

Revelation & Predictive Prophecy



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The Prophet Isaiah by Michelangelo Buonorroti

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Referring to various passages in the Old Testament is not all that is involved in the Old Testament background of Revelation. We must also consider the nature of predictive prophecy. Not all prophecies should be interpreted in the same way. Here is a quick survey of the variety of ways that biblical prophecies can find fulfillment. Look up the example passages to understand each principle more clearly.

Although we tend to make 'prophecy' and 'prediction' synonymous, not all true biblical prophecies are predictive. At times, a prophet of God merely points out the guilt of his people and called them to repentance. Old Testament examples of this type of prophecy include Micah 6:1-8 and Isaiah 1:1-20.

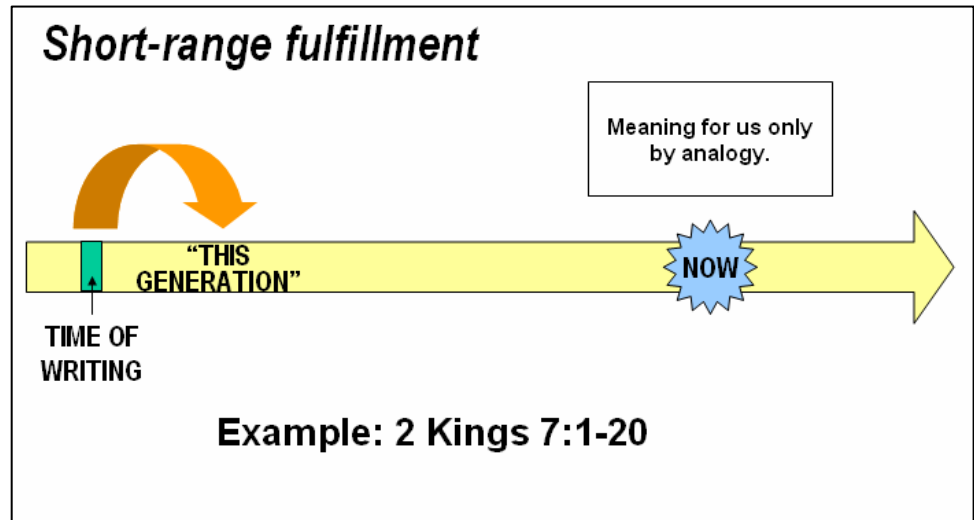
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are predictive.*

Even if a prophecy includes any number of predictions, we must try to distinguish between short-range fulfillment, long-range fulfillment, and dual fulfillment. Unfulfilled predictions fall into three categories: aborted predictions because of unfulfilled conditions, spiritual fulfillments, and predictions whose fulfillments are still in our future. Each deserves a closer examination.

Fulfilled Prophecies	Unfulfilled Prophecies
1. Short-range fulfillment	1. Unfulfilled because of unmet conditions
2. Long-range fulfillment	2. Unfulfilled literally, but fulfilled spiritually
3. Dual fulfillment	3. Fulfillment still lies in the future

Short-range fulfillment

Many biblical prophecies were intended by the prophet to be fulfilled in the immediate future—certainly within the lifetime of the prophet’s contemporaries (“this generation” on the chart, based on Jesus’ time frame in Mark 13:30 and parallels, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all of these things have happened”).



Because John in the introduction warns the original readers that they should take to heart what he is writing “because the time is near,” we should expect many or all of the Book of Revelation’s prophecies to fall into this category. For example, prophecies in chapters two and three readily fall into the

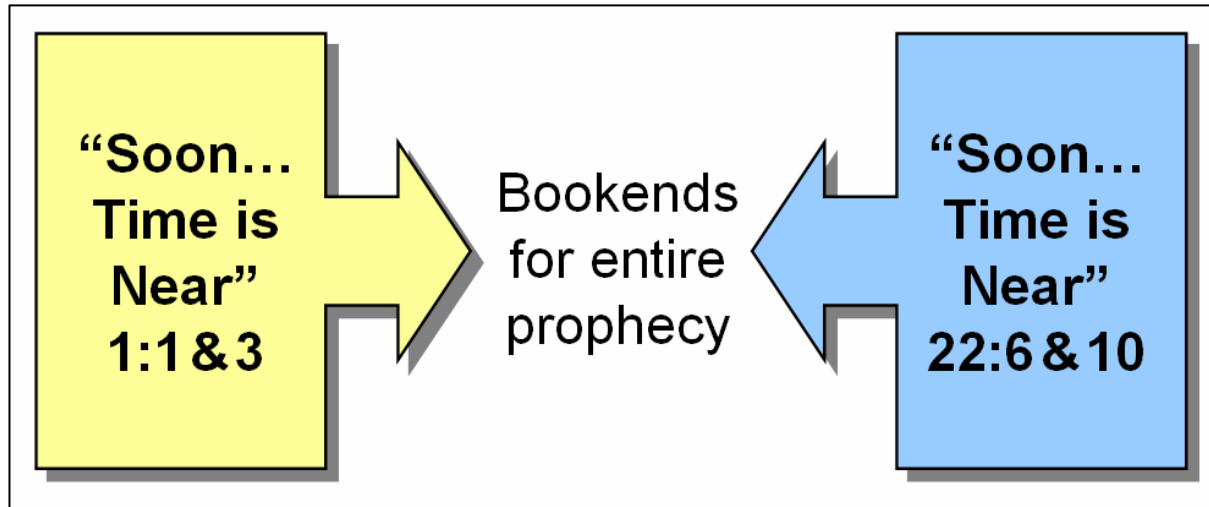
category of short-term prophecies. These include:

- The threat to “remove the lampstand” of the Ephesian congregation (2:5)
- The warning that the Smyranean Christians would have to suffer persecution for 10 days (2:10)
- The prediction of the fate of the Thyatiran “prophetess” and her associates (2:22-23)
- The prediction that the Philadelphia church would be kept out of the “hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world [land]” (3:10)

It is quite likely that all four of these predictions were fulfilled within the lifetimes of the original readers, the Christians of the Roman province of Asia. Other short-term prophecies elsewhere in Revelation may not be so obvious. We must, however, allow for this possibility, given what the book itself says about the time frame of the prophecy as a

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whole. At the beginning and at the end of the Apocalypse, John tells us that it concerns “things that must soon take place” and notes that “the time is near” (Revelation 1:1-3; 22:6-10). These statements serve as bookends for the prophecy as a whole, leading us to choose the short-term prediction category by default, unless we have good reason to veer away from it.

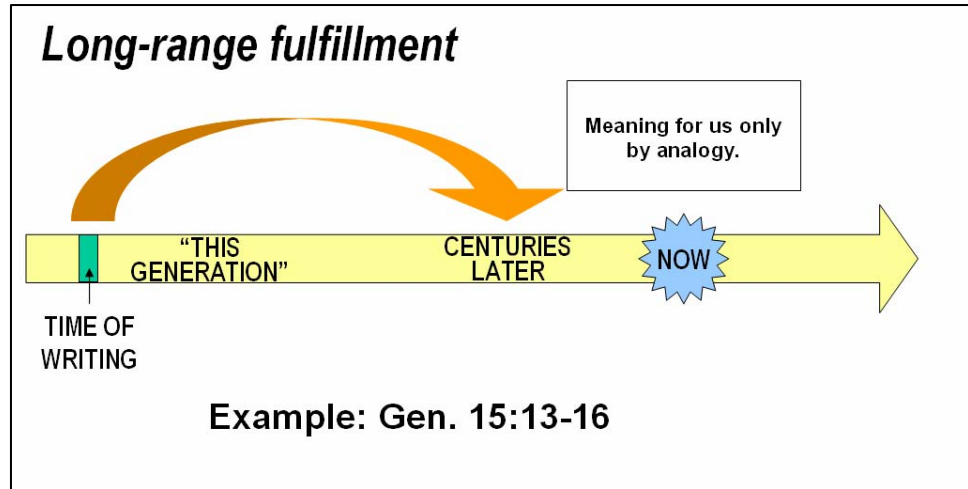


Long-range fulfillment

Other predictions, however, extend beyond the immediate situation and audience. They concern events in the remote future, sometimes centuries removed from the prophet and his contemporaries. A good example is God's

prediction to Abraham of the Egyptian bondage (Gen. 15:13-16). This prophecy began to be fulfilled nearly a hundred years after the death of Abraham, continuing to unfold over the next 400 years.

Some of the predictions in Revelation may have long-range fulfillments, but we would have to find strong contextual and historical evidence to persuade us to leave behind the short-range fulfillment category. A



possible instance involves the 1,000 years of Revelation 20. If the time period of 1,000 years is literal, then the information about what happens during and after the thousand-year period certainly extends beyond the scope of the original readers. Good reasons exist, however, to believe that “1,000 years” in Revelation 20 is figurative, since it occurs within the vision part of the book side by side with what are obviously symbols: a dragon, a chain, and a locked door. If the 1,000 years are literal, then what prevents us from understanding the dragon literally as well? But if the dragon is figurative, as Rev. 20:2 indicates, then what reason do we have for making the switch and taking the millennium literally?

But even if the 1,000 years are literal, they may already be fulfilled, rather than remaining future for us, the modern readers. Remember, the book itself says at the beginning and end that it concerns what must take place “soon” and “the time is near.” Add



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1,000 years to the time of writing (late first century), and what do you get? Somewhere around 1100 CE, which most of us think of as ancient history.

If a prediction has already been fulfilled in our past, despite its long-range nature from the perspective of the original audience, we can apply the prophecy only by analogy. From our point of view then, as far as getting a practical lesson for us, prophecies with long-range fulfillments are just like prophecies with short-range fulfillments. The fulfillments of both are in our past, though they were in the future for the original audience, whether the immediate or the distant future. When we read these prophecies, we have to undergo a time-shift.

The time-shift principle:

Original readers



Today's readers

