

Question:

Are most of the Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel already fulfilled or still to be filled? How would we decide this?

Answer:

Understanding Old Testament prophecy is very difficult and can lead to many Biblical misunderstandings unless one first understands two key Old Testament predictions. Most of today's religious world has gone far astray in interpreting Bible prophecy because they have abandoned a proper understanding of these two.

Let's start, however, with an overview of Old Testament prophecy. Everything in the Old Testament except for the very first few chapters of the book of Genesis, talks about the descendants of Abraham, specifically about Israel. The rest of the world is barely acknowledged except as it interacts with Israel.

I could at this point spend a very large amount of time establishing the fundamental message about Israel in Old Testament prophecy. God had a plan to evangelize the entire world through Israel. It seems David understood this.

“Be still and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.”
(Psalm 46:10)

May the peoples praise you, O God;
may all the peoples praise you.
May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples justly
and guide the nations of the earth.
May the peoples praise you, O God;
may all the peoples praise you.
(Psalm 67:3-5)

These are just a couple of examples of an idea that appears often, not only in Psalms, but in other books of the Old Testament.

The Hebrews weren't ready to do this, however, until they had dealt with their own unfaithfulness. The problem of idolatry continued from the day the Israelites entered Canaan until the northern kingdom was taken captive by Assyria and the southern kingdom of Judah was taken captive by Babylon.

Four “major” prophets have their writings included in the Old Testament. Isaiah, Jeremiah (who wrote Lamentations), Ezekiel, and Daniel. All four of them predict that God would restore his people after their captivity. That restored nation would, then, have the opportunity to perform the mission work God had in mind for them.

There are two primary elements to the promise of restoration. One great way of demonstrating this is to read Ezekiel 37.

The first half of this chapter tells about the valley of dry bones. When Ezekiel prophesied to the bones, they came together, and then flesh grew on them. They were still, however, dead bodies. Then Ezekiel prophesied to the wind. It filled the bodies with breath and they rose up, a great army. This demonstrated that God would take the remainder of his destroyed nation and turn it into a powerful influence for good and for God.

In the second half of the chapter Ezekiel takes two sticks. One is named Judah's stick, the other Joseph's stick. God told Ezekiel to hold the sticks in one hand so that they became one stick. This represented the reunion of the divided nations of Israel.

With that background let me guide you through two passages that are prophecies about the fulfillment of the two prophecies we've already noted. The first is in Daniel 9. Daniel 9 is a complement to and explanation of Daniel's vision in chapter 8. But it also stands on its own and sets a time limit on the fulfillment of the two prophecies above.

The chapter begins when Daniel prays to God about the restoration of Judah. When the prayer ends Gabriel, the man Daniel had seen in his vision of chapter 8, comes to explain more about that vision. Here's what he says:

“Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people [Judah] and your holy city [Jerusalem] to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy.” (Daniel 9:24)

This is one more indication of the task God had given his people. This is a tall order. Put an end to sin? That has never been accomplished! Atone for wickedness? I thought only the death of Jesus made that possible. And that's the point.

There's an interesting parallel in the story of Elijah. When he ran away from Jezebel, after the spiritual victory at Mount Carmel, God talked to Elijah at the "Mountain of God." When God finally got the great prophet's attention he gave him these instructions:

"Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet."
(1 Kings 19:15, 16)

As you read the rest of the history you find that Elijah anointed Elisha on his way back from the south. He never made it to Damascus and he never anointed Jehu. But Elisha did both of these things. In other words, in order for Elijah to fulfill all the tasks God had given him he had to diligently attend to the last.

And that's how we can understand this task list. The nation of Israel, composed of humans, could never accomplish any of the first goals. But if they recognized the Messiah's coming and accepted (anointed) him, he would take care of the rest. Jesus DID atone for wickedness. As people today come to him, he puts an end to their sin, and leads them into a path of everlasting righteousness.

"Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.

"After the sixty-two sevens the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing [or, but not for himself]. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary."
(Daniel 9:25, 26)

I could get into the rest of the chapter in great detail, and I could take a lot of time discussing the meaning of the details. But let me just note that this prophecy is about the "Anointed One." The King James Bible transliterates the Hebrew here as 'Messiah.'

This prophecy is, in fact, about the ministry of Jesus. The time periods given align perfectly with the baptism (anointing) and death of Jesus, and with the extension of the Gospel to the Gentiles. That last event marks the end of the seventy 'sevens' or weeks as the King James reads.

This prophecy tells us that God set a time limit for Israel to accept Jesus as Messiah and to carry the message of his love to the rest of the world. But it doesn't tell us whether Israel would live up to the challenge. The next to last book of the Old Testament gives us that answer.

In Zechariah 11 we read about the vision in which the prophet becomes a shepherd. God tells him to pasture a flock marked for slaughter. He takes two staves and names them: "Favor" and "Union." ("Beauty" and "Bonds" in the KJV.)

Verse eight says the flock despised him and he grew weary of them.

Then I took my staff called Favor and broke it,
revoking the covenant I had made with the nations.
(Zechariah 11:10)

There follows a few details that make it clear that the prophet is playing the part of Jesus, including the thirty pieces of silver and the destination of that money.

"Then I broke my second staff called Union, breaking
the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.
(Zechariah 11:14)

This is clearly symbolic prophecy, but with a little discernment you can see that the two staves represent the two major prophecies about the restoration of the Israelites. In this prophecy they are both broken. When we put the two together we see that the time allotted for Israel ran out about 34 AD. And we know that as a nation Israel did NOT accept Jesus as Messiah.

Now let's clarify some things here. We are NOT saying that Jews cannot be saved. Nor are we saying that they deserve to be treated differently from other people groups. When it comes to salvation Jews are in exactly the same position as every other person in the world. They CAN be saved, God WANTS to save them, but he will no more deny them freedom of choice than he will any of us.

I could go through a lot of verses in the New Testament, but let me show you just one that clarifies things for us:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

The book of Revelation is a review of Old Testament prophecy, giving us the setting for those prophecies in a time when the promises to Israel will be fulfilled not to a nation but to all people who accept Christ as their savior. Most, if not all, of the strange symbols in Revelation have their foundation in Old Testament prophecy.

There's a poignant account in Luke from the story of the Triumphal Entry:

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "...." (Luke 19:41, 42)

This was a time of great rejoicing, and the crowds around Jesus were praising God. Why did Jesus stop and weep? I encourage you to read what Jesus said, which continues through verse 44. Here is where Jesus came to the full realization that Israel would NOT accept him, and would not bring in everlasting righteousness.

He wept for the city because he saw that once the Jews no longer had God's protection, the evil world around them would destroy them. But he also realized that the plan to bring a new earth through Israel could not take place and the entire world would eventually have to be destroyed by fire.

The prophecies of the Old Testament will, eventually, be completely fulfilled. But the literal nation of Israel is no longer the focus of those prophecies, and the modern church can only understand them correctly by seeing how they are applied in Revelation.

This is an issue that requires an understanding of the complete harmony of the scriptures and that can only be fully comprehended by those who devote hours upon hours to the study of the Bible. I pray that you will begin this journey, or, if you have already begun it, renew your commitment to this task. May God bless you in the endeavor.

Elkanah