



God's purpose with Israel

4. Conditional prophecy

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THE OBJECTIVE of this series is to answer some of the arguments which are aimed at detracting from a latter-day application of prophecy about Israel. During the discussion we may need to extract the basic framework of Israel prophecy, but it is not intended to provide a detailed interpretation of the prophecies.

In the current article we look at some prophecies which, while they are usually agreed to be unfulfilled to date, are seen as being conditional on factors which have not been satisfied, and which, some argue, never will be fulfilled. We will examine whether the conditional factors are real, and if so, whether they have been satisfied after all, or whether God intends that they should become satisfied in the future. We shall see that, although, along the way, the large mass of the nation of Israel may fail the conditions, ultimately the promises to Israel will be fulfilled.

It is true that God does place conditions on many of His promises. In fact it is a common feature for predictive prophecy concerning Israel to be expressed in a conditional manner. But this says little about whether or not the prophecies will ultimately be fulfilled. To human minds the conditions may seem impossible, or to have low probability of success, but this is because our minds are limited in knowledge. God is not so limited: "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God" (Lk. 18:27).

Change of heart and repentance

Some prophecies are conditional on events that can still come to pass, or that have even been predicted without condition elsewhere in Scripture. The following passage illustrates this:

"And it shall come to pass, *when* all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath

driven thee, and *shalt return* unto the LORD thy God, and *shalt obey* His voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; *that then* the LORD thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather thee, and from thence will He fetch thee: and the LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and He will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers" (Deut. 30:1-5).

There is more than one condition attached to the promise that God will bring Israel back to possess the land and there do them good. It is fulfilled after both the blessing and the curse, which are detailed in all their aspects in Deuteronomy 28, have been completed, and it is conditional on a change of heart and repentance by Israel, on returning to God and obeying Him. The first has been satisfied; Israel has experienced the blessing and has been under the curse. Many of the people, if not all, still remain under the curse.

However, the second condition has not yet been fulfilled. In a few cases hearts have been changed, but certainly not nationally. But when we read on in Deuteronomy 30, we find that God has promised to bring about this. Verses 6-8 state that it will happen unconditionally: "And *the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart*, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live . . . And thou shalt return and obey the voice of the LORD, and do all His commandments which I command thee this day". The Lord is not speaking a platitude—they will

“return and obey” (v. 8) if they “return . . . and . . . obey” (v. 2)—but is speaking in unconditional terms in verse 8. Deuteronomy 30 illustrates a feature common in the Israel prophecies: they are often conditional on things which have themselves been prophesied unconditionally.

There is a picture of cooperation here between the Lord and Israel. So how does He bring it about? Other scripture shows it is by tribulation:

“But if from thence thou shalt seek the LORD thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. When thou art in *tribulation*, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto His voice; (for the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) He will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which He sware unto them” (4:29-31).

The tribulation is allocated to the era of “the latter days”.¹ A time when strong nations are making efforts to destroy national Israel or the Jews is likely to be the kind of tribulation the prophecy has in mind. But we can be sure that Israel’s God will not forsake them to destroy them utterly.²

Forgiveness

In the merciful promise of Deuteronomy 4:31 there is no reproach for the greatness of Israel’s past sins. It is for the sake of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with whom God made a covenant, that He will not forsake them, in spite of these sins (see also verse 37). This promise is therefore unconditional with respect to the past sins of the nation, once they turn to the Lord.

All who come to God depend on forgiveness. If we can be forgiven, why cannot Israel? Israel have been forgiven nationally in the past, when perhaps the majority were faithless, and when as individuals they might expect no glorious resurrection to receive the promises. Truly, the forgiveness of national Israel is conditional, but when the time is right, that is, when God brings about the right situation, forgiveness will be appropriate. As we read in Jeremiah: “I will cleanse them . . . and I will pardon all their iniquities . . . whereby they have transgressed against Me” (33:8).

Return from Babylon

Those who restrict the fulfilment of the above passages in Deuteronomy to the return from

Babylon need to consider that the Jews, having returned from exile, did not live up to the description given, nor were they blessed to the extent God promised, and they subsequently went again through more than one period of the curse on Israel. A prophecy of utter destruction found in a nearby verse (4:26) does not mean the utter destruction of the people, for Israel were to be scattered among the peoples and “left few in number”, not exterminated (v. 27).³ Rather, it meant the utter destruction of God’s kingdom and constitution for the people, that is, their exile and loss of independence; they will “perish *from off the land*” (v. 26). The return from Babylon and Persia was only a partial return, and there is no sense in which the prophecies of Deuteronomy 4 and 30 were completed at that time.

Zechariah was a prophet who spoke to Israel during the period of their return from Babylon, and possibly also after the return was completed. His prophecy talked of a widespread return still to come: “And I will sow them among the people; and they shall remember Me in far countries; and they shall live with their children, and turn again. I will bring them again also out of the land of Egypt, and gather them out of Assyria; and I will bring them into the land of Gilead and Lebanon; and place shall not be found for them” (10:9,10). This is an unconditional prophecy, supporting the view that the similar prophecy of a return found in Deuteronomy 4 and 30 was not fulfilled by the return from Babylon.

It has been argued that this prophecy of Zechariah was fulfilled at the time of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, when Ezra led a party of returning Jews to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:7). This was about sixty years after Zechariah began to prophesy (*cf.* Zech. 1:1). However, the prophecy of Zechariah 10 does

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1. The phrase ‘the latter days’ or ‘last days’ is worth following through from its first occurrence in Genesis 49:1.
 2. We note that there is no promise in these texts of a regathering and repossession of the land while Israel are in unbelief or in disobedience, and this is an important fact to be examined when in a later article we consider the status of Israel today in the land.
 3. For what purpose does God preserve Israel? Is it that He might continue to curse them? Surely not! He is not that kind of God. He is waiting for them to turn to Him, which they will do eventually, as we saw from Deuteronomy 4:29-31. We plan to consider the significance of the preservation of Israel again later in the series.

Longsuffering towards the Jewish nation

Thus, again, the longsuffering of God with the Jewish nation, as it is written, "Many times did He deliver them; but they provoked Him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity: nevertheless He regarded their afflictions when He heard their cry: and He remembered for them His covenant, and repented according to the multitude of His mercies;" (Psalm cvi. 43-45; see also Hosea xi. 7-9;) illustrates touchingly the patient love of Jesus our Lord towards the ungrateful and provoking members of His mystical body. To this longsuffering the Jewish nation was indebted for its continued existence: and every disciple of Jesus Christ may well say, "O Lord, if Thou wert extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who could stand?"—"not that Thou art slack concerning the fulfilment of Thy promises or threatenings, as men count slackness; but Thou art longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter iii. 9).

The Prophecies Relative to the Jewish Nation, M'Neile, 1878, p. 78.

not fit any such time, for it describes Israel and Judah as a strong and warring people (vv. 3-6), walking in the Lord's name (v. 12) and extending into Gilead and Lebanon (v. 10). The description is of an independent people, nothing like the return under Ezra, who needed a letter of authorisation from Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:11), and was accompanied by less than 2,000 adult men (Ezra 8). Five hundred years later the Apostle Paul was still promising a future when Jacob's ungodliness would be turned and his sin taken away (Rom. 11:26,27; 2 Cor. 3:16).

The promises to Abraham

A number of promises were made by God to Abraham. One of these was the promise that Abraham would inherit the land of Canaan (Gen. 13:15,17; 15:7; 17:8). In his lifetime Abraham did not receive what was promised (Heb. 11:13). The same was true of Isaac and Jacob, to whom the promises were renewed (Gen. 26:3; 28:4,13; 35:12; 48:4).

What they did obtain, though, was "a good report" (Heb. 11:2), so disobedience cannot be claimed against them. Further, we are told that their faith in the promises was not misplaced, but that God has "prepared for them a city" (v. 16). For them the fulfilment of the promises was not cancelled, nor were they changed in meaning. The fulfilment was merely delayed till after their death and future resurrection (v. 35).

The same is true for a number of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who conquered the land of promise, lived there under the rule of God's kings and priests, and are listed as faithful

in Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11:39 is clear: "these all . . . received not the promise", in spite of them living in the land. They did, however, "[obtain] a good report". In their case too, fulfilment of the promise was delayed until after resurrection, when they will be able to share it with Abraham, and with the seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ returned (1 Cor. 15:23). Conditions of obedience which are necessary to receive the promises were worked out in their natural lives as the faithful ones were chosen out by God. Conditions certainly apply to the choice of individuals reckoned as faithful, but the promises themselves are unconditional.

That there is also a national aspect of the promises to Abraham cannot be denied. This side of the promises began to be fulfilled in the entry of the people to Canaan under Joshua (Acts 7:6,7,17; Gen. 15:5,13,14,18). These were the children of Abraham according to the flesh, and the promises were fulfilled in them in a typical and partial sense, although they were also given an opportunity to show faith individually, and thereby in many cases to inherit the promises in the ultimate and glorious sense discussed in Hebrews 11.

It might be claimed that Israel after the flesh forfeited their right to the land by their continued disobedience, so that after the Lord dispossessed them there could be no further opportunity to hold the land again under the covenant made with Abraham. This theory, for which there is no Biblical confirmation, prompts certain questions. If it were simply a question of the nation's disobedience, why were Israel not expelled earlier at their first disobedience? Having

been expelled, why were they permitted to return at the end of the first exile, and then again in modern times? Surely there is a second major factor: the great mercy of God (Zech. 1:16). Since He has shown Himself to be so merciful in the past, then it will be natural to find Him continuing to show mercy in the future, as He brings them back to Himself and reconstitutes them in His Kingdom in the land (Deut. 30:3,4; cf. 1 Kgs. 8:46-50; 2 Chron. 7:14).

Remembering the covenant

In Leviticus 26 we find a statement of what would cause God to remember the covenant with Abraham following disobedience by the people:

“If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against Me, and that also they have walked contrary unto Me; and that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: *then will I remember My covenant* with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land” (vv. 40-42).

The remembrance by the Lord of His covenant is conditional on Israel’s confession, humbling and acceptance of His punishment.

On a similar theme, we find the following: “Wherefore it shall come to pass, *if ye hearken* to these judgments, and *keep*, and *do* them, that the LORD thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which He swore unto thy fathers” (Deut. 7:12). God keeping the covenant depends on Israel keeping His judgements. But He is so patient with Israel that He gives them enduring opportunity, lasting to “a thousand generations” (vv. 8,9; Ps. 105:8-11).

We see this patience manifest when we read further in Leviticus 26:

“The land also shall be left of them, and shall enjoy her sabbaths, while she lieth desolate without them: and they shall accept of the punishment of their iniquity: because, even because they despised My judgments, and because their soul abhorred My statutes. And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them: for I am the LORD their God. But I will for

their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the LORD” (vv. 43-45).

In these verses we find an unconditional prophecy of the Lord’s enduring interest in national Israel and their unconditional preservation as a people.⁴

The covenant of day and night

Twice the continuance of Israel is linked to the ordinances of day and night, set up on the fourth day of Creation:

“If those ordinances depart from before Me, saith the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me for ever” (Jer. 31:35,36);

“If My covenant be not with day and night, and if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth; then will I cast away the seed of Jacob, and David My servant, so that I will not take any of his seed to be rulers over the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: for I will cause their captivity to return, and have mercy on them” (33:25,26; cf. vv. 20,21).

Thus a fundamental and constant feature of God’s creation prevents Israel’s permanent casting away.

Similarly, the size of the heavens, or the number of the grains of the sand of the sea, or the inability to search the foundations of the earth, are made the measure of Israel’s future numbers or the impossibility of God casting off Israel (31:37; 33:22-24). It is clear that the conditions for casting away “the seed of Jacob” could not become true before or during the Kingdom of God on earth. Only complete obliteration of the earth or similar catastrophe could mean the casting off of Israel. But we are told that “the Branch of righteousness”, their greatest ruler, the Lord Christ Jesus, will “execute judgment and righteousness in the land. In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely” (33:15,16). It follows that Israel must have a significant part in the Kingdom.

4. Leviticus 26:45 (and also verses 15 and 25) is probably not a reference to the Abrahamic covenant, but to the covenant God made with the nation following their escape from Egypt (Ex. 19:5-8). Both covenants being remembered by God makes the promise of Israel’s future that much stronger.

The principle of 'conditionality'

Two Old Testament passages are used to support the idea of a generally established principle by which apparently unconditional prophecy is to be interpreted as being conditional. However, it is wrong to claim that, because a condition in a prophecy has not been satisfied a long time after it was given, it never can be, and that therefore the prophecy is no longer relevant. The two passages used are Jonah 3 and Jeremiah 18.⁵ Since both are used to support a dismissive attitude to prophecy about Israel, we will look at them more closely.

In Jeremiah 18 the example of the potter's method of working is used by the Lord as an analogy on which He bases His subsequent message (vv. 1-4). The first part of His message is that a prophecy of destruction of a kingdom which does evil will be cancelled if the people "turn from their evil" (vv. 5-8). Similarly, a second part of His message is that a prophecy of planting, construction and good will be cancelled if the kingdom does not obey the Lord (vv. 9,10). An application is then made to Judah and Jerusalem, where God is planning disaster but will change this if they all return from their evil ways and make their doings good (v. 11). Thus the Lord sets up a principle by which He works. History shows that Judah did not "return" to Him at that time, and so, after an opportunity for repentance, they were punished by destruction.

Jonah's prophecy to Nineveh is another example of this principle. His message was, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!". The people, led by their king, "turned from their evil way" and "God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it" (Jon. 3:10, NKJV). Thus the original prophecy of forty days did not come to pass. Years later, however, Nineveh was destroyed when they had ceased to heed the message of the Lord. He simply delayed while there was a valid remedy.

The principle illustrated in Jeremiah 18 and Jonah 3 should not be extended beyond its defined scope. It simply says that there is an implied condition of obedience before God gives His favour, and a condition of unrepentant disobedience before He punishes. It does not say that He may not reverse His action or decision subsequently, if the situation changes. In fact that is precisely what the principle described in Jeremiah 18:1-10 is all about.

Applying this principle to the house of Israel, as Jeremiah 18:6,11-13 itself does, leaves the prophecies of Divine blessing simply dependent upon the national repentance of Israel, which we already know to be necessary from more explicit statements referred to earlier. Disobedience and faithlessness may be the cause of delay, but the ultimate purpose of God is not defeated. The potter remoulds the clay to achieve a more satisfactory form, and the house of Israel eventually becomes a good pot in His hands. A prophecy expressed unconditionally is therefore unconditional in the ultimate sense, though the implied conditions may delay it.

The same principle applies to prophecies not restricted to Israel. The coming of Christ to bring peace to the earth might be delayed or hastened by the behaviour of the nations or of the ecclesia, but the promise of his coming cannot be cancelled by their behaviour. Similarly, when in Numbers 14:21 God says, "but as truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD", that is His absolute promise. It was delayed by the faithlessness of Israel in the wilderness, which is why God mentioned it at that juncture. A precondition will be that all the inhabitants of the earth give God glory by their obedience—a difficult condition, but one which God will certainly bring about.

Conclusions

If all the prophecies promising blessings to Israel, and expressed in an unconditional way, are arbitrarily taken as conditional on Israel behaving differently in the past, and so are not now to be fulfilled at all, then a large part of God's Word has fallen by the way, and is found to have been spoken in vain.⁶ This does not match the character of God's Word (Isa. 55:10,11; Prov. 30:5), or of the God Who has spoken it. He so often overcomes the deficiencies of man by arranging

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5. Jonah 3 and Jeremiah 18 are referred to in this context in *Israel in Bible Prophecy*, J. L. Bray, 1983 (reprinted 1995), p. 14, and "The Old Testament in the New", Ron Coleman, *Endeavour*, Dec. 1999, p. 23. See also the discussion in the Correspondence section of *The Testimony* under the heading, "Does Ezekiel prophesy about the last days?" (May 1993, p. 164).
 6. Arguments claiming that many prophecies which Israel were unable to fulfil literally have been or are being fulfilled in a spiritual sense will, God willing, be considered in a later article.

something even better than the plan that man has spoilt.

We see, then, the overall unconditional nature of God's purpose with Israel. Although frequently expressed in conditional terms, and although for long periods Israel have not satisfied the conditions, yet ultimately God's express

purpose will be fulfilled. God is not forestalled by man's failure. There is no reason for complacency in any man. God's blessings are certain, but humility, faith and obedience are needed for a share in them, and Gentiles are as much at risk as the Jews of not receiving them.

[\(To be continued\)](#)