

BIBLE PROPHECY

CONVINCING PROOF THAT GOD EXISTS

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The Bible is a most remarkable book. Its account of the origin of evil; its unparalleled record of God's dealings with the nation of Israel; its searching message through their prophets; its "good news" proclaimed by Jesus Christ and his apostles; above all, its unerring analysis of the weaknesses of human nature and its contrasting portrayal of the holiness, the truth and the mercy of God, made especially plain in the person of His Son - all these are outstanding features found in no other book in the world. They prompted Henry Rogers over 100 years ago to declare: "The Bible is not such a book as man *would* have written if he could, nor *could* have written if he would." (In *The Superhuman Origin of the Bible Deduced from Itself.*) In other words, God is needed to explain its existence.

In this short work we shall consider one of the Bible's unique features: its prophecy. Now strictly prophecy is not just foretelling the future. A prophet was one who "spoke for" another, a spokesman; and prophecy was the message the prophet spoke on behalf of God. But since Bible prophecy contains quite a lot of "prediction", or foretelling future events, for our purpose here we shall take the term in that sense.

Who has the Power of Prophecy?

But first we must settle an important question: Does the Bible claim that the power of prophecy belongs only to God and is a proof of His authority?

To this there is a decisive answer in the prophecy of Isaiah. In the 41st chapter God challenges the idols and the idol worshippers of the day to prove that they possess divine powers. This is how He does it:

"Produce your cause, saith the Lord; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob, Let them (the idols) bring them, (the reasons) forth, and *declare unto us what shall happen: declare ye the former things, what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; and shew us things to come ...*" (vv.21-22,R.V.).

The basis of this challenge is clear: the pagan worshippers claim that their idols are gods. Very well; let them produce the proofs. And the proofs demanded by God Himself are that the idols shall announce future events, and also declare "the former things", that is, explain how creation took place in the beginning. The point is made crystal clear in the next verse:

"Declare the things that are to come hereafter, *that we may know that ye are gods ...*" (v.23).

Here God Himself is asserting that to be able to foretell the future would be a proof of Divine power. More than once in this part of Isaiah's prophecy, God declares that He is the only one

who has this power, for only He is God; there is no other:

"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is *none else*; I am God , and there is none like me ..." (46:9)

The God of Israel is here declaring that there is no other worthy object of worship but Himself; and goes on to assert the signs of His power in these terms:

". . . declaring the *end from the beginning*, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, *My counsel shall stand*, and I will do all my pleasure" (46:10).

Come to think of it, whoever would *dare* to say, "My counsel shall stand . . ." -except God? What man is there in the whole world who could say any such thing? To carry it out needs Someone who not only *knows* future events before they happen, but has the power to see that they take place as He has decreed. In other words, to utter prophecy which will inevitably come true, you need God. No other cause can explain it.

The New Testament makes the same claim. When Jesus was about to leave his disciples, he promised them the help of the Holy Spirit in their task of preaching the Gospel in the world. One of the effects of this gift was to be: "He shall declare unto you *the things that are to come*" (John 16:13); in other words, the disciples were to be given a knowledge of future events. It is certainly implied that without the special gift they could not have done this. Their ability to declare the future was to be an evidence of the Divine power they had been granted.

Again, in the last book of the Bible, chapter 1, verse 1, it is declared that God gave to Jesus Christ a revelation, "to shew unto his servants *the things* which must *shortly come to pass* . . ." (Revelation 1:1) . The knowledge of the future came from God through Jesus; without that revelation, His servants could have known nothing of it.

The conclusion is clear: the Bible says quite definitely that the power to foretell the future belongs to God alone.

Does the Bible foretell the Future?

Well, we have only to examine history and our own experience to realise that men of themselves have no knowledge at all of the future. Why, we do not even know what will happen to us tonight, or tomorrow on our way to work, let alone next year; or of what will happen to the world in 100 years, to say nothing of in 2000 years! If men had the slightest knowledge of the future, how many decisions would have been different! How many accidents would have been avoided! How many disasters would never have been allowed to take place! How many wars would never have been started! The experience of our own lives and of the history of men both convince us that mankind has no sure knowledge at all of what is yet to be.

But suppose the future *has* been foretold, not once, but many times? And always in the same book, the Bible, and in no other book in the world? Ought not that to make us sit up and take notice? That is why we say that the prophecies of the Bible are most important; they deserve to be carefully examined, for a great deal depends on them,. They are a striking sign that there exists in the world a Power greater than mankind.

"Yes, but . . ."

Those who do not believe that the Bible is the word of God do not like its prophecy at all. Once grant that it has correctly foretold the future and you have gone a long way to admitting the existence of God. So they try to explain it away. "The prophecies", they say, "were not really

forecasts of the future at all- they were written after the events `foretold`"

Now this argument can only be made to appear to have any force if you can prove that the Bible documents, especially those of the Old Testament, were written a long time *after* the events they claim to foretell. It must be stated clearly that they have no direct evidence for this; the conclusion is the result of interpreting the evidence to support their own theorising. As a matter of fact, all the research of the last 100 years tends to show that the Bible documents are authentic: they really do belong to the age in which they claim to be written.

But there is a short cut in this matter which will do very well for our present purpose. No one can deny that the Old Testament documents were in existence by about 200 BC, because they were being translated into Greek (in what is called the *Septuagint Version* of the Old Testament) about then, and you cannot translate something that is not there!

Another objection is to say, "Well, these Bible `prophecies` are really clever political forecasts by people who could interpret the events of their day and their likely outcome."

"Clever political forecasts", issued in the centuries before Christ and remaining true for over 2000 years to the present day? What sort of wizards do they imagine the Bible prophets were to be able to accomplish such feats? Merely to state the matter thus is to show how utterly improbable such an explanation of their words would be.

But the surest answer to this objection, as to all others, is to read some of the prophecies themselves. So we begin with

PROPHECY CONCERNING BABYLON

In the days of the prophets of Israel (850-560 BC approximately) two great military powers arose in the territory around the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, now known as Iraq. The earlier was the Empire of Assyria, with Nineveh as its capital. During two centuries the Assyrians carried out invasions of the territory of surrounding nations: southwards they dominated the Chaldeans and their capital, Babylon; eastwards they overran Syria, then advanced down the Mediterranean coast, through Israel as far as Egypt. Their policy was one of terror. Their aim was to terrorise local populations into submitting and paying an annual tribute. To this end they sacked and burnt towns, devastated the countryside, massacred the inhabitants and took thousands away captive to Assyria.

The second half of the 7th century BC saw the decline of Assyrian power and the rise of the Babylonian. In 612 BC Nineveh was conquered. Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Chaldeans, rapidly created the new empire. The smaller nations of the Middle East, rejoicing over their deliverance from Assyria, soon found themselves overrun by the armies of Babylon. In particular Nebuchadnezzar overran Israel, sacked Jerusalem and burnt its temple, and carried thousands away captive to Babylon. He then went further south and invaded Egypt. The Babylonian Empire was the second phase of this military domination arising from the area of the Euphrates.

In particular, Nebuchadnezzar, its greatest king, made the city of Babylon a marvel in the world of the Near East. He built enormous temples and palaces, and surrounded the city with an immense protective wall. Babylon became the glory and pride both of Nebuchadnezzar himself and his Chaldean people.

It is difficult for us in these days to realise the impact of such ruthless power and extravagant wealth upon the inhabitants of the smaller nations. To them the empires of Assyria and Babylon must have seemed terrifying and invincible.

Utterly Overthrown

Yet 100 years before Babylon reached the height of its power, Isaiah the prophet foretold its overthrow in very specific terms. In a chapter headed "The burden of Babylon", this is what he said

". . . The day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty . . . Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them . . . And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldeans' pride, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited . . . neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there, neither shall shepherds make their flocks to lie down there. But wild beasts of the deserts shall lie there" (Isaiah 13:6, 17, 19-21).

The fate of Babylon is clear; the attackers are to be the Medes (a nation to the east of Babylon) ; the city is to become a desolation, inhabited by neither man nor beast. And let us remind ourselves that this clear prophecy was uttered 100 years *before* Babylon arose to the height of its power and glory.

Another prophet, Jeremiah, writing 100 years later, when Nebuchadnezzar was about to attack Jerusalem, added to the forecasts of Babylon's downfall:

"Behold, I will raise up against Babylon a destroying wind . . . Babylon is suddenly fallen and destroyed . . . Prepare against (Babylon) the nations, with the kings of the Medes . . . Babylon shall become heaps (ruins), a dwellingplace for jackals, an astonishment and an hissing, without inhabitant . . . The broad walls of Babylon shall be utterly overthrown, and her high gates shall be burned with fire . . . O Lord, thou hast spoken against this place to cut it off, that none shall dwell therein, neither man nor beast, but it shall be desolate for ever . . ."

And finally the prophet is commanded to bind a stone to the roll of the prophecy and to throw it into the river Euphrates, declaring,

"Thus shall Babylon sink, and shall not rise again . . ." (Jeremiah 51:1,8,28,37,58,62-64).

The agreement between the prophecies of Isaiah, written 100 years before Babylon arose to power, and of Jeremiah, written when the empire and city were at the height of their glory, is complete. To the people of those days it must have sounded as it would to us if it were prophesied that a great city like London, New York or Sydney was to be destroyed and to remain a desolation for ever. In this age of nuclear weapons such a fate would not be inconceivable; but the prophets of Israel uttered their predictions over 2500 years ago, long before anyone dreamed that such total destruction was possible.

History reveals how the prophecies about the fate of Babylon were progressively fulfilled. The first despoilers were the Medes and the Persians in the 6th century BC. From that time the glory of Babylon began to fade. Then came the Greeks under Alexander the Great, then the Romans; after them various warlike tribes like the Parthians, the Arabs and the Tartars. For centuries the actual site of the ancient city of Babylon was a heap of ruins, shunned - so travellers tell us - by wandering nomads. It was not until the archaeologists began to explore the site in the first half of the 19th century that the ruins of the great walls, the mighty temples and gates, and the immense statues revealed to an astonished world how magnificent ancient Babylon must have appeared in its day.

So history reveals how Babylon, "the glory of kingdoms", became ruined and deserted, just as the prophets of Israel said it would.

We turn now to a second, and quite different, example of the truth of Bible prophecy in

THE FATE OF EGYPT

Egypt had also been a mighty power in the Middle East. The period of its greatness was about 1600 BC, when the armies of the conquering Pharaohs pressed southwards into the Sudan, westwards along the north African coast, and northwards through the land of Canaan (later Israel) and into Syria. The discovery of some of the ancient temples, monuments and tombs of Egypt has revealed the glory of the Pharaohs at the height of their power.

But from about 1400 BC Egyptian power began to decline, due to civil war and to the rise of Assyria, and later Babylon. Nevertheless, during the period of Israel's occupation of the land of Canaan, 1400-600 BC, the Egyptians interfered periodically in the politics of the Middle East, with varying success. The Israelites, fearing invasion from the Assyrians or Babylonians, were often tempted to seek support from Egypt instead of relying in faith upon their God.

Now the prophets of Israel had something very definite to say about the destiny of the Egyptians. The prophet Ezekiel, whose pronouncements were made in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, from about 600 BC declared that as a result of the judgement of God Egypt was to be desolate for 40 years. Then there was to be a revival, but not to the former glory and power:

"Thus saith the Lord God: at the end of forty years will I gather the Egyptians from the peoples whither they were scattered . . . and will cause them to return to the land of Pathros [in upper Egypt, the original seat of Egyptian power], into the land of their birth; and they shall be there a base kingdom (RSV, a lowly kingdom). It shall be the basest of the kingdoms; neither shall it exalt itself any more above the nations: and I will diminish them, that they shall no more rule over the nations . . . Thus saith the Lord God: I will also destroy the idols and will cause the images to cease out of Noph (Memphis); and there shall be no more a prince of the land of Egypt . . ." (Ezekiel 29:13-15; 30:13).

Again the sense of the prophecy is clear: Egypt was to suffer the calamities of invasion and the deportation of captives. Although no precise historical record of these events has survived, they must have been the result of the invasion of Egypt by the Babylonians, as Ezekiel himself prophesied (see Ezekiel 30:17-20). But that was not to be the end of Egypt. For after 40 years the captives were to return to their own land. Egypt as a kingdom was not to be destroyed: it was to survive but with greatly reduced power - "a lowly kingdom", never presuming to exert power over the surrounding nations any more.

A Lowly Kingdom

And so it came to pass. From about 600 BC Egypt fell under the domination of a succession of conquering invaders: first the Babylonians in the 6th century BC; then the Persians, from the 6th to the 4th centuries; then the Greeks in the 4th century; then the Romans from the 1st century BC to the 5th century AD. They were followed by the Arabs and the Turks from the 7th century AD onwards. Even the British ruled in Egypt for a period in the 19th century. For 2500 years Egypt has remained, as Ezekiel prophesied it would, "a lowly kingdom", always dominated by others. But Egypt and the Egyptians did not disappear. They still exist, and they have even recovered a measure of independence in recent times, thanks to massive financial support from the U.S.A. and Saudi Arabia.

Let us store the case of Egypt away in our minds while we consider a third example of Bible prediction of future events, in

THE PROPHECIES CONCERNING ISRAEL

These are the richest of all, both in the detail of their predictions and in the abundance of the historical confirmation of their truth. We shall confine ourselves to the simple facts concerning Israel's remarkable destiny.

The Old Testament records for us how God made distinct promises to Abraham (about 1800 B.C) which meant, among other things, that his descendants would become a people (Israel) who would take possession of the land of Canaan, later called Palestine. About 1400 BC the people of Israel were brought out of Egypt at the Exodus under Moses, and 40 years after began to take possession of the land promised to them. But while they were still in the wilderness, before they entered the land, they were solemnly warned by God through Moses of the fate which would overtake them if they turned away from their God to worship idols and imitated the ways of the pagan Canaanites. The 28th chapter of Deuteronomy is a most remarkable prophecy - and was a terrible warning - of the calamities which would come upon the Israelites if they were disobedient. The reader is recommended to read the whole chapter for himself. Here we have space only to outline the main features:

"But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments . . . the Lord shall bring thee, and thy king which thou shalt set over thee, unto a nation which neither thou nor thy fathers have known . . . And thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword, among all the nations whither the Lord shall lead thee . . . The Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even to the other . . . And among these nations shalt thou find no ease . . ."
(Deuteronomy 28:15, 36-37,64-65).

Again the prophecy is quite clear. Israel were to be scattered among the nations, there to live in very uncomfortable circumstances, the object of scorn and contempt. How forcibly their history has proved the truth of these words! The scattering of the Jews throughout the world began in the days of the Assyrians in the 8th century BC The process continued through the Babylonians in the 6th century. After a partial return from Babylon in the days of the Persian kings, a community of Israelites lived in their land from about 500 BC to the days of Christ, successively dominated by the Persians, the Greeks and their successors, and finally by the Romans. In AD 70, 40 years after the crucifixion of Christ, there occurred the most terrible devastation of all. The city of Jerusalem was sacked by Roman armies because of rebellion; the temple was burned and the Jews were scattered as captives over the Roman world. There they have been found ever since, literally "from one end of the earth to the other".

And they have indeed, until very recent times, found "no ease". Suffering persecution and at times extermination- the pogroms in Russia in the 19th century and Hitler's policy of genocide in the 20th are only the most recent examples - the Jews have everywhere been subject to vilification and derision, so much so that their survival as a recognisable race is one of the marvels of history. Again we note the fact that this prophecy of Israel's fate has remained true for over 2500 years. Who could have foreseen that, despite all the scattering and the persecutions, the Jews would remain for centuries a recognisably distinct race, right up to the present day?

But there is more . . .

But the most incredible feature of the prophecies about the destiny of Israel is yet to be told, for

the prophets also clearly foretell an unexpected change in Israel's fortunes.

Consider, for instance, these predictions through the prophet Jeremiah, delivered nearly 600 years before Christ:

"For, lo, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah . . . and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it" (30:3)

"Now therefore thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel . . . Behold, I will gather them out of all the countries, whither I have driven them, in mine anger . . . and I will bring them again unto this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely: and they shall be my people and I will be their God . . ." (32:36-38)

"I will cause the captivity of Judah and the captivity of Israel to return, and will build them as at the first. And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity . . ." (33:7).

Again, there is no doubt about what the prophet is saying. The process of Israel's scattering and persecution is to be reversed. The Jews are to return to the very land from which they were expelled over 1900 years ago, and to dwell there in comparative peace. The three brief quotations from Jeremiah, given above, could be multiplied many times over by similar declarations from Isaiah and Ezekiel.

We have little need to go into great detail to show how these prophecies of Israel's restoration have been most accurately fulfilled. The Zionist Movement was active among the dispersed Jews in many countries in the late 19th century. The establishment of Palestine as a National Home for the Jews in 1917 led to a rapid increase in their numbers in the Land. When this provoked the hostility of the Arabs, the Jews fought off an attempt to suppress them in 1948, and established their own Jewish State. This was enlarged in 1967 after a second attempt in the Six Day War; as a result Israel recovered much of their ancient historical territory, and Jerusalem became the capital of their State under their own rule, for the first time in 2500 years. In short, the emergence of an independent Jewish State in the Middle East has been a most unexpected development. Less than 100 years ago no political observers would have thought it possible.

We are not here concerned with the "politics" of the situation. We are concerned solely with Bible prophecy. There are other things the Bible has to say about the Jews. The prophets tell us, for instance, that there is to be a great crisis in the Middle East, and that Israel will be brought to repentance before their God. Only then will the prophecies of final restoration and peace come to pass. Here we wish solely to emphasise that the prophets foretold the return of Israel to their land, and we in this century have actually seen their predictions begin to be fulfilled.

THREE PROPHECIES-THREE DESTINIES

It will be useful at this point to summarise what we have reviewed:

Babylon, that great power in the Middle East, was to lose its empire and its magnificent capital city was to become a site of desolate ruins, shunned by man and beast. And so it came to pass.

Egypt, also a great empire, was to remain a recognisable kingdom. The Egyptians were to continue to inhabit their own land. But they would be constantly dominated by other powers, remaining "a lowly kingdom". And so they have been.

The fate of **Israel** was not to be like either of these. Scattered from their own land into other

countries, and suffering severe persecutions and constant contempt, they were to return to the very land from which they were scattered, and to establish themselves there once again.

Let us note carefully the following facts:

1. The prophecies concerning these nations were uttered about 2500 years ago.
2. Their truth has been demonstrated in history right up to the present day.
3. The three cases quoted concern three different powers with *three entirely different fates*. One was to disappear into oblivion; the second was to remain, but be subject to other nations; the third was to be destroyed, its people expelled and scattered all over the earth, and yet eventually to be restored in the original land.
4. These are not "political forecasts" of clever political observers, but accurate predictions.

Who could have known?

How is prophecy on this scale of time possible? There is only one reasonable answer: *somebody must have known* beforehand. But who *could* have known? Certainly no *men* of 2500 years ago, or indeed since, could possibly have known. On purely human grounds these prophecies are inexplicable. But then, the prophets of the Old Testament did not claim human powers for their predictions. They said they were speaking words inspired by *God*. "Thus saith the Lord" is the constant introduction to what they say. If God was behind what they said, we realise who it was who "knew". There is no other reasonable explanation. The prophecies we have considered *require* the existence of God as their Author. *That* makes sense.

The three examples already quoted were intentionally chosen to illustrate the variety of the Bible's prophecies. But there are many other examples. We could, for instance, examine those concerning Jesus Christ: he was to be in the line of Abraham, and of David, he was to be born in Bethlehem; he was to be rejected by his own people, and yet die an atoning death on their behalf; and many other details - all uttered centuries before he was born, and all strikingly fulfilled in Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection.

But we will conclude our brief survey with two further examples which will bring the prophetic programme right up to our own day.

The Bible and the Nations

The prophecy of Daniel contains an impressive outline of the rise and fall of empires, and of the state of the nations in what used to be called "the civilised world" - that is, the nations of Europe, the Middle East, Egypt and the North African coast, all surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. The prophecy was uttered when Daniel was captive in the court of Babylon, in the 6th century BC. Its truth has been demonstrated in history from that day to the present time.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, full of his own pride and glory, saw in a dream a great image of a man, made up of five parts:

1. The head of the image was of gold.
2. Its breast and arms were of silver.
3. Its belly and thighs were of brass.
4. Its two legs were of iron.
5. But the feet and toes were composed of a mixture of iron and clay.

Then a stone appeared, "cut out of the mountain without hands". It fell upon the feet of the image, brought it all crashing to the ground, and then ground into powder all its elements, so that the wind swept them away. The stone then became a great mountain and filled the whole

earth.

Nebuchadnezzar was much troubled by the fate of this image, for none of his wise men could tell him what it meant. But Daniel, the prophet of Israel declared:

"There is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets, and he hath made known to king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days" (Daniel 2:28).

So Daniel explained the meaning of the image. The head of gold represented the dominion of Nebuchadnezzar himself. It was to be succeeded by another, inferior kingdom (the breast and arms of silver); and that in turn by a third (of brass); then the fourth kingdom (the legs of iron) was to be strong and violent, but the feet and toes represented divided kingdoms, "partly strong and partly broken" (vv. 37-42)

One thing is clear: this image represented a succession of powerful kingdoms, and it is not hard to identify them. The first we know: it was the empire of Babylon. In Daniel chapter 8 (vv. 20-21) we are told that the successors were to be Persia and Greece. The fourth power, "great and terrible", is not explicitly named in Daniel's prophecy. History abundantly verifies these predictions. About 530 BC the Babylon power was overthrown by the Medes and Persians, who eventually established the Persian Empire. It lasted for 200 years, and was then overthrown about 330 BC by Alexander the Great who set up the Empire of Greece.

What great power succeeded the kingdoms of the successor of Alexander? There can be no doubt about the answer: it was the Empire of Rome. The Romans invaded the territories of the former Greek Empire from the 2nd century BC onwards. In the next 500 years Rome became the greatest power on earth. Its Empire covered practically all the territories of the first three, and spread far and wide into Europe, the Middle East, and all the countries surrounding the Mediterranean. Its conquests were carried out with ruthless efficiency, well symbolised by the description, "strong as iron". In the last two centuries of its existence it was divided into two parts: the Western Empire, based on Rome, and the Eastern, based on Constantinople - the two "legs" of the image.

A God that Revealeth Secrets

But what happened after the break-up of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD onwards? It was not replaced by another great empire - there has in fact never been a fifth empire of comparable dominion, despite the efforts of ambitious men to establish one. The territory of the Roman Empire broke up under the attacks of the barbarian tribes of Huns, Goths, Visigoths and Vandals, who formed separate kingdoms of their own. The nations of the present day Europe are the successors of these kingdoms. Throughout their history of 1500 years to the present day, those nations have remained in a divided state, well symbolised by the image's feet, part iron and part clay: "partly strong and partly broken . . . they shall not cleave one to another" (Daniel 2:42-43).

How could Daniel have known that the great dominion of Nebuchadnezzar would be succeeded by three others, the fourth being exceptionally strong, but would never be succeeded by a fifth? How could he have known that after the fall of the fourth, its empire would disintegrate into divided States, with little unity between them? Of course, of himself he could know no such thing, nor could any other man. But Daniel does not leave us without an explanation:

"There is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets . . . The great God hath made known to the king *what shall come to pass hereafter*: the dream is certain and the interpretation thereof sure" (vv.28,45).

How else can you explain that the prophecy of Daniel chapter two should be in existence centuries before Christ, and yet contain a forecast of the course of Empires and nations accurate right up to the present day, well over 2000 years ago? If there is indeed "a God in heaven", you can understand it. Without Him, there is no reasonable explanation.

We shall comment in the concluding section on the last phase of the image vision, when the stone strikes the image on the feet and brings it all down. But for our final prophetic example we turn to

OUR OWN TIMES

Although their fulfilments have extended right up to the present day, the prophecies so far considered have concerned events long in the past (with the exception of the recent regathering of Israel to their ancient land). Has Bible prophecy anything to say about modern times, as a guide to us in these days?

Indeed it has: and what a contrast it makes with the confident expectations of human thinking! The 19th century was an age of optimism. Great developments were taking place. Increased scientific knowledge led to rapid technical progress, bringing greater industrial production. This in turn meant more wealth (though not for the poorest people). Education was being made available to all sections of society, and beneficial results were confidently expected. Better educated people would take more interest, it was argued, in arts like literature, music and painting. The general moral tone of society would be improved. Politicians promised a new social order of justice and equality for all. As people became better off, they would cease to envy one another. "Banish poverty, and you'll banish crime" was the slogan. When the finest powers of the human mind were developed, peace would be established among the nations. Church leaders confidently looked forward to the spreading of the Gospel all over the world. Human progress and improvement, both in individuals and in society, were taken for granted. The future was bright.

Peace and Progress?

What a shock the events of the 20th century have been! The dream of progress and peace has faded. Two terrible world wars, with millions of slain and untold damage and suffering, have been followed by the development of the mostly frightfully destructive weapons ever invented. The varying solutions in which the "wise men" of the 19th century put their trust have all been exposed as false. More widespread education has *not* been followed by higher moral standards, but by a growth in dishonesty, greed, violence and crime. The Christian religion, far from converting the nations, is in decline all over the earth. Democracy in politics has not proved the magic cure for social evils that was expected. Finally - cruellest blow of all - science has proved a frighteningly double-edged weapon. Far from being an era of peace, this "civilised" 20th century has become an age of strife and violence. No wonder the attitude of so many people is one of pessimistic resignation. There seems little any one can do.

Now what has Bible prophecy to say about all this?

It has a clear forecast of the "last days", "the time of the end", when the career of mankind in the earth will come to a critical point. It is not a picture of continuing progress and peace, but rather of world trouble and fear. The clearest and most striking example of this is found in what Jesus says to his disciples, when they asked him what would be the sign of his return to the earth and of "the end of the world". He tells them first about the fate of the Jewish people:

"They (the Jews) shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles

(the nations), until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24).

Now this is a brief description of what we have already considered in prophecy concerning Israel. The Jews were to be driven as captives into all nations: Jerusalem was to be subject to Gentile powers. Note that Jesus implies a limit to this: "until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled". We have seen the beginning of this in our own days: Jerusalem is no longer dominated by "foreign" powers - it is under the control of Israel itself.

World Distress and Fear

So what he says next must also apply to the same days - the days of Israel's restoration to their own land; This is what he foretells:

"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after (for expectation of, R.V.) those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken" (vv.25-26).

This is no picture of peace and progress. It is a world of distress and perplexity, of fear seizing men's hearts as they contemplate the events taking place on "the inhabited earth" (as the word Jesus used literally means).

The Apostle Paul, writing about 35 years after the time of Jesus' prophecy, has this to say about the character of the last days:

". . . In the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it . . ." (2 Timothy 3:1-5, RSV).

This is an astonishing picture of a civilisation; mankind is throwing off all restraint and indulging its own desires, reckless of consequences. Its uncanny resemblance to the developments in our own world cannot be denied.

So this is the position: whereas the "wise men" of only 100 years ago were confidently anticipating an era of progress and peace for the nations of the world, the Bible, in the words of Jesus and Paul, was foretelling a world of distress, fear, and perplexity, an age of violence, self-indulgence and hatred. Our human philosophers were wrong; Jesus and Paul were right. But they spoke and wrote over 1900 years ago! How *could* they have known? Only because neither of them spoke his own words, but the words of God Himself. It was God who knew, and inspired His Son and His apostle to reveal the character of the last days.

Conclusions

There are certain important conclusions to be drawn from our consideration of these Bible prophecies.

If the Bible has proved to be so right in its predictions about events in human history - the fates of Babylon, Egypt, and Israel, as well as the rise and fall of empires, and the state of the modern world - is it not just as likely to be right in its predictions of events *which have not yet come to pass?*

Take that image vision in Daniel, for instance. We have not so far commented upon the final development: the stone, "cut out of the mountain without hands", smote the image on the feet, destroyed it, and then itself "became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth" (Daniel 2:35). Now the general sense of this is plain: a new element *not* part of the image empires and kingdoms, destroys them and takes their place in the earth. And since "without hands" must mean "without *human* hands" the stone must represent no ordinary human power.

But Daniel tells us himself what it means:

"In the days of those kings (that is, the various kingdoms that followed the Roman Empire) shall *the God of Heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed . . . it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever*" (v.44).

The present governments and powers of the world are to be removed, in a sudden dramatic event, when God intervenes and sets up His own government. To avoid misunderstanding it should be said that it is not the populations of the earth who are to be destroyed: it is the power and authority of their human governments, to be replaced by the new Kingdom of God. Many other prophecies tell us of the nature of this Kingdom; the uprightness of its rule, the truth of its teaching, and the peace it will at last bring to mankind through their recognition of "the God of heaven". Read for instance Isaiah 2:1-4 for a clear and striking picture of the nations in that age to come.

But how exactly is this great change in the earth to be accomplished? The New Testament tells us. In fact Jesus himself tells us in that prophecy of times of trouble and fear for all nations. His next words are these:

"Then shall they see *the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory*" (Luke 21:27).

He is saying that he will come back himself. The return of Christ to the earth is a frequent theme in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. They agree completely with the prophets. Read Psalm 72 for a picture of his reign.

Now this surely is what should concern us: if the prophecies of the Bible about nations and empires have proved so true over a period of more than 2000 years, are not those other things they predict also likely to come to pass? Is it not unreasonable to say: "Well, I accept that the prophets were right in their predictions in these historical matters, but I can't believe what they say about the future for us." Why not? They have given evidence that they were setting out not their own ideas, but the very purposes of God. Whatever else they say must surely claim from us all the most careful attention.

The Vital Element

But of course there is more. These remarkable prophecies are found in the Bible, and nowhere else in the world. There are no other writings, no other books, no other human pronouncements which can even begin to compare with the Bible. But the Bible tells us that Jesus was the Son of God; the things he said are preserved for us in the Gospels of the New Testament. Together with the teachings of his inspired apostles Peter, John and Paul, they reveal to us truths we cannot know otherwise. They warn us of the reality of death; they explain why the Gospel is "the good news", "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16). They encourage us with the promise of a lasting life in the new order which Christ will establish when he comes. That is why we ought to be reading the Bible. It can make the vital difference to us between the hopelessness of death and the confident hope of everlasting life.

Careful reading of the Bible will convince us that God exists, that He is in control, and that He calls us to be disciples of His Son. The Bible is the book for us . We do well to pay attention to what it says.

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