

Prophets

WERE THEY RATHER CRUDE PREDICTORS OF THE FUTURE?

G. W. Anderson, A Critical Intro. to the O.T.

The prophets did predict, sometimes the immediate, and sometimes the more distant future. But their function was not to plot the future course of history in detail, but to interpret history in terms of the will of Yahweh. Jeremiah's forecasts of events were often wrong in detail, as he himself tells us; but this does not seriously affect his greatness as a prophet, unless his interpretation of history in terms of the will of Yahweh was unsound. (p.98)

Again, Isaiah's prophecy that Jerusalem would not fall, and Ezekiel's recurrent prediction that it would fall, cannot be understood unless they are put into their respective settings, the former during Sennacherib's invasion at the end of the 8th century, and the latter at the beginning of the 6th, during the last years of the kingdom of Judah. To relate either prophecy to the wrong situation would involve misunderstanding its message. That is why dating the various parts of the prophetic books is not merely an academic exercise, but often an essential preparation for exegesis. (p.98)

This moral conditioning and immediate reference explains how a prophetic forecast, far from being inevitably fulfilled with literal exactness, can be modified or withdrawn altogether. . . . As a consequence of what has just been said, we may see how some prophetic predictions could remain unfulfilled, while others were fulfilled in essence but not literally. . . . Another point to be remembered is that these predictions are usually clothed in the language of poetic imagery and hyperbole which no one but the most prosaic literalist could insist on taking as exact description. . . . (Scott, pp.10-11)

To be sure, the prophets often made predictions, in the conviction that Yahweh was shaping the course of events according to his purpose. But these predictions, some of which came true and some of which did not, had reference to the immediate future, which impinged on the present. Just as a doctor's prediction that a patient has only a short time to live makes the patient's present moments more precious and serious, so the prophet's announcement of which God was about to do accented the urgency of the present. The prophet was primarily concerned with the present. His task was to communicate God's message for now, and to summon the people to respond today. (Anderson, 184) ⊙

. . . so far as we can determine, when studied in their contexts apart from dogmatic preconception, no prophet leaped across the centuries and foresaw the specific person Jesus of Nazareth. It is a plain violation of historical context to think that they did so and in practice those who interpret the prophets as predictors of Jesus obscure the settings in which the prophets functioned. . . .

The truth in the position is retained by recognizing that the prophets were in a line of development culminating in Jesus of Nazareth. Some of their deepest convictions were his and the spirit of his ministry was that of prophecy reincarnate. (Gottwald, 275)