

# Precepts for Prophetic Fulfillment<sup>1</sup>

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Has prophetic fulfillment already taken place, is it presently taking place, or will it take place in the future? These three options summarize the way in which prophetic fulfillment is understood by different schools of prophetic interpretation today. The historicist and preterist school views prophecy as largely or wholly being fulfilled in the past, however, historicists can also accept prophecy as having a present fulfillment since it is taking place in history. The futurist school views prophecy as largely being fulfilled in the future, i.e., with Israel and the nations after the Rapture of the Church, although some futurists see some events, such as the establishment of the State of Israel (1948) and the Jewish recovery of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount (1967) as being present fulfillments. In order to understand how we should approach the concept of prophetic fulfillment, let us consider four basic precepts.

## **1. *The Bible (Old and New Testaments) contains unfulfilled prophecies that will be fulfilled in the same way they were given.***

The “Old” Testament is not out-of-date, but like the New Testament (itself 2,000 years old) contains hundreds of prophetic statements that have yet to be fulfilled in the manner they were originally given. Consider the statistics: There is 23,210 verses in the Old Testament and of these 6,641 verses contain prophecy (28.5% of the Old Testament). There are 7,914 verses in the New Testament and of these 1,711 verses contain prophecy (21.5% of the New Testament). Together there are 31,124 verses of which 8,352 verses contain biblical prophecy (27% of the whole). This reveals that 1/3 of Bible (Old and New Testaments) contains prophecy. In the statement of these prophecies, the past provides the grounds for the realization of the future. Moreover, this future realization can only be understood if the grounds established in the past remain unchanged. Otherwise it would not be divine fulfillment (as the prophets predicted), but a human fabrication made to fit our present reality. This, of course, means that we must read the Bible as it was written and not invent a new method of interpreting its message based on some theory of literary criticism or by a personalized, post-modern, approach. Sometimes it is stated by biblical scholars that the original writers of scripture understood their message metaphorically and never intended their readers to understand it literally.

However, the majority of prophecies, although many contain figurative language, were given in an actual historical and geographical context and for the apologetic purpose of confirming God’s word and comforting the recipient in a real circumstance. No metaphorical message could accomplish all these purposes. For example, the Jewish People suffering in exile were given prophecies of their return to the Land of Israel (Isa. 44:26-45:3; Jer. 25:12-14; 27:21-22). Such prophecies had to be literally fulfilled if they were to fulfill their purpose. Only if the Jews (not some other people) actually returned to the Land of Israel from which they were exiled

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(not some other place), could the prophecy make sense and offer real hope to a captive people. More important, there is no way that it could offer a proof of the power of God to perform His promise, unless it were fulfilled as it was given. These prophecies were literally fulfilled in the past with the return of a remnant of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem beginning in 539 B.C.

At one time all biblical prophecy was unfulfilled, but through the ages much has been fulfilled (depending on how one interprets and applies messianic prophecy). However, the principle of literal fulfillment for past-fulfilled prophecies establishes the pattern for the literal fulfillment of future unfulfilled prophecies. For example, there are prophecies that promise to the Jewish Nation a future restoration in the Land of Israel under a New Covenant with both spiritual and material blessings (Isa. 2:2-4; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:24-37:28; Zech. 8:3-23; 12-14). In these contexts Israel is redeemed and spiritually observant of God's ways and is the dominant Nation to which all the Gentile nations come to learn God's laws. There is no longer any war and the Temple stands in Jerusalem as the spiritual center for God's restored Presence as well as for all mankind. Such prophecies have not yet been fulfilled literally in the experience of Israel's history.

Because of this apparent lack of fulfillment, some have tried to counter the theological conclusion that prophecy failed by developing various explanations that the prophecies actually were fulfilled, but not in the literal way expected. In one scheme fulfillment is with historical Israel and occurred within one of the past experiences of Jewish exile and return. In another, a different people and place find fulfillment (for example, with the Church throughout the world). In yet another, the application is non-specific and timeless (for any person in any age). In each of these schemes the prophetic texts are interpreted partially or wholly in a non-literal manner with specific details, which might require literal fulfillment, read in the light of the whole. However, this approach contradicts the precedent set for unfulfilled prophecy by fulfilled prophecy and fails to satisfy the promised expectation of the original Jewish audience, for whom the prophecies were intended as a present comfort and justification for future hope. For example, Ezekiel prophesies both concerning Israel and the Temple's ruin (chapters 4-24) and its restoration (chs. 33-48). Because the ruin occurred historically in the events culminating in the Babylonian invasion and destruction of 586 B.C., the details of the text can be seen to have been fulfilled literally.

However, even though Israel returned from exile and rebuilt the Temple, the extent of the restoration and magnitude of the Temple described in the text have no complete correspondence with these past historical events. Are the prophecy of ruin to be interpreted literally and the prophecy of restoration to be interpreted non-literally? How could a non-literal promise of restoration offer comfort and confidence to Jews in a literal exile? Moreover, how could it offer, as it claims, *proof* to the more powerful Gentile nations of the almighty power of Israel's God (cf. Ezek. 36:23-36; 37:21-28; 38:14-16, 23; 39:6, 21, 25-29)? The alternative, therefore, to the non-literal approach is to interpret the text consistently and to interpret it literally. If a prophecy has not yet been fulfilled literally, its fulfillment must await the future. This offers both present comfort and confidence in the future and holds out the real hope that God will demonstrate before the world His sovereignty on the stage of history.

Having said this, it is necessary to briefly note the different focus presented in the Old Testament and the New Testaments respectively. The Old Testament focuses on the preparation of and purpose for Israel's calling as a Nation. Within this program designed to make God known to the nations (the rest of the world), there is the prophecy of a glorious future Temple as

part of the fulfillment of Israel's restoration under the New Covenant in the Last Days (Isa. 2:2-4; Ezek. 37:25-28; 40-48; Hag. 2:7-9; Zech. 6:12-15; 8:3).

By contrast, the New Testament's focus is upon how the basis for the fulfillment of this prophecy for Israel and the nations has been provided by Messiah. In the New Testament, Jesus came as the prophesied Messiah and fulfilled the spiritual requirements for Israel and the nations redemption and restoration. In the future, Jesus will return to fulfill the physical requirements through His messianic rule. However, at the present time, both Jews and Gentiles have been enabled to the experience of the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant through the bestowal of God's Holy Spirit. Because of this universal spiritual emphasis and the postponement of prophesied national blessings to the Last Days, the New Testament rarely touches upon these benefits (such as a glorious new Temple) promised to national Israel.

However, since the New Testament does acknowledge the promise of Israel's future restoration (Matt. 8:11; 10:23; 19:28; 20:21-23; 25:31-32; 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 2:38; Acts 1:6-7; 3:20-21; Rom. 11:12, 15, 23, 25-27), the Temple must be assumed as a part of this promise (cf. Matt. 23:38-39 with Psa. 118:22-26; Mk. 11:17 with Isa. 56:7). Even though the New Testament employs on occasion spiritual elements of the Temple (a holy structure where the Presence of God dwelt) to explain the new nature of the New Covenant believer - corporately as a spiritual Body, the Church (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16-7:1; Eph. 2:21-22), and individually as a physical body, the saint (1 Cor. 6:19-20) - this does not imply that it does not follow the Old Testament in recognizing the Jerusalem Temple as essential to Israel's future destiny, but underscores its historic sanctity.

## ***2. National Israel has not yet fulfilled her predicted purpose and therefore has an abiding validity as a people and as a national entity.***

The Old Testament explains the promises made to national Israel while the New Testament explains why these promises have not yet been fulfilled. It must be remembered that Jesus and His disciples were Jews and belonged to national Israel, as did most all of the writers of the New Testament. They shared the conviction that Israel had been chosen through the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:3) to be God's instrument of universal blessing: "It is you who are the sons of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all of the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Acts 3:25). This was to be fulfilled spiritually as the Nation accepted its role as "the Servant of God" and became a "light to the nation so that God's salvation might reach the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). Although Israel failed in the past in this commission, through God's Anointed Servant, the Messiah, the Nation would find redemption and fulfill its destiny (Isa. 52:13-53:12; Lk. 24:21 with Jn. 4:42; Acts 13:23) and the Gentiles would receive God's light (cf. Matt. 4:14-16 with Isa. 9:1-2; Matt. 12:17-21 with Isa. 42:2-3; Lk. 2:29-32 with Isa. 42:6; 49:6) and realize the relationship of blessing promised them in the Abrahamic Covenant (Rom. 11:16-18; Gal. 3:8-9, 29). However, the Jewish People (with whom the Abrahamic Covenant was made) have *as a Nation* yet to experience all of the terms of the covenant, such as prescribed territorial allotments (Gen. 15:18-21).

Why make the distinction "as a Nation"? Because, while individual Jews have believed and received spiritual blessings related to both the Abrahamic Covenant (Rom. 2:28-29; 4:16-17; Gal. 3:6-7) and New Covenant (Heb. 8:6-12; 10:16; 12:24), the unconditional promises of God

made in both covenants was to the Jews *as a Nation*. In Jeremiah 31:35-37, after prophesying the conditions and characteristics of the New Covenant (vss. 31-34), we read of God's confirmation of its fulfillment: "Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so its waves roar; the Lord of hosts is His name: 'If this fixed order departs from before Me,' declares the Lord, 'then the offspring of Israel [the Jewish People] also shall cease from being a nation [the Jewish Nation] before Me forever.' Thus says the Lord, 'if the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth search out below, then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done,' declares the Lord."

In this passage the word for "nation" is the Hebrew term *goy*, a stronger term than the Hebrew word *'am* which simply means "people." This term *goy* refers to Israel as a national entity, and indicates that the fulfillment of the New Covenant as promised in this context cannot simply be for individual Jews within the Church, but contains the hope of national Jewish restoration to the Lord (spiritual) and to the Land (physical). Furthermore, this passage makes this promise unconditional since it states that it will be fulfilled despite "all that they have done" (vs. 37). In the context of Jeremiah this includes the covenant unfaithfulness and spiritual apostasy for which the Nation was punished with exile from the Land. By extension, it must also include the national rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, for which the Nation also suffered exile.

Such a statement goes against the traditional replacement view of much of Christendom that Israel having rejected Jesus as its Messiah has itself been rejected by God as His Chosen People (Nation) and the national promises formerly made to it have been transferred to the Church. However, the Apostle Paul in the Book of Romans makes the opposite case he states: "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision [the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant]? Great in every respect ... What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?" (Rom. 3:1-3). And again: "From the standpoint of the gospel they [Jews who have rejected Jesus as Messiah] are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers [the Abrahamic Covenant]; for the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28-29). Therefore, the Jewish People and Nation have an abiding validity until they realize their purpose as promised by God, a purpose, which He will fulfill in His time (Rom. 11:25-27).

Jesus understood this when, despite Jewish rejection of His messianic ministry, He told His disciples: "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne [the time of Israel's national restoration in the Millennial Kingdom, cf. Matt. 25:31-34], you shall also sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28). Jesus must have believed that national Israel (the twelve tribes), though rejecting Him for the present, would continue in the divine program, for He expected it to be in the future Millennial Kingdom and to be under His Messianic rule. Similarly, Paul in his defense before Herod Agrippa II declared: "I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day" (Acts 26:6-7). Paul did not deny to national Israel the validity of its promised hope because it had rejected its Messiah.

In like manner, Peter during the festival of Shavuot (Feast of Pentecost) declared to the Jews that had rejected Jesus: "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Messiah appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration

of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3:19-21). The phrases “times of refreshing” and “the period of restoration” are both terms that refer to the future Messianic Kingdom. Note that Peter in saying this is speaking to Jews who only weeks before approved Jesus’ crucifixion (vss. 13-15, 17), yet he still says that this is the promise of God to them as a Nation and that the coming Messianic King is appointed for them (vs. 20), because they are “sons of the prophets and of the covenant” (vs. 25). While such statements are conditioned upon national repentance (vs. 19), they nevertheless reveal the early church’s view that national Israel had abiding validity.

Therefore, if national Israel has abiding validity so does its Temple, which is prophesied to be part of the program of its fulfillment of its national destiny under the Abrahamic Covenant (Isa. 2:2-3; 56:6-7; 57:13c-d; Zech. 8:3-23).

### ***3. The Land of Israel was chosen by God as the homeland of the Jewish People and remains their homeland today regardless of its occupation by other peoples.***

This statement, while certainly echoed in the secular movement known as Zionism, is based on the biblical covenants that promised defined geographical boundaries to the Jewish People such as Genesis 15:18 and 17:7-8: “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I have given this land. From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates ... And I will establish My covenant between you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession ...”

It is significant to observe that although Abraham was the father of both the Jewish people (through Isaac), and the Arab people (through Ishmael), the covenant was established *only* with Isaac and his descendants (see Genesis 17:18-21). This means that the Abrahamic Covenant, and the land promise contained within it (Genesis 15:18-21), is exclusive to the Jewish people as the sole descendants of Isaac. This promise, in turn, was selectively passed on to Isaac’s son Jacob (who was re-named “Israel”) rather than his son Esau (Genesis 28:13-15; 35:12). Esau and his Edomite descendants were rejected with respect to the covenant and therefore appointed land outside of the covenanted boundaries (Malachi 1:3-4). The psalmist in Psalm 105:8-11 emphasized this chosen line when he wrote: “He has remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac. Then He confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, ‘To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion of your inheritance.’” According to the Prophets it will be in the Last Days that the territorial aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant (such as possession of the full extent of the promised boundaries and the universal blessing of all mankind) will find fulfillment (Isaiah 2:2-4; Hosea 3:4-5; cf. Ezekiel 37:24-28; Zechariah 8:7-8, 11-13).

The recognition by Jesus and New Testament writers of the Abrahamic Covenant, as given above, includes their recognition of its land provisions. Therefore, although the New Testament makes no direct statement concerning the Jewish People’s inheritance of the Land of Israel, such is implied in its acceptance of the Abrahamic Covenant. It should further be noted

that the duration of the land covenant is stated to be “everlasting” (Genesis 17:8) and “for all time” (Deuteronomy 4:40). This would indicate that Israel’s possession of the Land was not meant to be temporary but remains in force. To be sure Israel has sinned and been punished with exile from the Land, but the unconditional nature of the covenant requires that God’s faithfulness ultimately overcome this problem and make possible a complete fulfillment for all the covenant People in the covenant Land (cf. Ezek. 36:16-38; 37:1-14, 21-28) For this reason, the modern claim by the Jewish People to the Land of Israel rests on an ancient and unchanging divine promise.

In like manner, the future Temple, which will be built in the Land in the Last Days, requires that the Jewish People be at home in their Land and in possession of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. In terms of the present preparation for fulfillment in the Last Days of this prophecy, the wars between Israel and the Arabs in 1948 and 1967 resulted in the modern State of Israel (for the first time since the loss of its independence and the destruction of the Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70) regaining sovereignty over its historic homeland (including Judea and Samaria) and Jerusalem with the Temple Mount. The Davidic Covenant, which will be finally fulfilled in the Messianic Age, joins the prophecies of a restored Israel and Davidic dynasty with that of a restored Temple and priesthood. For example, in Jeremiah 33:14-18 the promise of the Messiah is given to accomplish this restoration of the government and the Sanctuary: “Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David [the Messiah] to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. In those days Judah shall be saved and Jerusalem shall dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she shall be called: the Lord is our righteousness.’ For thus says the Lord, ‘David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel [2 Sam. 7:16]; and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before Me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to prepare sacrifices continually’.”

This promise of the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, like that of the New Covenant, is guaranteed by a repetition in verses 20-22, 25-26 of the unconditional pledge made previously in Jeremiah 31:35-37. Therefore, the Promised Land must be preserved for the fulfillment of such promises to its people and must be recognized as the perpetual homeland of the Jewish People today and forever. With respect to the present condition of the Jewish Nation (unbelief) and the secular nature of the Jewish State (unspiritual), it needs to be emphasized that:

#### ***4. The fulfillment of prophecy does not depend on human faith or spirituality, but on the eternal plan and promise of God.***

The prophet Zechariah affirmed this when he wrote concerning the fulfillment of God’s prophecy of the building of the Second Temple: “Not by might nor by power, but My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6b). Likewise, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul in summing up Israel’s election in God’s purpose declares: “So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Today, many Orthodox Jews believe that the prophetic program for Israel has not yet been realized because the State of Israel is a secular state or because there is a low level of spirituality among Jews in general or because not enough Jews are observant or committed to rebuilding the Temple. For

Christians the reason most often given is that the Jews have not yet believed in Jesus as their Messiah, and until the Jews return spiritually to the Lord their return physically to the land has no prophetic significance. However, the unconditional nature of the covenants we have observed above is that God's program, and especially His prophetic program, does not depend on human initiative, as though almighty God were waiting on mortal man to do something before He could act, but is determined by His own sovereign plan (Jer. 17:5-7).

Jesus made a statement of this fact in the context of Israel's national restoration in the New Testament to His disciples on the Mount of Olives. In Acts 1:6-7 we read: "And so when they had come together, they [the disciples] were asking Him [Jesus], saying, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority ...'" In other words, neither they nor even Jesus Himself could force the hand of God to act outside of a predetermined plan. The Old Testament confirms this design for us in its presentation of the Abrahamic Covenant as unilateral and unconditional, terms, which indicate that its fulfillment depends upon God, not man.

The biblical prophets emphasized this aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant to Israel when, as a result of violations of the Mosaic Covenant (which was multilateral and conditional), the Nation was punished by exile from the Land (see Deuteronomy 4:26-27, 40; Jeremiah 7:3-7). There are certainly conditional aspects in unconditional covenants, but the conditions (such as obedience) relate to the temporal fulfillment of the covenant by man, not the ultimate and eternal fulfillment by God. This is because, as Deuteronomy 29-30 explains, in God's plan the Land and Israel are joined in final fulfillment. Israel's disobedience and exile is predicted (Deut. 29:30:2-4), but will be followed with an equally predicted return and restoration (Deut. 30:1-10). To reiterate, the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional because God initiated it and has personally assumed the obligation for its fulfillment. Restoration to the Land was therefore possible in the future, for even sin on the part of the Jewish people cannot keep the promise of the covenant being from fulfilled (see Deut. 4:29-31; Isaiah 41:8-9; Jeremiah 30:2-3, 8-11; 31:35-37; 33:23-26; Ezekiel 36:18-28).

These texts reveal that Israel will fulfill the conditional terms of the covenant because in the Last Days every Israelite will "know the Lord" (Jer. 31:33-34) for God will have given them "a new heart and a new spirit and put His Spirit within them and caused them to walk in His ways" (Ezek. 36:25-28). Again, we have a precedent established for the literal fulfillment of such prophecies by past-fulfilled prophecies such as Jeremiah 29:10-14, in which the Lord at His appointed time moves the Jewish People in the Babylonian captivity to the repentance necessary for their restoration from exile: "For thus says the Lord, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you ... and I will restore your fortunes: and I will bring you back to the place [the Land of Israel] from where I sent you into exile'."

Keeping in mind the plan of God which accomplishes His purposes according to His timetable, the present actions of some Israelis (as well as of some Christians) calling for the State of Israel to effect legislation in favor of Jewish prayers on the Temple Mount, to reinforce its sovereignty over the site, or even rebuild a Third Temple, should not be viewed as provocation

that will somehow force the end of days, as an Israeli journalist has feared.<sup>2</sup> If the Land of Israel, the city of Jerusalem, and the Temple Mount are in fact part and parcel to the fulfillment of Israel's purpose to bless the world, then actions that favor this purpose cannot be responsibly suppressed. Yet, no such actions in and of themselves will force a premature conclusion to the present conflict since the outcome of these events will lead to the fulfillment of God's prophetic promises, which are determined by His sovereign plan and purpose.

Therefore, it should be recognized that no political action, however zealous or provocative, could influence the fulfillment of prophetic events. Nevertheless, this is not to say that present political events, especially in the Middle East, may not reflect the progressive outworking of the prophetic program as the stage is being set in the Israel for future fulfillment.

### ***5. Fifth, the Modern State of Israel is a Part of the Future Fulfillment of the Prophetic Plan.***

God's earthly program in the past focused on Israel with respect to its promise as a people, a place and a purpose that would remain in perpetuity (Genesis 12:2-7). Prophetically, this program and focus continues into the future, for God has stated that He is not yet finished with Israel (Jeremiah 31:35-37; 33:7-26; Rom. 11:25-29). Therefore, since God controls history and is directing it toward the fulfillment of His program, events throughout history related to the Jewish People and their Land (its focus) have prophetic significance, even if these events do not yet completely fulfill any specific prophecy. Just as the dispersion among the nations (Diaspora) of the Jewish People from the Land of Israel over the past two millennia has been deemed prophetic (of God's judgment), so the return of Israel of Jewish People from the Diaspora over the past century to reestablish an independent Nation in the Land must also be considered prophetic (of God's restoration). And in the same way that the dispersion occurred in successive stages over time (722 B.C., 586 B.C., A.D. 70, A.D. 115, et. al), so the restoration may occur in stages modern and future (before the Tribulation, e.g. 1897, 1948, 1967, and at the end of the Tribulation).

Since the loss of Jewish sovereignty in and dispersion from the Land of Israel in the first century, it has been expected by biblical students that for prophetic texts concerning Israel to have a literal fulfillment that at some point in history the Jewish People would have to return to their ancient homeland, "the Land of Israel," regain their national status as "the People of Israel," and exist in an adversarial position with the Gentile nations so that God could demonstrate He was "the Holy One of Israel" (cf. Ezekiel 39:7). Furthermore, Jerusalem, as the central city of prophecy, had to share in this fulfillment, returning to Jewish sovereignty but as the subject of international controversy.

The prophecy of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38-39 well illustrates these particular expectations. Set in an eschatological context (Ezekiel 33-48), the text specifically states that its

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<sup>2</sup> Accusations that the actions of fundamentalists (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian), including myself, with respect to the Temple Mount would bring about self-fulfilling prophecies were made by Jerusalem Report journalist Gershon Gorenberg, *The End of Days: Fundamentalist and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (New York: The Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2000).

fulfillment “will come about in the last days” (38:16). At this time “the people of Israel” are described as living in “the cities of Israel” in “the Land of Israel”(38:14, 18-19; 39:9). According to Ezekiel 37:25 this Land is “the land that I [God] gave to Jacob (Israel) My servant, in which your fathers lived.” Ezekiel 38:8 also notes that the Jewish People who had returned to the Land had been “gathered from many nations.” The historic restoration (regathering) of Jews from exile in 538 B.C. had only been from one nation (Babylon). Only in our modern period have we witnessed a regathering of Jews to Israel from “many nations.”

Moreover, in Ezekiel’s Gog and Magog prophecy, the mountainous region that extends the length of the country, is identified as “the mountains of Israel” (39:2, 4, 17). It was not until after the Six Day War of 1967 that this region again became a part of the territory of the modern State of Israel and could be properly called “the mountains of Israel.” Before this date it was under a succession of foreign rulers until wrested from Jordan (who last controlled it from 1948-1967). Ezekiel 38:8, 12 even notes that this mountainous land before the Jewish returned to it and restored it had been under “the sword” (foreign dominion) and “a continual waste.” History affirms that under foreign domination, and especially under the 400 years of Ottoman Turkish domination, the once fertile mountain region (particularly in the north) had been denuded and had eroded into a wasteland. Only Furthermore, it is significant that this territory of biblical Judea and Samaria, known today as “the West Bank,” is, like the rest of the Land of Israel, in a state of contention with the surrounding nations and even the nations of the world. Ezekiel 38-39 is a prophecy that uniquely details a future invasion of Israel by a huge alliance of foreign nations (38:3-13). Interestingly, Ezekiel’s prophecy also provides the detail that at the time of this invasion the people of Israel are living “securely, all of them” in a “land of unwalled villages” (38:8, 11). This would not have been true of ancient Israel where cities were typically surrounded by a defensive wall, but only in the modern era in which Israel’s military has afforded the Nation unparalleled security and modern methods of warfare have made walled cities unnecessary.

Even though history confirms that the conditions predicted by Ezekiel are those that have characterized the birth and continue to depict the current situation of the modern Jewish State, this text cannot be pressed to reveal more than the conditions that must be present for Israel before final fulfillment is possible. How then can we know that the *present* State of Israel is the *same* Israel Ezekiel and the prophets predicted would exist in the last days? The answer may be provided in Isaiah 11:11-12, whose temporal order of predicted regatherings to Israel from the nations would seem require that the present Israel is the Israel that will experience prophetic fulfillment. This passage reads: “Then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover [regather] the second time with His hand the remnant of His people [the Jewish People] who remain from Assyria (Greater Syria), Egypt, Pathros (Upper Egypt), Cush (Ethiopia), Elam (Iran), Shinar (Iraq), Hamath (Lesser Syria), and from the islands of the sea (Mediterranean coastlands). And He will lift up a standard for the nations, and will assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth (universal regathering).”

The context of this passage is eschatological, the setting being the ultimate period of fulfillment in the Messianic Kingdom, with verses 1-5 describing the Second Advent of Messiah in judgment to rule the earth, verses 6-9 depicting the peaceful conditions of restoration under the New Covenant, and verse 10 introducing Israel’s national repentance toward and return to the Messiah. Verses 11-12 continue this theme, revealing the time and extent of the end time

regathering. Notice that the universal regathering to the Lord is said to occur when “the Lord again recovers *the second time* with His hand.” This “second time” is obviously the “last time,” since this restoration is the final one for Israel. If the “second time” is the “last time,” then when is the “first time” implied in the text? Like the “second time” it too must be a time of international regathering to Israel by God’s hand. If we go back into Israel’s history of regathering we find an exodus from Egypt and a restoration from Babylon.

However, neither of these regatherings can satisfy the specific geographic and temporal conditions of this prophetic text because they were regatherings from only one place (not from “the four corners of the earth”) each of them had a subsequent exile follow their return. How many exiles and returns can you have between a “first time” and a “second time”? The answer is none! According to Matthew 24:30-31 the last regathering of Israel to the Lord will be in national repentance at the time of His coming at the end of the Tribulation. This “last time” or “second time” regathering (according to Isaiah) is followed the establishment of the Kingdom for Israel and the judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:31-46), ending forever Israel’s fear of exile. Notice that the “second time” regathering as a time of repentance indicates that national Israel existed in a state of unbelief prior to this (cf. Zechariah 12:10-14; 14:4; Romans 11:25-27). Moreover, the context makes it apparent that the Nation was already in the Land of Israel. Therefore, the “first time” regathering must be sought immediately before this in a time in which Israel has returned to the Land in unbelief.

This fits the pattern revealed in many prophetic passages of the regathering of national Israel taking place in two phases or stages; the first to the Land before the Tribulation in unbelief, the second to the Lord before the Millennium in belief. The “first” regathering of Jews to the Land of Israel in unbelief, and their reconstitution as a Nation, since their exile among the nations 2,000 years ago, is the modern one.<sup>3</sup> And since there can be no further dispersion before the “second time” regathering, the present State of Israel must be the national Israel that will continue in the Land until it experiences the completion of physical regathering and climatic spiritual regathering. In addition, the interpretation of this passage in this manner also requires us to accept that the modern return of Israel to the Land (even in unbelief) is a divinely ordained event (“by His hand”) as a part of His prophetic program. This means that despite the sometimes-unjust actions of the Jewish State or the perceived arrogance of its leaders, as national Israel it is still the “people of God” and destined to be regathered again to God at the return of their Messiah. To be sure it must also pass through “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7), but it will also inherit the kingdom promised by the prophets. For this reason, we who understand the plan of God in the prophetic scriptures must respect His purpose with the Jewish people and pray for His Will to be done through them, for it will result in “blessing for the world” (Genesis 12:3; cf. Romans 10:12, 15).

It needs to be recognized, however, that even among prophetic futurists there are those who doubt the prophetic significance of the establishment of the present Jewish State. Objections range from an agnosticism – we can’t know whether the Jewish return to Israel at this time is relevant to future fulfillment – to specific questions concerning the nature of the modern return and the current spiritual condition of the Jewish People. In the first case, because futurism places

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<sup>3</sup>The “unbelief” from an Orthodox Jewish perspective is that the regathering was a secular, rather than spiritual return. From a Christian and Messianic perspective it is the condition of unrepentant heart toward Yeshua as Messiah (see Acts 3:17-26).

prophetic fulfillment for Israel in the future (the last days/end times), and dispensational futurism in particular places fulfillment in an age distinct from and following that of the Church (after the Rapture of the Church), there is a hesitancy to view current events with respect to Israel as having prophetic significance. However, significance does require present fulfillment but only present *preparation* for future fulfillment, and as it has often been observed, (future) prophetic events cast their shadows behind them (into the present).

In the second case, objections are often made that the modern return of the Jewish People has been only partial (part of the Jewish People to part of the Land) and is secular, not spiritual, in nature. However, it is a misconception that all of the Jewish People would return to the Land at once when the process of national regathering was commenced, and that the regathering is singular rather than plural. As we have said, two regatherings of the Jewish People seem to be delineated in the prophetic texts – one before the Tribulation and one before the Millennium. The first of these appears to be primarily a physical regathering to the Land, while the second appears to be characterized by a spiritual regathering to the Lord. If this first regathering is in spiritual *unbelief*, then it would be expected to be a secular and political movement, such as is the modern Zionist movement that led to the establishment of the Jewish State. Furthermore, the lack of a spiritual motive to return to the biblical Land would produce only a partial physical return from the Diaspora, that is, mostly among Jews in lands experiencing persecution and forced exile, as the majority of Jewish immigrants to Israel have experienced. Even so, the limited extent of this first phase of regathering can still be demonstrated to have geographically taken place from “the four corners of the earth.” The second regathering, then, which would follow a time of worldwide Jewish persecution in the Tribulation will result not only in Israel’s seeking deliverance physically but also spiritually in a time of national repentance (Luke 21:25-28).

It is hoped that this overview of prophetic precepts will help you understand the purpose for the Christian of investigating “the things which are to come” as well as the practical encouragement it holds for us who look for the outworking of God’s eternal program within the age in which we live. *Keep looking up – the best is yet to come!*