coming.

v) A possible objection to this interpretation is Rev 1:1,3. That's from an introductory section before we get into the vision. However, that's a summary or lead-in to what the reader is about to witness in John's extended vision.

In what respect did Jesus "show" or "reveal" to John "what must take place soon"? That must have reference to what follows in the visionary narrative. It's not something Jesus told John directly, apart from the vision, but is mediated through the vision. John, and various characters within the vision, experience the impending return of Christ in that surreal history as it unfolds right before his eyes.

Once the reader is transported into the vision, he never leaves. It has an entry point but no exit. Like parachuting out of a plane onto an island. After that, everything happens on the island.

vi) Another objection to this interpretation might be, if Jesus was only coming soon in vision but not in reality, how does that give beleaguered 1C Christians any hope of deliverance? One answer is the fate of martyrs (Rev 6:9-11; 20:4). Jesus comes to them by bringing them to himself. At the

moment of death they are inducted into God's presence. And that has the advantage of making that hope available to every Christian generation. A very tangible hope, and not some far-off hope that only one generation at the Parousia will enjoy.

vii) There will, of course, be a Second Coming in the real world, but we can't use Revelation to fix the timing. Events in Revelation are meant to have some counterparts outside the vision, but how they correspond is often intentionally open-textured, to leave room for multiple applications.

Through the hidden door

1. To unbelievers and Rabbinic Jews, the way Christians interpret some OT and NT

prophecies smacks of special pleading. However, Rabbinic Jews face a parallel challenge. There are OT prophecies which, from their own vantage point, were not fulfilled during the Second Temple period or medieval Judaism. So these also look like

"failed" prophecies. Put another way, if Rabbinic Jews can claim that many OT

prophecies remain outstanding, so can Christians with regard to some OT and NT

prophecies alike.

2. Individual Bible prophecies are like houses with basements and subbasements with hidden doors leading to tunnels connecting to the subbasement of the house next-door.

On the surface, the houses are separate. But if you go down into the house, the houses are connected at the level of tunnels between subbasements. You start on the ground floor of one house. Go down to the basement, then the subbasement, open a door to a tunnel leading to the subbasement of the next-door house, then go up to the ground floor of that house. Or, to invert

the metaphor, imagine an underground city with hidden staircases leading to surface.

3. In that regard, it's interesting that the cosmography of Revelation has three stories: heaven>earth>netherworld. Earth is like the ground floor, the netherworld is like the basement, while heaven is like the flat rooftop living space in mediterranean architecture. And there's a progression from the dark basement to the brighter ground floor to the sunny roof deck. Incidentally, it's always a fatal mistake in horror movies to go into the basement!

4. Although this is metaphorical, it has realistic counterparts. Reality is like parallel worlds connected by hidden doors. The physical universe often seems to be a closed-system. For many people, that's all they ever experience in this life. Yet that perspective can change in a flash when beings from heaven or hell enter our world. Angels, demons, saints or ghosts.

Multiple fulfillments

Some Christians, myself included, appeal to multiple fulfillments to explain certain prophecies. To outside observers, this probably smacks of special pleading.

And there is the danger of fooling ourselves by becoming too creative in how we defend a belief-system in the teeth of prima facie evidence to the contrary. Cult members fall into that trap. Of course, it also depends on how much positive evidence you have for your belief-system. The Christian faith is up to its neck in evidence. We have to stand tiptoe to keep from drowning in the evidence.

However, the question I'd like to briefly explore is whether there's something intrinsically ad hoc about the multiple fulfillment principle. To take a comparison, the Bible contains Gospel promises. If you repent of your sins, trust in Jesus for salvation, commit your life to Christ, you will be saved. But that's certainly consistent with multiple fulfillments.

Likewise, the Bible contains prayer promises. If you pray for something, God may grant your request. Once again, that's certainly consistent with

multiple fulfillments.

Not only do multiple fulfillments not falsify Gospel promises and prayer promises, but if the promises were not fulfilled on multiple occasions, then that would falsify the promises. Suppose, in the course of church history, only one prayer by one Christian was answered. That singular fulfillment would disprove the prayer promises. In order for them to be true, they require multiple fulfillments. These are general promises. So there's nothing ad hoc in principle about something having more than one fulfillment.

Promises often involve a type/token relation, viz. one promise, but many instances of answered prayer. A one-to-many relation between the promise and the outcome.

And when you think about it, prophecies are like promises (or threats) about the future.

And just as promises can be conditional or unconditional, prophecies can be conditional or unconditional. Just as promises can have a one-to-one fulfillment as well as a one-to-many fulfillment, so can prophecies.

It might be objected that if a prophecy has so many candidates vying for fulfillment, that makes the prophecy vacuous. But that's not true as a matter of principle—any more than multiple candidates for answered prayer makes prayer promises vacuous.

I'm not suggesting that every prophecy is open to multiple fulfillments. I'm just examining whether, as a matter of principle, it's special pleading to consider that explanation.

From temple and Transfiguration to Pentecost A. For secular readers, Ezk 40-48 is a classic example of a failed hope. This was Ezekiel's utopian anticipation for what awaited the post-exilic community. But it never happened. Before getting more specific, I have a few preliminary observations: **B.** Strictly speaking, it's not a prophecy. It is descriptive rather than predictive. A verbalized record of what Ezekiel saw in a vision. It has no calendar for when that will happen. It doesn't locate the outcome in the

post-exilic restoration. That said, it certainly fosters an expectation regarding the future.

C. Revelatory dreams and visions may either be literal or allegorical. For instance, the dreams in the Joseph Cycle (Gen 37-50) are allegorical. Likewise, the visions of Zechariah are often allegorical. So even if the outcome doesn't literally correspond to the description, that doesn't falsify it. The comparison may operate at an analogical level—like the revelatory dreams in the Joseph Cycle. A critic might object that this is special pleading, but analogical fulfillment can be clearly recognizable.

D. In his magisterial monograph on theophanies, Vern Poythress has a taxonomy of theophanies, including fire theophanies, thunderstorm theophanies, cloud theophanies, and glory theophanies.

i) Although that classification scheme is useful up to a point, the categories involve borderline distinctions that often blend. For instance, a thunderstorm is a composite phenomenon of cloud, wind, lightning, and thunder. And one question is whether all or some of these elements are represented in the theophanic counterpart to a natural thunderstorm. Poythress says the theophany in Ezk 1 is a composite theophany:

God appears to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1 in an elaborate and detailed theophany, which

combines features of cloud theophany, fire theophany, court theophany (the

living creatures), chariot theophany (the wheels), and man theophany (the man-

like figure in vv. 26–28). This theophany is the most elaborate within the whole

Old Testament.

ii) Another element of thunderstorm theophanies is their source: they come from the sky. That's something which clouds and electrical storms share in common.

iii) I don't think cloud theophanies and glory theophanies are distinct categories. In Scripture, the Shekinah has the appearance of a luminous cloud or plasma.

iv) Likewise, lightning was probably equated with firelight. For one thing, lightning strikes cause fires. When Elijah summons "fire" from the sky, that's probably preternatural lightning.

In some passages, moreover, lightning and firelight are used interchangeably. In that respect, a fire theophany and thunderstorm theophany overlap. In addition, the Shekinah may well have looked like a fiery cloud.

E. With that in mind:

4 I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, 5 and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures...13 The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it (Ezk 1:4,13).

5 The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks (Ezk 10:5).

Seen from a distance, it resembles an electrical storm. Lightning and firelight are synonymous. The cherubic wings probably rumbled like thunder.

F. Now let's compare these two passages:

Then the man brought me to the gate facing east, 2 and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory. 3 The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. 4 The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east. 5 Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple (Ezk 43:1-5).

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).

What if Ezekiel's vision of the new temple, Spirit-rapture, and the return of the Shekinah, to consecrate the visionary temple—finds fulfillment at Pentecost, when a Spirit-theophany with elements of stormy wind and firelight inaugurates and consecrates the new covenant community? Its realization would be analogical rather than literal. But the analogical parallels are striking.

G. Let's consider another "failed" prophecy: *27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. 28 "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Mt 16:27-28).*

Compare that to the Synoptic parallel in Luke:

Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God (Lk 9:27).

Without bothering to speculate on the origin of the verbal variants, it's notable that seeing "the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" in Matthew is equivalent to the more generic seeing "the kingdom of God" in Luke. Some commentators think this prediction finds fulfillment at the Transfiguration,

which follows directly on the heels of the prediction in the Synoptic accounts:

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus...5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said,

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”
(Mt 17:1-3,5).

28 About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. 29 As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning...32 Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory...34 While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud
(Lk 9:28-29,32,34).

1. The Transfiguration involves two luminaries: Jesus is incandescent and the Shekinah is incandescent.

2. Why do Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus? All three have two things in common: **i)** They experience fiery theophanies

ii) Theophanies which take place on mountains: Mt Sinai, Mr. Carmel, Mt. Horeb, and whatever eminence was the site of the Transfiguration.

3. This also raises the question of whether Lk 9:27 finds additional fulfillment at Pentecost.

i) Does Jesus come in the person of the Spirit? One function of the Spirit is to take his place during the inter-adventural age. Although ontologically distinct, they are, in that respect, functionally interchangeable.

ii) By the same token, the luminous Spirit, manifested in the Shekinah at Pentecost, evokes the luminous Christ, manifested at the Transfiguration.

The Bible for modern readers

An atheist objection to Christianity is that if the Bible is divinely inspired, it should contain some prophecies about advanced technology. I've discussed that before. I'll make two points.

i) To recap my first response, suppose you're a moviemaker with a penchant for science fiction. You want to set your story in the future, several centuries from now. And suppose you have actual knowledge of the future. So your depictions of the future are fantastically prescient and realistic.

That, however, generates a conundrum. It will give your nerdy, geeky movie viewers some clues about the future. Although they think the movie is just science fiction, the depiction of advanced technology gives them ideas. They think about designing gizmos that could really do that. So the effect of your movie is to kickstart the future it depicts.

By giving a preview of the future you change the future because your preview influences how people behave, as an intellectual stimulus.

But because it's premature, because it doesn't represent an incremental development of technology, because it utilizes the resources at hand, at an earlier stage of history, the inventions and discoveries will be different than in the film. By interfering with the natural progression of science, the future it causes isn't the same future, because the modifications begin at an earlier point in the timeline.

The paradoxical consequence of your movie is that before anyone saw your movie, it accurately predicts how the future will turn out, but once enough people see your movie, it no longer predicts how the future will turn out. Rather, it's an accurate prediction of the future without a past containing your movie.

ii) But here's another point. It's easier for a modern reader to understand an ancient text than for an ancient reader to understand a modern text.

References to modern technology would be unintelligible to an ancient reader. By contrast, references to ancient technology are intelligible to modern readers. We know the past. We have the benefit of hindsight.

In addition, future technology is constantly changing at a rate that didn't occur in the ancient world. Take the comical spectacle of teenagers who don't know how to use a rotary phone. For today's teenagers, rotary phones might as well be advanced alien technology.

Expository gaps

I'd like to revisit an issue I often discuss, with some additional considerations: **1.** The secular interpretation of Dan 11 is that most of Dan 11 is "prophecy" after the fact, but then the author goes out on a limb and makes an actual prediction about the fate of Antiochus, only he gets it wrong. By contrast, conservatives postulate a chronological gap. They say it's not about Antiochus but the future Antichrist. That can look suspiciously like special pleading. An ad hoc, face-saving postulate to salvage the prophecy.

2. And, of course, there are false prophets and "psychics" who make failed predictions.

So that's a legitimate issue.

If we have extrabiblical evidence that some people have genuine premonitions, then that establishes the principle. So we approach the text of Daniel knowing that's both possible and sometimes actual. And it only takes a few verified examples to establish that a phenomenon is real. The prophecies of John Knox might be a good candidate.

Likewise, Craig Keener includes some uncannily accurate predictions in his book on miracles. There are other examples.

3. If the author of Daniel got it wrong, why didn't he just edit the prediction to make it retrospectively correct? Did he die before the demise of Antiochus? Or if it circulated before the demise of Antiochus, why was it

even preserved by posterity when Jews on the scene, who'd be in the best position to know, could tell that the prediction was a bust?

4. In Scripture, the default mode of prophetic inspiration is visionary revelation. And the book of Daniel is no exception. It contains revelatory dreams and visions. However, it also contains futuristic exposition. Take the angel who tells Daniel what will happen.

One question this raises is whether Daniel's experience alternates between visions in which he foresees the future and auditions in which an angel tells him what will happen.

In principle, he could see what the angel is describing. In a sense, the angelic exposition is for the benefit of the reader rather than Daniel.

I don't think it's coincidental that the shorter material takes the form of visual descriptions while the longer material takes the form of verbal exposition. When there's too much ground to cover, the reader is given a verbal summary rather than a vision description. But this doesn't imply that Daniel had a different experience. Rather, it seems more likely that he consistently has visions, but some of the visions are distilled into verbal summaries to save space.

5. Let's take a comparison: movies consist of consecutive scenes. In terms of the plot, there are chronological gaps between the scenes. The interval between one scene and another may be a matter of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or years.

The movie viewer isn't shown the gaps. He watches a seamless series of scenes. It's not like there's a scene, then it goes black or blank, then there's another scene.

But the viewer is expected to understand that while, in terms of the viewing process, there's no time lapse from one scene to the next, changing scenes usually implies a time lapse, in terms of the plot—even though the viewer isn't shown the passage of time in-between scenes.

And that's not just a fictional convention. The same convention exists for documentaries and biopics. Chronological gaps in historical narration are routine and necessary.

6. That's overlooked in Dan 11. Even before we get to the question of Dan 11:36-45, or 11:40-45, the series of events leading up to that oracle contains many unspecified chronological gaps. It sketches the rise and fall of empires and the succession of kings: Neo-Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Ptolemies, Seleucids, and Rome. But it doesn't provide a minute-by-minute, day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-monthly, or even year-by-year account. It skips over many intervening stretches of time, choosing to focus on key figures and events.

7. This may also have a bearing on oracles that say a future event is "soon", "near", "at hand". In a vision, the seer views each event following right on the heels of the prior event. Within the continuity of the vision, a particular scene may be sooner or later in relation to the series of images. Just like, in a movie, one scene may be close to another scene, in the sense that there are no chronological gaps in the flow of the imagery. The scenes were shot at different times, sometimes out of order, but edited into a continuous succession of scenes.

Yet in terms of how the scenes track the plot, there is a lapse of time between one scene and another, even though that's not shown. By the same token, the way visionary revelation corresponds to reality needs to make allowance for the difference between the flow of images in the vision and how that lines up with the future.

Prophetic blanks

Conservatives have often argued that the critical position rests on a dogmatic,

rationalistic denial of the possibility of predictive prophecy. For the critical

scholar, however the issue is one of probability. That Daniel's predictions have

particular relevance to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes is not in dispute...There is

no apparent reason, however, why a prophet of the sixth century should focus

minute attention on the events in the second century. J. Collins, Daniel (Fortress

Press 1993), 26.

That sounds plausible, but it's superficial. Bible prophecy is selective. Focussed on the big events. The Babylonian Exile was a big event for Jews. Suppose that's when Daniel was written. What's the next big event on the prophetic calendar? The Antiochean crisis is a good candidate.

That would tempt many Jews to commit apostasy. So it would be very encouraging for 2C BC Jews to realize that a 6C prophet foresaw their ordeal, and predicted that God would deliver them.

And what's the next big event on the prophetic calendar? What's the big event between the Antiochean crisis and the advent of Christ? There's nothing of comparable importance in-between. So it's not unreasonable think Dan 11 has a blank, an unstated interval, between Antiochus and the next big event.

That's how prophetic timetables in Scripture work. They skip over minor events and focus on the high points or low points.

Thunderstorm

Recently I dreamt about a thunderstorm. In my dream I was in a strange house at night.

I could hear the thunder and see flashes of lightning through the windows. Then I woke up, and there was a thunderstorm outside!

Now, there's nothing extraordinary about that kind of dream. When we're asleep we sometimes hear things which our imagination turns into a dream.

It is, though, an illustration of how apocalyptic prophecies might depict the real world. In an altered state of consciousness, a seer perceives things in his revelatory dream or vision. And that may correspond to what will happen outside his dream or vision in a fairly straightforward sense. Rather like how I dreamt about a thunderstorm at night while there was, in fact, a thunderstorm at night, outside the my dream. A direct parallel between the real world and the dreamscape.

You are here

Eschatology is like a store directory. When you look at a store directory, it orients you to the rest of mall by saying "You are here". But where is here? It keeps shifting according to where you are in relation to the mall. Depends on which entrance you happen to be at. Depending on where inside the mall you happen to be at. There are directories at each entrance of the mall well as inside the mall. And whenever you come to a directory, it says "You are here". So you're always here—yet here is never the same place! Here becomes a circular indexical. Here becomes there and there becomes here as you move from one directory to the next.

Imagine a lost driver. He pulls into a gas station to ask directions. "Where am I?" the driver asks. "You are here" the attendant answers. Well, that's not very helpful.

The question is how to get from here to there, but you have to know where you are to know where there is. That's the tricky thing about endtime prophecy. Unless I know where I am in relation to the final destination, knowing that I'm here is useless since here can be anywhere. Here keeps changing.

Seeing double

I'm going to expand on a previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/10/was-jesus-failed-prophet.html>

Many readers of the Olivet Discourse conclude that Jesus mispredicted the future by synchronizing the fall of Jerusalem with the end of the world.

There are different responses to that objection.

One potential problem with that inference is the tacit assumption that this is a continuous discourse which Jesus delivered at one sitting. The Olivet Discourse is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. There are several parallel editions floating around the Internet. If you compare them side-by-side, there's a lot of overlap, but there's also striking additions and omissions.

What accounts for the differences? One possible explanation is that Jesus didn't deliver this address at once sitting. Rather, Matthew, Mark, and Luke have topically collated some separate, but related sayings originally given at more than one time and place.

Perhaps grouping them by a common theme like oracles of salvation and judgment.

Indeed, such arrangements may have antedated the composition of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

When we read all three Synoptic accounts of the Olivet Discourse horizontally, the selectivity of the editorial process stands out. If that's the explanation, then it's more precarious to assume that Jesus had the same future referent in mind.

Was Jesus a failed prophet?

Mt 24:34 (*"Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place"*) is a familiar crux. Did Jesus mispredict the future?

There are different explanations. And I've discussed this on numerous occasions. But here's another angle. The question at issue is the relationship between his fall of Jerusalem prediction and his end-of-the world prediction. These are adjacent, but are they coreferential? Are they synchronized?

This verse is embedded in the Olivet Discourse. That's an extended block of text (Mt 24-25). But did Jesus deliver that entire address at one sitting, or is

this a composite text?

Matthew and Luke both have a tendency to group related material together. For instance, the Sermon on the Mount is often thought to a composite text, where Matthew combined things Jesus said at different times and places.

In that's the case in regard to the Olivet Discourse, then we're dealing with two or more separate oracles of salvation and judgment. Each is prophetic, but may well have different referents. When combined, there are no editorial seams, so we're left with one continuous block of text—which fosters the superficial impression of one continuous chain of events. But the continuity is literary rather than chronological. Like other composite speeches in Matthew and Luke, there may be no explicit textual clues to distinguish the underlying sources, which were delivered at different times and places.

It's just run-on. Yet the impression of continuity is an editorial artifact. There's the original setting for each speech, but in writing a biography, the narrator must rearrange some material to produce a linear flow. Writing is a different medium from speaking.

Writing about history is different from how history is experienced.

The end is at hand!

So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates (Mt 24:33).

The end of all things is at hand (1 Pet 4:7).

1. The Bible uses variations on this eschatological imagery. For modern readers, it creates the impression that the Bible mispredicted the future. Let's consider that.

Both passages use metaphors. There are different kinds of metaphors. Let's consider three.

I) DEAD METAPHORS

That's a word or phrase which no longer evokes an image in the reader's mind. That can happen through popular repetition or because the origin of the metaphor has been forgotten.

II) TEMPORAL METAPHORS

As a temporal metaphor, the nearness of the end denotes distance in time. It means time is running out (itself a metaphor!). The wait is almost over.

In that sense, the end is inevitable. There's no stopping it. There's less and less time until there's no more time before the denouement. Like a countdown.

III) SPATIAL METAPHORS

A spatial metaphor can have temporal connotations. But let's consider a spatial metaphor in its own right. As a spatial metaphor, the nearness of the end denotes distance in space. For instance, a journey in which a traveler is approaching his destination.

2. Sometimes these coincide. Suppose my destination is an hour's drive from the point of origin. Suppose my destination is 50 miles from the point of origin. Halfway through the journey, I now have half as much distance to cover, and half the time remaining.

3. But sometimes these come apart. As a temporal metaphor, you keep on getting closer until you run out of time. But as a spatial metaphor, you may come near without closing the gap. As a spatial metaphor, moreover, nearness is repeatable.

Take orbital motion, like periodic comets. Sometimes it's closer to earth, sometimes further away. It has a nearest point, and a farthest point (in relation to earth). Unlike linear motion, it doesn't get closer and closer until it reaches the end. Rather, it circles back around.

4. Mt 24:33 is an extended metaphor rather than a dead metaphor. The reader should try to visualize the implicit imagery. It suggests a traveler or conqueror approaching a fortified city.

On the face of it, this is a spatial metaphor, although it might have temporal connotations. Unlike "end is near" temporal metaphors, where that's bound to happen, in exponentially decreasing increments, "end is near" spatial metaphors are not necessarily inevitable or unrepeatable.

I already mentioned periodic comets, but let's take some other examples. I once rode a bus home across a bridge. However, after the driver got across the bridge, and let some passengers off that the bus stop, he made a wrong turn by taking the exit back onto the bridge. Instead of crossing the bridge once, we had to cross it three times! We were closer to home, then further away, then closer to home, as he circled back to rectify his mistake.

I once saw a special about the USS Enterprise. Not Star Trek but the aircraft carrier. In one episode, the admiral had his pilots practice landing in choppy seas. That makes for dangerous landing conditions because the deck is bobbing up and down. If you try to land when the stern is on the way down, you may crash into the deck, but if you try to land when the stern is on the way up, you may slam into the back of the carrier. Not surprisingly, none of the pilots tried to land the first time around. They'd come in close to gauge the conditions, then come back around until the angle of the deck was level enough with the jet to risk landing. Several times they were almost at the point of landing before they pulled away to try again. Timing is everything. There's no margin for error.

Or take Westerns in which the good guy is pursuing the bad guy on horseback. The hero wants to get positioned to jump from his horse onto the villain's horse. But of course the villain doesn't want him on his back, so he tries to pull away. Sometimes the horses are closer together, sometimes further apart. The trick is when to make the jump. If you don't do it just right, you fall off your horse. Fall between the galloping horses.

Or take a river you can cross during the dry season which is impassable during snowmelt.

5. As a spatial metaphor, end-is-near imagery may suggest an opportunity. It might turn into a lost opportunity, but sometimes you get a second chance.

Take an army marching to a fortified city. How will the city respond? Will the army lay siege until the city surrenders? Will the city be able to repel the invader? Will the city pay tribute?

6. A common theme in Scripture is threatened judgment. "Repent or else!"

In some cases, judgment is not inevitable. Indeed, the purpose of the warning is to give sinners an opportunity to repent.

Moreover, this is a cyclical process in Bible history and church history. Even if one nation or generation blows the opportunity, another nation or generation may take advantage of the opportunity. Even if that's a missed opportunity for one individual, the same opportunity may come back around for another individual.

7. It's possible to overinterpret metaphors. Conversely, it's possible to pay insufficient attention to metaphors. My point is that I think we should make allowance for different connotations, depending on whether the metaphor is temporal or spatial (in the aforementioned examples).

Can prophetic fulfillment be staged?

One objection to the argument from prophecy is whether it's naturally possible to stage a prophetic fulfillment. What if a Jew read OT oracles, then decided to "fulfill" them by imitating them? He'd be acclaimed the messiah.

Well, that depends. In theory, it would be humanly possible to "fulfill" some prophecies by manipulating circumstances. Mind you, the argument from prophecy doesn't rest on a handful of instances.

There are, however, some formidable obstacles to pulling that off systematically.

For instance, a messianic pretender can't prearrange to be born in Bethlehem. He has no say in where he will be born, since he doesn't exist at that point. It's up to his parents.

Or take this oracle:

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy (Isa 35:5-6).

Suppose a messianic pretender tried to imitate that? In the original, this is probably metaphorical, but that would make it all the more impressive if he could do it literally.

But, of course, it isn't naturally possible to heal the blind, deaf, mute, and lame.

By the same token, consider this oracle:

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? 9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied (Isa 53:10-11).

Vv8-9 describe messiah's violent death. And it's naturally possible to provoke the authorities into executing you. Mind you, what would be the incentive to get yourself killed if you know it's a hoax?

But putting that aside, the encore is the really tricky part. Isa 53 presents a paradox that would be deeply baffling to OT readers. The messiah dies, and yet—according to vv10-11—he lives again!

Engineering your own resurrection isn't naturally feasible.

Agabus

i) One of the disputes between cessationists and charismatics is whether there's such a thing as fallible prophecy. Charismatics cite Agabus (Acts 21:1-14) as an example of fallible prophecy.

There's a sense in which I think both sides are wrong. I think allegations that Agabus was inaccurate are very wooden, but I'd like to approach the issue from a different angle. In some cases, a prophet can be right even though events didn't turn out as predicted. Is that paradoxical? Not really.

ii) To begin with, some prophecies are conditional. That's common regarding oracles of judgment. A paradigm case is Jer 18:7-11:

7 If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. 9 And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. 11 Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.'

In this case, the prediction is not a statement of what will happen without further ado, but what will happen unless sinners repent in response to the fearful warning.

That in turn goes to a general principle. Some predictions envision a future if the recipient does nothing different. Take a premonition. Suppose I have a premonitory dream. Suppose it has a dire denouement.

When I wake up, and events begin to repeat themselves, just like I saw in my dream, I take actions to change a key variable, resulting in a different outcome that diverts the stream of causality, with a different end-result.

Was the premonition false? In one sense, I'll never know, since I deliberately thwarted that trajectory.

But what if the purpose of the premonition was to forewarn me so that I could take steps to avert that outcome? There were two futures in play: one in which I go with the flow and one in which I divert the flow. Which future is actual and which is counterfactual depends on what I do in response to the premonition.

BTW, that's consistent with Calvinism and freewill theism alike. This goes to the difference between predestination and fatalism. If I act on the premonition to avoid the future I see in the dream, I'm doing what I was predestined to do. The dream is a stimulus to that end. The premonition, as well as my reaction, was included in God's

plan, as a means of advancing the plot to the appointed goal. Although the premonition doesn't contain my reaction to the premonition, that's contained in God's plan, like Russian dolls, where smaller factors are nested in larger factors.

iii) This, in turn, goes to the distinction between foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge. If what I see in the dream plays out, then it was foreknowledge.

But if I heed the premonition by changing a variable in the chain of events leading up to the dire outcome to deflect that outcome, then it was counterfactual knowledge. In a proximate sense, my action determines whether it was foreknowledge or counterfactual knowledge—rather like Schrödinger's cat, although there's another sense in which my action is predetermined by the dream. Having been tipped off, I act differently than if I never had that advance knowledge.

iv) Returning to the original illustration, because Paul was forearmed by the prophecy of Agabus, he may have handled some situations differently than if he wasn't privy to that foresight. In consequence, even assuming that things didn't unfold in quite the way Agabus envisioned, his prophecy could still be infallible if that was a prediction about an alternate timeline. That's exactly the fate which awaited Paul, if Agabus hadn't shared his vision with Paul. But knowing the prophecy could affect Paul's actions in many subtle ways. He might adjust his plans in ways that had the same general, ultimate outcome, but by a somewhat different route.

v) However, this only applies to predictions where the recipient has some control over the relevant variables. There are, of course, predictions that are out of our hands, like natural disasters, which we lack the wherewithal to stop. In some cases, a recipient might have the power to redirect the course of events if he only knew all the intervening causes and altered one of them.

Seers and time-travelers

I've discussed this before, but I'd like to use a different illustration to make the same point. A common objection to the argument from prophecy is that Bible prophecies are said to be too vague. In general, they don't have a name, date, and address.

But predicting the future poses something of a paradox. It's necessary to strike a balance between too much specificity and too little.

A seer is like a time-traveler who takes a trip into the future, then returns to his own time. He literally meets himself coming and going.

But he doesn't simply come full circle. He returns with additional information. That's potentially disruptive, because he now knows what he will do before he does it. Yet foreknowledge of his own decisions now threatens to affect the decision-making process. He will make decisions about the future knowing how things turned out. But that advance knowledge is likely to influence his decision-making, resulting in different decisions than if he hadn't witnessed the future. Knowing the future carries the risk of changing the future.

That's a familiar conundrum in time-travel stories. If you see the future, you act in light of the future you saw, which may in turn change it. Your intrusion replaces the future you initially saw with an alternate future.

That's why prophecies are, by design, more clearly seen in retrospect. Once fulfilled, it's too late to willfully or inadvertently frustrate the prediction.

One safeguard is multiple prophecies. It won't be clear in advance how these synchronize. And so it won't be possible to disrupt the predicted

outcome. How they're coordinated can't be discerned ahead of time. But once they converge, the predicted outcome is recognizable, after the fact.

Prophecy and hermeneutic

Background information is often useful or sometimes crucial when we interpret Scripture. Ideally, it puts us in the situation of the original audience. It helps to interpret historical narratives and ancient law codes. It helps us to understand the type of situation that NT epistles were responding to. Writers presume a body of common knowledge which the implied reader shares with the author. That fills in the gaps.

Writers expect readers to grasp more than what is actually said.

Mind you, there are pitfalls to using background information. The Bible is often countercultural, so sometimes the Bible is saying something in spite of or contrary to the social milieu.

In addition, we can only use the evidence that's survived. But that runs the risk of stretching the surviving evidence to make it germane to something in Scripture, even if it's unrepresentative.

But I'd like to make a different point. When it comes to Bible prophecy, especially long-range prophecy, appeal to background information poses a conundrum. There's circularity to the appeal because a scholar must have a preconception of what the oracle has reference to for him to match that against relevant background information.

Conversely, he cites background information to interpret the oracle. So he uses presumptive background information to identify the prophetic referent while he uses the presumptive referent to identify suitable background material.

Yet it only gets worse. If an oracle refers to the distant future, then the salient background information lies in the future. And the reader only knows after the fact what would constitute the salient background information. That's something we're only in a position to recognize in retrospect.

For instance, what's the relevant background information to interpret Ezk 40-48? Dan 11:40-45? Daniel's 70-week prophecy? The Olivet Discourse? The Apocalypse? The man of sin (2 Thes 2:3-10)? Depends on whether we view that as past or future. If future, we must wait for the background information. Invoking background information to interpret Bible prophecy may be prejudice the referent. We only know the historical context if we know when the event takes place or was meant to take place.

We only know if certain background information correlates with the prophecy if we know what the prophecy means. But what if we only know what the prophecy means in light of whatever background information we use as our interpretive frame of reference?

There's a mutual dependence.

Assuming the inerrancy of Scripture, if it's fairly clear that the oracle hasn't been fulfilled in the past, then the best we can do is to imagine futuristic scenarios.

This conundrum makes it difficult even in principle to falsify Bible prophecy. A "skeptic"

might complain that this is special pleading. A face-saving out that immunizes Bible prophecy from disproof.

By way of response:

i) Simply as a matter of hypothetical logic, the relevant background knowledge for a true prophecy must be synchronized with the timeframe of the prophetic fulfillment. If the oracle is both future and true, then it's necessarily the case that we can only identify the relevant background information with the benefit of hindsight. For that's the situation which the oracle actually pointed to. Although that may indeed be convenient for a Christian apologist, it's not an ad hoc consideration. In the nature of the case, the background information for a true prediction must peg the same timeframe. The setting, in time and place, is the same for the specific event as well as the general environment which lends interpretive clues to the outcome of the oracle.

ii) Moreover, this isn't just hypothetical. For instance, there are credible examples of precognition in modern times. Premonitions. Prophetic dreams. It isn't confined to Bible prophecy. And the same principle applies. A prophetic dream may be indistinguishable from an ordinary dream ahead of time. It's only if it comes true that the dreamer can look back on a chain of events leading up to its realization to perceive the context in which it occurs. That's where it fits.

iii) In addition, consider an oracle by Ezekiel which, from the standpoint of his contemporaries, appeared to fail—yet was ultimately realized in an unexpected and humanly unforeseeable way:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/06/tyre-and-babylon-in-bible-prophecy.html>

In retrospect

To understand the Spirit of the Lord in the OT it is first necessary to recognize that

the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit (as a distinct person of the Trinity) is

due to progressive revelation and is not exactly how the Israelites would have

viewed the Spirit of the Lord, in the Old Testament, and especially in the book of

Judges, the Spirit of the Lord is portrayed as an extension of the presence, power,

and authority of Yahweh.

While some scholars have identified the appearances of the angel of the Lord as

theophanies or Christophanies in which God (or the Second Person of the Trinity)

himself is revealed, there are a number of problems with such a view. First, the

Christophany view forces NT theology onto earlier OT texts, which violates the

concept of progressive revelation and makes exegesis secondary to theology.

Second, the Christophany view dilutes the uniqueness of the incarnation event

and undercuts the teaching of Heb 1, which reveals Christ's superiority over the

angels (cf. 1 Pet 3:22). Third, both views ignore what is now widely known from

ancient Near Eastern practices that envoys, who were sent by kings or deities,

functioned as authoritative mouthpieces for their superior. Like a prophet, who

occasionally shares the same title (malak, see Hab 1:13; cf. 2 Chron 36:15-16; Isa

42:19; 44:26; Mal 1:1; 3:1), the messenger would often speak the words of his

sender in the first person, and the recipients would respond to it as though they

were dealing directly with the sender. Thus is it preferable to understand the

angel of the Lord not as an ontological equivalent to God himself (e.g. note how

the Lord is distinguished from the angel in Judg 6:21-23 and 13:16) but rather as a

function that is filled by a human or angelic intermediary who is sent by God to

speak and act on his behalf. K. Way, Judges and Ruth (Baker 2016), 30,79.

This raises some perennial issues in hermeneutics. I've discussed the general issue on many occasions, but now I'd like to approach it from different angles: **1.** The first time you see a movie or read a novel, or read a history book (assuming you don't know the plot), you're in the same situation as the characters or participants. Like theirs, your viewpoint is prospective. You don't know what to expect. You don't know how things will turn out.

When, however, you see a movie or read a novel for a second time, your viewpoint is retrospective. Because you now know how the story ends, you bring that later insight

into how you interpret the earlier action. The first-time perspective is unique and unrepeatable.

There are, in fact, some people who only see a movie once or read a novel once because, having lost the element of surprise, they lose interest. But that's pretty shallow.

2. Take some concrete examples. If you're reading Gen 2-3 for the first time, you share the blinkered viewpoint of Eve. You don't know what the serpent is up to.

But on a second reading, the scene has dramatic irony because you now know something Eve doesn't. She's oblivious to her peril. This conversation will lead to expulsion from paradise. There's a particular suspense in seeing that someone is in danger when they themselves are oblivious to the danger they are in. Alfred Hitchcock used the example of having viewers see a man put a time bomb in a box, and put the box under a table. The audience knows when the bomb will go off. People sitting at the table have no idea.

Or take the scene of David viewing Bathsheba's bathe. On a second reading, you don't view that incident in isolation. Rather, you know that this will set in motion a disastrous chain reaction. You know far more about the consequences of David's fateful lust than he knew at the time. You know where it all leads, like falling dominoes.

Consider the curse sanctions in Deuteronomy. Reading them in hindsight, which is, of necessity, what all of us do, is a different experience than hearing the warnings for the first time, in advance of the Babylonian exile and Assyrian deportation. We can't really forget what we know. What was future for them is past for us. We inevitably read those dire warnings with a sense of fatalism, not in the *que sera sera* sense, but because we know what happened and how it happened.

Or take a thriller in which the behavior of one character is initially puzzling and intriguing. As the plot unfolds, it turns out that he is a spy. That explains his enigmatic behavior early on. It's not as if, upon each rereading, we should try to forget the plot.

That's not something we can do, even if we tried.

3. In general, there's nothing exceptional about bringing later information to bear when we interpret a story. That isn't unique to how some Christians read the Bible. To the contrary, that's how we read stories generally.

4. To be sure, we need to guard against anachronistic interpretations of a certain kind.

This in part raises the question of whether the viewpoint of a particular audience supplies an interpretive frame of reference, and if so, what audience would that be? Is it the original audience? Or is it the canonical audience? Compare an OT Jew who only had the Pentateuch—with post-exilic Jews (e.g. Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah, Malachi, the Chronicler). They read the Pentateuch, not as a self-contained literary unit, but in light of Israel's evolving history as well as Israel's evolving canon. They are able to see a

trajectory leading out of the Pentateuch. Is that a misguided perspective? How can they not read the Pentateuch in light of subsequent historical and canonical developments?

That's well before we ever get to the NT.

5. If the Spirit of God is same individual in the OT and the NT, if the OT successful refers to the same individual, if the Spirit of God is a distinct person of the Trinity, then he will have the same attributes across time (indeed, across possible worlds) even if our knowledge of the Spirit is progressively revealed. Like my example of the spy in the thriller. He was already a spy when the story began. His true identity only became apparent in the subsequent course of events, yet even though other characters were ignorant of his true identity, the reader is privy to something they don't know.

Suppose oil reserves are discovered on a parcel of land in 1950. Although that's the first time the property was known to have oil reserves, the land had those reserves for thousands or millions of years. That was already true about the land, in the distant past.

6. To take a different example, Abraham is the ancestor of David. Of course, you wouldn't know that if all you had to go by was Genesis or the Pentateuch. But suppose you're a Jew living at the time Samuel was written. So you have everything up to and including Samuel as your canonical frame of reference. That will shed a backward casting light on Abraham in

Genesis. On God's plans for Abraham and his posterity. On the historical significance of his covenant with Abraham.

7. My maternal grandfather is one of my ancestors. He died before I was born. At what point did he become my ancestor? There are different ways to answer that question.

You might say he became my ancestor when I was conceived. But given my existence, he was always going to be my ancestor.

Suppose you were alive when he was alive. Suppose you had foreknowledge of his progeny. You'd already view him in the larger context of his descendants.

Or, to consider this from yet another angle, if my mother is my ancestor, and her father is her ancestor, then he became my ancestor when she was conceived. The ancestor of my ancestor is my ancestor. I can view his ancestorship retroactively.

8. Over and above the general hermeneutical issue of progressive revelation in reference to the angel of the Lord:

i) What's the difference between a theophany and a Christophany? In my opinion, the OT usually refers to "God" or "Yahweh" without further Trinitarian specification. By the same token, the angel of the Lord doesn't necessarily represent out any particular person of the Godhead. It could just be generic.

If so, there's a sense in which a theophany will include a Christophany, just as the Trinity includes the Son. Although a theophany doesn't single out the Son, the Son will

be included in a theophany. In that respect, there's a false dichotomy between theophanies and Christophanies, for a Christophany is a subset of a theophany.

ii) An OT Christophany wouldn't dilute the uniqueness of the incarnation event for the obvious reason that an OT Christophany isn't an OT

incarnation. It's categorically distinct.

iii) An OT Christophany wouldn't undercut the teaching of Heb 1, which reveals Christ's superiority over the angels, for the obvious reason that, on a Christophanic identification, the Angel of the Lord isn't an "angel" in the sense of heavenly, discarnate creatures, but God manifesting himself by simulating an angel.

iv) Some apparitions of the angel of the Lord are neutral on whether that's a theophany or angelophany, but in other cases (e.g. Gen 18; Exod 3), it doesn't have the same status as a creaturely envoy, like a prophet of God.

Time lag

I'm going to return to a topic I've discussed on more than one occasion.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place (Rev 1:1).

1. This is a prooftext for preterism. On this view, John expected the predictions in his Apocalypse to be fulfilled within the 1C, give or take. Of course, that's a somewhat anachronistic way of looking at it. People in the 1C didn't think of themselves as living in the 1C. They didn't think of the end of the 1C as a terminus ad quem. That's a retrospective calendrical distinction.

2. In addition to Rev 1:1, we have similar sounding passages at the end of the work: And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place" (Rev 22:6).

"And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book"

(Rev 22:7).

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done (Rev 22:12).

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20).

And I doubt it's coincidental that these kinds of passages come at the beginning and ending of the Apocalypse. It forms an inclusio.

And these passages are customarily understood to refer to the end of the world. The return of Christ and the aftermath thereof.

3. Before discussing that, I'd like to draw a technical distinction. A linguistic or philosophical distinction. Expressions using terms like "I," "sooner," and "later" are called indexicals:

An indexical is, roughly speaking, a linguistic expression whose reference can shift

from context to context. For example, the indexical 'you' may refer to one person

in one context and to another person in another context. Other paradigmatic

examples of indexicals are 'I', 'here', 'today', 'yesterday', 'he', 'she', and 'that'.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/indexicals/>

In the philosophy of language, an indexical is any expression whose content

varies from one context of use to another. The standard list of indexicals includes

pronouns such as "I", "you", "he", "she", "it", "this", "that", plus adverbs such as

"now", "then", "today", "yesterday", "here", and "actually".

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/dem-indx/>

A temporal indexical is only be true at a particular time. A spatial indexical is only be true at a particular place. Mind you, that doesn't necessarily mean it can only be true once. Once person's "now" may be another person's "then," and so forth.

By themselves, indexicals don't pick out a particular time and place. They don't have a date-stamp or place-name.

4. In addition to the first set of passages I quoted, there's another set: *Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent (Rev 2:5).*

Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth (Rev 2:16).

Only hold fast what you have until I come (Rev 2:25).

Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you (Rev 3:3).

I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown (Rev 3:11).

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (Rev 3:20).

Like the first set, these refer to Jesus "coming" or coming "soon," yet unlike the first set, these seem to refer to events within church history rather than events that terminate church history. Indeed, the Apocalypse is inaugurated by Jesus coming to John, on Patmos. So the variety of similar sounding statements, that can't all converge on the same event, should make the reader cautious about assuming that when Revelation talks about the coming of Jesus, or his coming "soon," that this is necessarily an end-of-the-world prediction, with a terminus ad quem around the turn of the 2C, give or take.

5. The thief-in-the-night motif (Rev 3:3; 16:15) is in tension with a predictably imminent event. The point is to keep Christians watchful. They can't afford to let their guard down, because the timing of the Parousia is unexpected. That, in itself, qualifies how imminent it can be.

6. A theme in some science fiction stories is a character in the present sending a message to people in the future. This may take the form of a warning. The messenger has foreknowledge that if the current trajectory continues as is, it will culminate in a catastrophe one or more generations in the future—or possibly centuries in the future.

He needs to send this message into the future, or at least have a message from the past which, when they discover it, future readers will recognize is about their situation, enabling them to deactivate the time bomb before it detonates (as it were). The impending disaster can't be prevented in the present.

So this raises a practical question: how to send a message about the future to people in the future. How to send a message about the future to people in the same future as the message is referring to. The message would have to be sent in the past. There'd be a time lag between time-frame when the message was sent and the time-frame when it took effect.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that predictions about Jesus coming soon are not to give people in the present (i.e. John's contemporaries) a preview of the near future, and not even to give people in the present a preview of the distant future, but to give people in the future a preview of their impending future. How would a seer in the 1C, or Jesus speaking through a 1C seer, give people in the distant future advance notice? How would you signal them?

As in science fiction stories, there's a certain paradox when a character must speak over the heads of his contemporaries to an audience that doesn't yet exist. His contemporaries may be the first people to hear it, although it's really not about them.

And in order to reach the target audience down the line, it may have to be transmitted from one generation to the next. Handed down by scribes who

copy it down and recopy it, century after century, until it finally reaches the intended audience.

We can't literally send messages into the future. We can't skip over the intervening time.

A message to future recipients has to begin in their past. In some cases, in their distant past. It has to work its way through the intervening years or centuries.

That's the nature of long-term prophecy in general. Promises or forewarnings to people who do not yet exist. The carriers of the message are, in a sense, the immediate audience. But it's really not for them or about them. They are just switchboard operators.

7. Scholars typically think the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2-4) were addressed to real 1C churches in Asia Minor. And that's my own predilection.

But suppose, for the sake of argument, that you took a consistently futuristic view of Revelation. Could Rev 2-4 be reconciled to that position?

Well, this goes back to the science fiction conundrum. How would Jesus signal churches far into the future? The letters can't be addressed to the church of Manilla, the church of Buenos Aires, the church of Helsinki, the church of Singapore, the church of Fiji, the church of Bombay, the church of Cape Town, &c. That would be anachronistic to the point of opacity.

Moreover, it would be counterproductive. If the NT used placenames that didn't exist in the 1C, Christians would name localities prematurely after those placenames. So the message would never get to the intended target. It would be diverted.

Therefore, a seer would need to use familiar localities that function as placeholders for the future counterpart. Suppose this was really for the benefit of Christians in Manilla.

One of the ancient churches will be a stand-in for that future referent.

I'm not saying I agree with this. I think it's overstated. My own position is that Revelation was occasioned by the situation facing 1C Christians, that it's intentionally germane to the situation of Christians at different times and places throughout church history, but it also has a climactic fulfilment in the future.

8. A critic might object that my explanation could rationalize any failed prophecy. That raises several issues:

i) A dated prediction is falsifiable after the fact. That's more specific than mere indexicals.

ii) It's true that a long-range prophecy may be unverifiable or unfalsifiable in advance.

But if there's a track record of fulfilled predictions, then that supplies a reason to believe the next prediction.

Dreams and divination

The Bible narrates some revelatory dreams. The Bible even has a famous prophecy about Christian dreams (Acts 2:17-18). That raises the question of whether we ought to interpret our dreams. How seriously should we take our dreams?

There are "primitive" cultures in which oneiromancy is a fixture of the culture. In addition, depth psychologists think dreaming is significant. Freud and Jung are two noted examples.

Recently, I was listening to a psychologist discuss dream analysis. I didn't listen to him for that reason. He was initially discussing Dostoyevsky and secular ethics, but then he got onto the subject of dreams, which is natural for a psychologist to discuss, since dreams are an important and historically neglected feature of human cognition.

He discussed what dreams represent. In dream analysis, a psychologist will ask the client what the dream reminds them of, then attempt to connect that to a network of ideas.

A presupposition of dream interpretation is that dreams are symbolic. Therefore, the objective is to decipher the symbolism.

However, I'm skeptical about the operating assumption. I think ordinary dreams are figments of the imagination that don't really symbolize anything. To be sure, that's an oversimplification. Sometimes we dream about familiar people and places. Many dreams draw on memories. Dreams aren't imaginary in that sense, although we also dream about strange people and places that only exist in our dreams. I mean the plot in a dream is imaginary. And even when we dream about a real place, there's often a degree of surreal distortion.

Ordinary dreams can be significant in the sense that we sometimes dream about things that are significant to us. In that respect, dreams can sometimes be a reflection of what's important to us. But in that case, the interpretation is obvious to the dreamer.

Then there's the question of revelatory dreams. If these are coded language by which God communicates to some people, does that require interpretation?

Even if it did require interpretation, that doesn't mean the interpretation is available. In the case of premonitory dreams, those don't require interpretation ahead of time, because the future will supply the interpretation. If the dream comes true, the interpretation lies in the fulfillment. In that respect, premonitory dreams are self-interpreting, but not in advance. And, of course, that's a direct way to distinguish ordinary dreams from revelatory dreams.

I think it would normally be a mistake to make decisions based on dreams, since most dreams are imaginary rather than prophetic. That's a highly unreliable source of divination and decision-making. A snare.

Moreover, the paradox of premonition is that it's usually too late to act on premonitory dreams, because it's only after the fact that you are in a position to know that the dream was premonitory.

This raises the question of whether dreams ever can or should function as a warning.

That depends in part on whether you can confirm certain presently true details—as well as whether treating the dream as a possible omen entails nothing more than a minor inconvenience. It would be foolhardy to act on a dream if that carries the potential for major irreversible loss in case it's just a figment of your imagination.

The question of premonitory dreams also goes to the perennial issue of fatalism. And that, in turn, goes to the distinction between foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge. If a dream comes true, then in retrospect you can see that it was bound to happen that way. But that's in part because, if you don't know ahead of time whether a dream is premonitory—and most dreams are just ordinary dreams—so there's no reason to take actions that would change the outcome. Moreover, most dreams aren't threatening. And threatening dreams (nightmares) are apt to be unrealistic, so there's nothing you could do to avert the dire consequence since the dream doesn't correspond to reality, in any discernible sense. Rather, it's one of those surreal things that only happens in a dream. It can't happen in real life.

And there's another paradox. If the future doesn't turn out the way you dreamt because you did something to thwart the dream, then you will never know if the dream was premonitory. Did it not come true because it was never about the future in the first place? Or did it not come true due to your evasive maneuvers?

One can think of hypothetical examples in which that's a false dichotomy. Suppose you dream about a terrorist attack in Times Square tomorrow, so you avoid Times Square tomorrow, and the attack occurs. The dream was true, but it wasn't true for you, because you took preventive measures to opt out of that scenario.

This also goes to fictional dilemmas about seers who futilely warn the populace about some impending catastrophe. The authorities assume they are loons, and lock them up.

The predicted disaster occurs right on schedule. The seer is belatedly vindicated.

Wheels within wheels

10 And as for their appearance, the four had the same likeness, as if a wheel were within a wheel. 11

When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went, but in whatever direction the front wheel faced, the others followed without turning as they went (Ezk 10:10-11).

Artists and commentators struggle to visualize Ezekiel's description of the wheels. Since I wasn't there, I can't reconstruct what Ezekiel saw. However, I'd like to draw a comparison. One time I was standing near a railroad. I was familiar with the railroad, having seen it from both sides. It was a double railroad. Two parallel tracks for two trains.

The time I was standing there, I saw a train in the foreground, facing me. That train was at a standstill.

Yet I saw moving wheels. How could the wheels be moving while the train was motionless?

The explanation, of course, is that I was seeing through the undercarriage of the train in the foreground to another train beside it. The train in the foreground obscured the train in the background. This generated the optical illusion that the train facing me was simultaneously mobile and immobile. How would the undercarriage be in motion while the carriage remained motionless?

Of course, that's impossible, yet I didn't misperceive the situation. The illusion was caused by the ambiguities of perspective. A montage in which the train in the foreground was superimposed on the train in the background. The only part of the train in the background that was visible was the undercarriage. But due to the foreshortened perspective, it looked as if the moving wheels belonged to the motionless train.

Perhaps Ezekiel's disorienting imagery is analogous to that.

Intermission

i) I've discussed this before, but I'd like to approach it from a different angle. Both amils and premils (and postmils, I suppose) posit chronological gaps in some Bible prophecies. That can look like special pleading. A face-saving device to savage your eschatological timetable. Or, more seriously, a face-saving device to salvage the prophecy itself.

Now, I do think Christians of whatever eschatological outlook (amil premil, postmil) can be at risk of postulating ad hoc gaps to protect their position. And I'm not sure we can entirely guard against that. We need to make allowance for the possibility that our prophetic school of thought is mistaken. (That's different from saying the prophecy itself is mistaken.) And we need to have general evidence for our eschatological outlook. We can't be constantly patching it up.

ii) On a related note, some people are suspicious or dubious about Bible prophecy because they've seen how millennial cults devise creative interpretations when their founding prophet makes false predictions. And they think Christian apologists are guilty of the same antics when defending the Bible.

iii) And I think skepticism is often justified in assessing prophetic claimants. As even Scripture says, "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1). The Bible warns of false prophets.

iv) That said, I'd like to make a preliminary point. If there's evidence outside of Scripture that some people can sense the future (e.g. premonitions, premonitory dreams), then that establishes both the possibility and reality of genuine prophetic foresight. And it doesn't take many examples to establish the existence or occurrence of a particular phenomenon. If you have that baseline, then it should affect the presumption you bring to Scripture. At the very least, that ought to make you more sympathetic.

v) The next point I'd like to explore is whether the notion of prophetic gaps is inherently suspect. Let's consider the idea of Bible prophecy. Even if you don't initially believe it, ask yourself what it would be like in case it's for real. What would a seer experience?

We need to remind ourselves that Bible prophecy is typically a two-stage process.

That's easy forget because all we have is the record of vision. So that makes it look like a one-stage process. Since we're reading a prophecy, our default mode is to judge it on those terms. But that's misleading. A visionary revelation didn't originate in writing.

Let's begin with our ordinary waking perception of temporal succession. We experience the "passage of time" continuously. Instant by instant.

I can't jump ahead from 1:00 to 2:00. I can't skip over the intervening time. Rather, I must live through each moment to get from 1:00 to 2:00. Unless I suffer a blackout, there are no chronological gaps in my experience of real time.

Compare that to visionary revelation. Imagine what it's like to be a seer. Suppose, one night, you experience a series of prophetic dreams. It's like watching a movie in your head. You see one scene after another. The scenes keep changing. Then you wake up and write them down.

Now, writing is a different medium than seeing. There are no gaps on the printed page.

When you write down what you saw, you don't insert blank spaces between one section and another. Rather, you just write down what you saw in the order in which you remember having seen it—in tidy, evenly spaced paragraphs.

So when we read a prophecy, the written record is continuous. There are no breaks on the page.

Yet that's just an artifact of how to represent an experience in writing. It's a category mistake to confuse the nature of the underlying experience with the nature of a textual description.

Let's go back to the experience of visionary revelation. Suppose these are visions of the future. A series of visions. But here's the thing: there's nothing in what he sees that shows him how much time passes between one scene and another. Serial visionary revelation is discontinuous. A vision of disconnected scenes.

So there's nothing in the visionary experience to indicate the actual duration of the intervals between one future scene and another. There's an implicit gap between each scene and the next scene. Abrupt scene changes.

There's no indication that the envisioned events occur in rapid succession, or evenly spaced intervals. If you think about it, it would be rather disorienting to witness. The seer's imagination is bombarded with shifting, disjointed scenes. He saw this, that, and the other thing.

So the fulfillment of these visions could well be staggered. That's not a case of wedging gaps between a continuum. To the contrary, there's already "space" between one scene and another. And there's no telling how much space separates one scene from another.

It could be a brief interlude or centuries apart.

Consider movies where the action cuts ahead to ten years later. Say you were watching a scene of teenage boyfriend and girlfriend. A moment later, you see a scene of the teenagers all grown up. Married with kids. The director expects the audience to make the mental transition.

So there's nothing intrinsically suspect about the notion that Bible prophecies contain chronological gaps. Indeed, if you think it about it, that's to be expected. And there'd be no interruptions in the text (hence, no textual clues) since the mechanics of recording

the experience are fundamentally different from the mechanics of the recorded experience.

The interesting question isn't whether there may be the occasional prophetic gap, but whether a reader is even aware of where they lie, in which case prophecy might be riddled with gaps.

Desert storm

I grew up on the shores of a lake. The weather fronts were normally on-shore systems. I could see dark clouds massing and approaching from the other side of the lake.

Weather systems came from the coast. From the ocean beyond.

I later moved to a state on the Eastern seaboard with a subtropical climate. This produced spectacular thunderstorms.

In addition, the weather fronts were normally off-shore systems. I could see them rolling down from inland.

Sometimes, when I was heading home, I could see the storm ahead of me.

Thunderbolts striking the road. I was driving right into an electrical storm. It was exhilarating!

The only question is whether I'd get back before I was overtaken by the storm.

When I read Ezekiel's description of the theophany, that's what it reminds me of. At a distance, the theophany resembled a desert storm. At least it looked more like that than anything else which Ezekiel had ever seen. That was his only frame of reference.

But as it drew closer, like entering a storm, it became apparent that this was no ordinary storm.

In his commentary, Horace Hummel compares Ezekiel's description of his first encounter with his second encounter. The description of the theophany in his second encounter is more lucid. Hummel thinks Ezekiel was too stupefied the first time around to clearly express himself.

He had never seen anything like that before. It was hard for him to distinguish details or find the words to say what he saw.

That's very realistic. If the accounts of the theophany were just hallucinatory or literary constructs, we'd expect them to be consistent. But Ezekiel had to become accustomed to the strange sight.

In *Out of the Silent Planet*, the Malacandran landscape is so alien to Ransom that he's initially disoriented. Like a blind man who just received his sight. It takes him a while to adjust. To make out shapes. To restore his sense of perspective. What is he seeing? Is it near or far?

That was Ezekiel's experience. Confronted by something so unfamiliar, otherworldly, he was almost speechless. It took him a while to process what he saw.

Some standing here will not taste death

27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. 28 Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Mt 16:27-28).

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Rev 1:12-16,20).

Mt 16:28 is a familiar "problem passage." Did Jesus mispredict the future?

It's instructive to compare the Matthean prediction with Rev 1. John was one of the disciples whom Jesus addressed on that occasion (in Mt 16). Before John died, Jesus came to him. His appearance is glorious. There's even the angelic motif. Jesus comes with angels (i.e. stars=angels).

This is a personal appearance. But it is, of course, distinct from the Second Coming—

which is a global, one-time, endtime event. So John did not taste death until he saw Jesus come to him, in royal imagery that parallels the Matthean prediction. (By the same token, Jesus came to Paul [Acts 9, 22, 26], to instigate his conversion.) Likewise, in his dictated letters to the seven churches (Rev 2-3), Jesus threatens to

"come" to some of them in judgment. But in context, that hardly seems to be the end of the world. It simply marks the demise of that particular fellowship.

We need to distinguish at least two different ways in which Jesus can come to people.

There's a local, individualized appearance, and then there's a global return. Both are personal. But the former is repeatable whereas the latter is climactic. Between Jesus coming within church history (i.e. objective visions) and Jesus coming at the end of church history (i.e. the return of Christ).

Some Protestants misunderstand sola scriptura. They treat the Bible as an encyclopedia. Unless they can find something in Scripture, it never happened. This often leads to very creative prooftexting. But the Bible does not intend or pretend to record everything that exists.

Jesus may well have appeared to other disciples in the same way he appeared to John.

It's just that John wrote about it.

Foresight and insight

This is related to some other recent posts of mine. Should NT commentators emulate apostolic exegesis? Did OT prophets understand what they were predicting? Did OT

prophets really foresee the future? Do NT writers rip OT passages out of context? This also has some bearing on the current debate over christotelism.

I. HINDSIGHT

Although we tend to think of OT prophets as forward-looking, a basic function of OT

prophets was to be backward-looking. They reminded OT Jews of their duties under the Mosaic covenant. They remind OT Jews of what God had done for his people in the past, especially the Exodus, but also guiding and guarding the patriarchs, providing for the Israelites in the wilderness, and protecting Israel from her enemies.

By itself, hindsight doesn't require supernatural knowledge. It is, however, possible that just as Moses saw the tabernacle in a vision, which was the model for the earthly tabernacle, so the early chapters of Genesis were based on direct visionary revelation.

II. FORESIGHT AND INSIGHT

i) We most associate prophets with inspired foresight, in part because that's clearly supernatural. In that regard it's important to distinguish between foresight and insight.

These can be combined or be separated. Revelatory dreams are a good example.

ii) Take Joseph's two related dreams (Gen 37:5-11). These are predictive dreams.

However, Joseph didn't know how they'd be fulfilled. He had to discover how they'd be fulfilled by experience. The dream was prospective, but his understanding was retrospective. The correct interpretation was based on the context of fulfillment.

In what sense did Joseph understand the dream? He could describe what he saw. The dream used recognizable images. And he caught the drift of its allegorical import. His father and brothers would be subordinate to him. But he was in the dark regarding what, precisely, was the literal counterpart to the allegory. What would be the concrete circumstances?

iii) Take the dreams of the baker and cupbearer (Gen 40). In this case, Joseph was not the dreamer, but the interpreter. In this situation he was given insight rather than foresight.

Their dreams are predictive. However, a dreamer wouldn't necessarily know that a dream was predictive ahead of time. Absent inspired interpretation, for all he knows it

might just be an ordinary dream. It's only if and when the dream comes true that its predictive nature becomes evident.

The baker and cupbearer seemed to think their dreams were predictive. That might be because they were naturally nervous about their fate. They'd fallen

out of favor with Pharaoh. Would they be restored or executed? Were these dreams an omen?

In fact, they were right to sense that their dreams were predictive. However, there's nothing in the dreams themselves that contains unmistakably predictive clues. And, of course, the allegorical nature of the dreams compounded the ambiguity. That's why they required interpretation.

If, by contrast, a revelatory dream or vision employs literal, representational imagery, then that simplifies the interpretation. And that makes it clearer at the outset if the revelation is predictive.

iv) Then you have Pharaoh's two related dreams (Gen 41). Once again, these are predictive, allegorical dreams. Considered in isolation, the dreams aren't clearly predictive. Of course, with the passage of time, their predictive nature would become evident.

So there are two ways of knowing whether a dream is predictive. You can find out after the fact. Wait and see. But to know that in advance requires inspired interpretation.

v) Then you have the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2; 4). One pressing issue in dream interpretation is whether the interpreter has any actual insight. Or does he just pretend to be insightful? How can you tell if his interpretation is correct?

Nebuchadnezzar is shrewd in that respect. He has a simple test. Instead of telling the interpreter what he dreamt, he requires the interpreter to tell him what he dreamt.

Obviously, that's not something an interpreter can fake. He can't do that unless he has supernatural knowledge. That, in turn, corroborates his interpretation. If he has the supernatural ability to recount what the dreamer dreamt, then he presumably has the supernatural ability to explain what it signifies. Nebuchadnezzar's tactic is a way of smoking out the charlatans.

vi) In principle, God can give a prophet foresight without insight, insight without foresight, or give him both. God can give a prophet advance

knowledge. The prophet knows what he saw, and what he saw is a future event. In that sense, the prophet knows the future.

Yet a prophet may or may not understand what he saw. That depends, in part, on whether God gave him the interpretation of what he saw. In some biblical visions there's

an interpreting angel. The seer asks the angel questions, and the angel explains the imagery.

He's able to grasp what he sees in the sense that he can describe it. The imagery is familiar. But he may not know what it represents—assuming it uses symbolic imagery. If it uses prosaic imagery, then what it points to may be self-explanatory.

In principle, the relationship between OT prophecy and NT interpretation might be the relation between foresight and insight. A distinction between advance knowledge and interpretation.

I'm not claiming that's the norm. I just use that as a limiting case. Even within the OT, you have that distinction. Therefore, if you had that distinction between the OT and the NT, that wouldn't be a new distinction. Rather, that would be a preexisting principle.

Something already in play in OT times.

Did you see Superman?

The latest kerfuffle at WTS, involving Green/Fantuzzo, is an extension of the Enns affair. To what extent Green/Fantuzzo (or Longman and McCartney) share the perspective of Enns is disputed. However, this raises, once more, the issue of how the OT "points" to Jesus.

i) Christians of good will can, and often do, struggle to formulate how the OT points to Jesus. That's not surprising. For one thing, this, in part, goes to general philosophical debates concerning rival theories of meaning. It's not as if Christians are guilty of special pleading if they find it challenging to

hit on the right formulation. These hermeneutical issues are not unique to Scripture, although Scripture adds an extra dimension to the debate.

ii) Apropos (i), the fact that some Christians may have an unsatisfactory model of how the OT points to Jesus is not, in itself, disqualifying. However, not everyone is acting in good faith. Although we can debate the right answer, there is clearly a wrong answer.

More precisely, there's clearly a right starting point and a wrong starting point.

The right starting point begins with the inspiration of Scripture. In some sense, God reveals the future. He reveals the future to prophets. In addition, God has prearranged history so that some things foreshadow other things.

An "Incarnational" model of inspiration, or "Christotelic" hermeneutic sounds pious enough, but as we know by now, that's cover fire for an essentially secular view of Scripture. Enns clearly denies the inspiration of Scripture, apart from Pickwickian definitions. By the same token, he implicitly denies predictive prophecy. Any hermeneutic which begins with that starting-point is a non-starter.

iii) Let's attempt to sketch a positive hermeneutic. How is the OT about Jesus?

Let's begin with a comparison. Suppose a pedestrian in Metropolis witnesses Superman save the day. Suppose you ask him, "Have you seen Clark Kent?" Suppose he says

"No." Is his answer true or false?

Well, in one sense, by seeing Superman, the pedestrian saw Clark Kent. But he doesn't know that Clark Kent is really Superman. So the true answer is equivocal. We have to break it down.

iv) There are characters who know who Clark Kent is. Even in that respect, their knowledge may be limited or compartmentalized. Some characters

know that Clark Kent is the bespectacled, unassuming reporter at the Daily Planet.

Other characters know the backstory of Clark Kent. He's was a farm boy who grew up in Smallville, USA. The son of Martha and Jonathan Kent.

They may assume Martha and Jonathan were his biological parents. Only a few characters know that they are actually his adoptive parents.

Many characters know who Superman is, although their knowledge is usually quite limited or compartmentalized. Most of them know that he's a good guy, a heroic figure, with superhuman abilities, who uses his special powers to fight evil and defend the innocent.

Very few characters know the backstory of Clark Kent. Very few know that he's an alien from the doomed planet of Krypton. That his "biological" parents were Lara and Jor-El.

That his real name is Kal-El. Very few know that his superhuman abilities derive from his alien nature.

By contrast, the narrator knows everything about Superman. He knows that Clark Kent is an alias for Superman. He knows the backstory of Superman.

And the audience is privy to what the narrator knows. The audience knows more about the true identity of Superman than almost any of the characters within the story. The audience knows that Clark Kent and Superman are one and the same individual.

v) We might also distinguish between the actor and the role. Different actors can play the same role. You can know who Superman is, in the sense of being familiar with the character, without knowing in advance what actor will be cast to play that part.

Conversely, it's possible to know about the actor without being conversant with the Superman mythos.

vi) This illustrates some technical distinctions in hermeneutics. On the one hand, Superman and Clark Kent don't mean the same thing. On the other hand, Superman and Clark Kent are co-referring expressions.

Superman denotes the alien superhero, whereas Clark Kent denotes his human alias.

Superman leads a double life, slumming as an ordinary human being.

Suppose a character describes Clark Kent. He doesn't intend his description to pick out Superman. But since Clark Kent is Superman, his description of Superman unintentionally refers to Superman.

In addition, there's a difference between not intending to refer to Superman, and intending not to refer to Superman. The fact that in describing Clark Kent he did not intend to refer to Superman doesn't mean he intended to deny that Clark Kent was Superman. It was not his intention to contrast the two. Therefore, the true identity of Clark Kent doesn't contravene his intentions.

vii) In Messianic prophecy, it's useful to distinguish between sense and reference. Did Isaiah think that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah? No. However, when Isaiah

describes the Messiah, his descriptions pick out Jesus. That isn't a case of NT writers reassigning these descriptions to Jesus.

Different OT prophets know different things about the Messiah. God disclosed different things to different prophets. Some prophets know more about the Clark Kent side of Jesus, while other prophets know more about the Superman side of Jesus. Some know more about the backstories than others.

Likewise, Isaiah could know what the Messiah would be like without knowing who would play the Messiah—just as I can know about the character without knowing ahead of time that Zack Snyder or Christopher Reeve will play the part.

There's another asymmetry. Later OT prophets can know what earlier OT prophets said, but not vice versa. Having the benefit of hindsight doesn't begin with the NT. That retrospective outlook was already unfolding in the OT.

My analysis doesn't require me to say that an OT prophet did not intend to refer to Jesus. Rather, this is a limiting case. Even if (ex hypothesi) that's an unintentional implication of the description, it still refers to Jesus. If Clark Kent is an alias for Superman, then by metaphysical necessity (identity of indiscernibles/indiscernibility of identicals) an accurate description of Clark Kent will implicate Superman in the process.

Even if an OT prophet is ignorant of the Messiah's true identity, Messianic prophecy successfully refers to the Jesus via the descriptions. An OT prophet can be talking about Jesus even if that's not what he had in mind.

Isaiah intends his description. Isaiah intends the choice of words that form his sentences. The description may have objective implications above and beyond what he was consciously aware of. The future event is out of his hands. He doesn't intend or will the event. That's up to God.

Isaiah determines the sense, but not the referent, for the referent (e.g. future person or event) is causally independent of Isaiah.

OT prophets are like characters in the story. Bible writers are instrumental authors in relation to the divine narrator.

viii) Finally, God prearranges history so that some things are analogous to other things.

Earlier persons, places, institutions, or events have later counterparts. There are prophetic events as well as prophetic texts.

All this requires a strong doctrine of inspiration, revelation, and providence. But with those elements in place, it's not special pleading to discern how the OT points to Jesus.

Models of visionary revelation

1. Some books of the Bible draw heavily on visionary revelation (e.g. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, Revelation). It's striking to me that scholars who write commentaries on these books rarely spend much time on the psychology of visionary revelation. They discuss genre, symbolism, schools of interpretation, rules of interpretation, yet they rarely explore the experience of visionary revelation, and how that might impact interpretation.

2. In theory, visionary revelation could employ two different modes of image-processing: **I) MOVIE THEATER MODEL**

Visionary revelation might be analogous to watching a movie. The viewer is stationary, while the scenery is in motion (or the illusion of motion). Like a movie theater, where you sit still, in front of a screen, watching a series of rapid fire images. One scene after another.

II) VR MODEL

Visionary revelation might be analogous to a VR program. Unlike watching a movie, this would be an immersive, interactive experience. The scenery is stationary while the observer is in motion (or the illusion of motion).

This is also analogous to those time-travel dramas where you can dial up a particular date in the past or future, maybe see a preview, step through a portal, and there you are—right in the thick of things.

The moviegoer model is an extension of looking at a still picture. The observer remains outside the picture.

The VR mode is like stepping right into the picture. The observer finds himself inside the picture.

3. Does Scripture give any indication which of these models is closer to the truth? It's possible that God uses both modalities at different times.

Visionary revelation includes revelatory dreams. Dreams are immersive, interactive.

That would fit with the VR model. Likewise, in Ezk 40-48, the prophet is given a guided tour of the temple complex. He seems to be moving through the temple complex. That, too, would fit the VR model.

This may be dream-like, where certain details are fuzzy. Perhaps he doesn't describe the temple ceiling, if there is a ceiling, because he doesn't look up.

4. In Rev 19-20 we have a battle, followed by the "Millennium," (and the binding of Satan) followed by another battle. Premils regard this as a continuous action.

Some amils, based on recapitulatory parallelism, regard 20 as a new cycle. I agree with amils that Revelation contains recapitulatory parallelism, but I'm not convinced that there's a hard break between 19 and 20. So it's possible that 20 is a continuation of 19.

Amils also draw attention to the parallels between the battle scenes in 19 and 20. Both are literarily indebted to Ezk 38-39.

Consider a thought-experiment. Suppose we view the battles scenes in 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 as two sides of the same panel, while 20:1-6 is the hinge. If you swing the panel to the right, that displays 19:11-21. If you swing the panel to the left, that displays 20:7-10.

Which is the front and which is the back? That depends on the direction in which you approach the panel. If you approach the panel from one side, that's the side you're facing. If you approach the panel from the other side, that's the side you're facing.

In that respect, which battle is before or after the other depends on where you are standing in relation to the panel. The Apocalypse is written in a particular sequence, in part because writing is inherently linear.

But John's visionary experience may have been more spatial. Simulated locomotion. He moves from scene to scene. The battle scenes in 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 may have similar features because these are two sides of the same panel.

Soon for whom?

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place (Rev 1:1).

This is often cited by unbelievers as a classic example of a failed prophecy. These things were "soon" to take place, but in retrospect, we know they didn't happen. Not soon. Not ever.

However, I'd like to examine the assumptions underlying that indictment. What counts as fulfillment of a prediction?

To some extent that depends on who (or what) the prediction was for or about. Who does it concern? Soon for whom?

Let's take a simple example:

20 and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' 34 But a certain man drew his bow at random[a] and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, "Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded." 35 And the battle continued that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians, until at evening he died (1 Kgs 22:20,34-35).

That prediction was about Ahab. It was fulfilled when he died. A one-time fulfillment.

Now let's consider a more complex example:

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. 2 This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. 3

The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: 4 “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. 8 For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, 9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.

10 “For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile (Jer 29:1-14).

i) In one respect, the fulfillment is straightforward. It was fulfilled 70 years later.

ii) However, who was the prophecy for or about? On the face of it, the prophecy was about the exiles. But that's somewhat ambiguous. It's not the same group for the duration. Most of the exiles who originally heard the prophecy didn't live to see it play out. So in that sense, it wasn't for them. It wasn't about them. That's why they are instructed to settle down. But it also looks ahead to the final exilic generation, who will return from exile.

Now let's take another example:

18 If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (Jn 15:18-19).

i) When was this fulfilled? The answer is bound up with the question of who it's for or about. It's a prediction about Christians generally. The kind of animus which every Christian generation can expect to face. It doesn't necessarily apply to every individual, but to Christians as a class, in contrast to unbelievers as a class.

This prediction is fulfilled throughout the course of church history. It lacks a singular, one-time fulfillment. The fulfillment is diachronic because the prediction applies across generations of Christians.

ii) Suppose, for the sake of argument, this prediction included the word "soon."

Suppose Jesus said, "You will soon be hated by the world."

Although Jesus didn't put it that way, that's implicit in what he said. If the world hates them because they are not of this world, then once the world becomes aware of them, they will be hated by the world. That will happen soon enough.

iii) Now, if this prediction was to take place "soon," does that mean it had to be fulfilled in the 1C? Would it be exclusive to 1C Christians?

It would be soon for everyone it was about. If the prediction is for Christians generally, and it will happen soon, then it's soon, not in relation to a particular period of time, but in

relation to the lives of the referents. For whomever it was intended. It is soon for all interested parties. But what is soon for a 1C Christian isn't soon for a Medieval Christian, or vice versa.

iv) Which brings us back to Rev 1:1. When you think that was meant to be fulfilled isn't something you can derive from the adverb alone. Rather, you

must determine who the prophecies in Revelation are about. It will be soon for them—whatever they are.

A preterist will say it's soon for 1C Christians. A premill will say it's soon for the final generation. An amil will say it's soon for Christians at different times. For instance, Revelation predicts persecution. From an amil standpoint, that's about Christians generally. For premils, that's about endtime Christians.

Likewise, Revelation predicts that dying Christians enter the rest of the blessed (14:13).

That's true for all Christians, who die at any time.

He is coming soon

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place (Rev 1:1).

i) What does "soon" mean in this verse? Not so much what does the Greek word mean, but to what does it refer?

Preterists think they have a straightforward answer: "soon" means soon in relation to the fall of Jerusalem, in 70 AD. They make fun of how futurists try to explain "soon."

David Chilton quipped that you wouldn't send a futurist to buy hot sandwiches.

The preterist interpretation isn't quite as straightforward as it appears at first blush. For one thing, "soon" depends on what you date the book. Soon would mean soon after the book was written. Of course, that itself makes "soon" a relative concept. A matter of degree. How many years must go by before it's too late? The word itself doesn't specify an exact cut-off.

ii) More to the point, even if that's a straightforward interpretation of the adverb, the preterist buys that straightforward interpretation at the expense of a very convoluted interpretation of what Revelation says about

eschatological judgment, the return of Christ, the new Eden, new Jerusalem, cessation of sin, suffering, death, disease, and grief. That's a high price to pay for a single word. Surely there's a less costly interpretation for the book as a whole.

iii) However, that's not the main issue. Let's explore the fluidity of this adverb. Suppose a husband becomes a widower at the age of 70. Perhaps they were a childless couple.

Or perhaps they had a son who died in battle. Or a daughter who died in a traffic accident. So she's all he had. After she dies, he loses the will to live. Although he's free to remarry, he feels that it's too late in the life to begin a new life. He made his life with her. He can't go back and he can't go forward. She was it for him.

Suppose he prays that God will take him "soon." When he first begins to pray for that,

"soon" means soon after she died. He prays that God will let him die shortly after his wife died.

But suppose, to his consternation, he's still alive 5 years later. Every day, he prays the same prayer. But "soon" as shifted. Even though he continues to use the same adverb, it no longer has the same referent. At this point it's too late for him to die soon after she died. So "soon" now means soon after the last time he prayed. "Take me soon,"

meaning, take me soon after I ask you to end my life. "Soon" is relative to the timeframe. If the timeframe shifts, the adverb follows the timeframe. Later is still "soon"

in relation to the shifting timeframe.

iv) For the preterist, "soon" (in Rev 1:1) has reference to an event: the fall of Jerusalem.

But what if soon has reference to the audience? Indeed, isn't that unavoidable? What is soon for them. For the reader. Isn't that the natural

frame of reference?

But that in turn raises another question. The identification of the audience. Which audience?

Is it the original audience? The seven churches of Asia Minor? They are certainly included in the audience for the book as a whole.

Preterists like to emphasize that Scripture must be meaningful or relevant to the original audience. And that's true enough. Indeed, that's a component of the grammatico-historical method.

However, the audience for Scripture isn't monolithic. Scripture has more than one audience. God inspired the Bible for the benefit of Christians in every generation. So the audience for Revelation isn't a fixed frame of reference. In which case, "soon" lacks fixity as well.

More so when we consider the audience for prophecy. Suppose you have an oracle that's fulfilled just a generation after the prophet delivered his oracle. Even in that brief turnaround time, there's been some turnover in the composition of the audience. Some members of the original audience have died by then, while others were born afterwards.

"Soon" and "late" are indexical markers. Soon in relation to where you happen to be in history. Because we're born at different times and die at different times, what is soon for you may be late for me. What is soon for me may be late for you.

If Christ had returned in the late 1C, that would be too soon for subsequent generations.

You and I wouldn't be here in that event.

I had a devout grandmother who, when I was a boy, used to tell me about how she was hoping that Jesus would return in her own lifetime. In her mind, the sky would part like a curtain and Jesus would descend.

But he didn't return in her lifetime. And unfortunately, she lived too long for her own good. Her final years were darkened by tragedy. Whenever Christ returns, it will be too late to spare her what she suffered in her final years. But in that respect, the return of Christ will always be too soon for some and too late for others.

v) In Rev 1:1, "soon" may mean soon for the final Christian generation. For Christian readers who happen to be alive when he comes back. "Soon" tracks the salient audience. "Soon" picks out the applicable audience.

Every Biblical promise isn't equally applicable in time and place. Not everything that happens in Revelation happens to everyone.

Christina Rossetti was a Victorian poet who wrote devotional commentary on Revelation. She no doubt found Rev 20-22 edifying. Promises like that give us the hope to persevere. But the situation it describes isn't directly applicable to the reader until it happens. That isn't directly applicable to the reader unless it happens to the reader. In which case it's directly applicable to the final Christian generation.

It wasn't soon for her. But then, it wasn't meant to be. Not everything in Revelation is meant for you and me. Not directly. Revelation describes some kinds of events which happen to some Christians, and other kinds of events which happen to other Christians.

Things like that happen. Every Christian isn't going to recapitulate the narrative in Revelation. That was never in the cards. You and I will find out by experience how much of that describes our own experience.