

Prophecy And The Sixth-Century Axial Period

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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The principle of duality is an element of prophecy we have to be very careful about when attempting to interpret. Prophetic statements sometimes apply to more than one fulfillment; dual applications do exist. But at the same time, it can be a lure, trapping us into a wrong interpretation because God never intended every prophecy to have dual applications.

A prime example of duality is Christ's first coming to atone for our sins and His second coming to rule as King of Kings. Another clear dual application is Jesus' Olivet prophecy given in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Many of the conditions He predicts to befall Judea shortly after His ascension into heaven are also forming for a repeat performance in our day. Often, we will read of "the day of the Lord" and perceive that it was fulfilled anciently. Then a few verses later, the "day of the Lord" will appear in a setting that could not possibly exist anciently but does now.

Hosea 11:1-12 is a prophecy made against ancient Israel, which was headed by the tribe of Ephraim. It too has modern relevance to Israel, but its application is complex, requiring that we believe that biblical Israel—the ten northern tribes—still exists as modern nations. How far can we take its ancient application into our day or to a time yet future? Verse 1 appears in Matthew 2:15, applied to Christ, because Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's persecution against them. When that was safely over, God brought them back to Israel. This prophecy was fulfilled twice before the first century AD began! Is there yet another?

Hosea wrote this prophecy about forty years before Israel went into captivity to Assyria. Since part of it has already been used in reference to Jesus, how much of it applies to modern Israel? All, just another verse or two, or most that remains? Is Assyria truly modern Germany, as some believe? Will it fulfill exactly the same role a second time? The research of some within the church of God leads them to believe Germany is actually a part of the ten lost tribes of Israel! We can see how risky it is to make assumptions and leap to conclusions. One must be careful when using duality as a base.

A Foundation for Understanding Prophecy

Prophecy has many purposes, but it is never intended to open the future to mere idle curiosity. Its much higher purpose is to furnish guidance to the heirs of salvation; to give comfort, hope, and encouragement; and to instill in them confidence and a sense of urgency in the troubled period in which they live.

Amos 3:1-7 is instructive of some of prophecy's uses:

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Will a young lion cry out of his den, if he has caught nothing? Will a bird fall into a snare on the earth, where there is no trap for it? Will a snare spring up from the earth, if it has caught nothing at all? If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the

people be afraid? If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it? Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.

Prophecy is both practical and positive, not all gloom and doom. Most of prophecy begins negatively but ends positively because God is confident that what He prophesied will accomplish His end, which is always good! Much of the thrust of Amos is an education for catastrophe. Amos followed Elijah about 90-100 years later. During that period, Israel's sins continued to mount horribly. Despite this, they became very wealthy and self-indulgent, even oppressively so.

Religiously, they were trying to walk a tightrope between God and Baal. They were behaving and worshipping like Baal worshippers but doing it in the name of the Lord. Does that not sound familiar to an informed observer of our modern, American scene? People in high places are claiming we all worship the same God; they say the God of Islam and the God of Christianity are the same!

Amos, a Jew from the southern kingdom, was sent by God to preach against the sins of the northern ten tribes. In those from the north, there would be a natural resistance to such an arrangement. The first thing Amos needed to do, then, was establish his authority to preach against them.

The prophet begins in the first two verses with a "thus saith the Lord," providing the foundation for all that follows. He sets out two things that construct a basis for what he says. First, God and Israel have a special relationship: "You only have I known." This phrase indicates a very close bond, as in a marriage, from which ensues the sharing of life's experiences. This ties what Amos would say to correct them to their responsibilities within that close relationship.

Second, he makes a veiled warning, contained within the next five verses: Amos' words carry authority. Israel had better heed because his words are not idle. He establishes this through a series of illustrations posed as challenging questions that can logically be answered only one way. His aim is to awaken them from their spiritual lethargy. It is as if he is saying, "Think about the practical ramifications of this." What follows is a general pattern of God's operation in His people's behalf.

First: People traveling in the same direction toward exactly the same destination would hardly meet except by appointment. It is no accident that God and Israel have this relationship. This also applies on a smaller but more immediate scale: Amos has been sent by appointment, and he does not speak promiscuously. He is there by no accident. His utterances are not his own words; they began with God, who sent them because the close relationship is seriously threatened.

Second: Lions do not roar unless they have taken their prey because they do not want to scare their intended prey away. Israel is God's prey, as it were, and He is not roaring yet. This means, "Take heed! He is stalking you, and you are in mortal danger. Punishment is imminent, at the very door. Beware, for the margin of safety is very slim."

Third: One cannot snare a bird unless a trap is set, and then something—in this case a bird—has to cause the trap to spring shut. This illustration is declaring a cause-and-effect relationship, meaning, "Israel, you are already in the trap, and you, through your conduct, are just about to spring it shut on yourself. Your sins brought this warning, and punishment *will* follow if you continue sinning."

Fourth: All too often, the alarms go off, and *then* people take notice. "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Amos is declaring that God is involved in His creation; He has not gone

way off. The Israelites must not allow themselves to be self-deceived. God is managing it, governing it. His warning of impending calamity would not come if they were not deserving of it. They have been flippantly careless and have no one to blame but themselves.

Fifth: It is illogical to think that God would punish without first warning His people. It is an aspect of His mercy. We can infer that Amos did not choose to be there before them. God appointed him to this task and "caused" him to speak. It is from God that the authority for the prophet's message emanates.

An important overall warning from Amos for those of us who have made the New Covenant with God is that great privileges must not be abused, or they will bring great penalties. To whom much is given much is required (Luke 12:48). Our great privilege is to have access to Him, His Spirit, and therefore a far closer relationship with Him than Israel ever had under the Old Covenant. Israel's sin was first neglecting and then departing from God and the relationship. This in turn produced great moral corruption through self-serving idolatry, illustrated as and called "fornication" in other books.

The overall effect of these sins produced a careless disregard for the simple duties people owe their neighbors, as well as oppression of the weak. Amos speaks strongly against public and private indifference toward the keeping of the second of the two great commandments (Matthew 22:37-40). When these are considered, we see that he is truly a prophet for our time, when public morality has fallen so low. We need to heed His words seriously because our cultural circumstances parallel what Amos confronted in his day.

The Axial Period

The Old Testament gives a strong impression that prophets arose in times of crisis, and most church members believe we are facing the crisis at the close of this age. However, the New Testament shows that God is no longer using prophets as He did before He established the church. Instead, He has given us an understanding of the dual application of what has already been written, using the apostles to fill in necessary prophecies for the sake of the church. God has given these prophecies so we can be spiritually prepared for the end-time crisis and do whatever work of witnessing of Christ's gospel He requires.

The Bible's prophets, with few exceptions, have indeed come in bunches. Most of them appeared within a 250-year period beginning about 800 BC and included a remarkable range of personalities: the visionary Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel; the ethical Amos and Hosea; and the outstanding Jeremiah, who seems to be in the midst of everything.

For our purposes, we will deal with a 130- to 150-year period that began in about 620 BC, which contained Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and possibly Obadiah and Zephaniah. Their lives and service preceded and spanned the most tumultuous period in man's history until now. Some historians call it the "Axial Period" because history shows the rise and fall of nations created a multitude of flip-flops in terms of power and influence. New nations rose to dominating power, and older powers fell, never to rise again. Some nations disappeared from view altogether.

Axial means "having the characteristics of an axis." An *axis* is "a line, shaft, event, or thought on which something rotates." Rightly applying what happened immediately preceding and during the sixth century BC gives greater insight to history and, because of the duality principle, to what is happening now. The sovereign God was deeply involved, as shown through the writings of His

prophets to Israel. Understanding this period from a biblical as well as a secular viewpoint is important because it is a type of what we are living through now.

The Origin and Goal of History

Swiss historian Karl Jaspers authored *The Origin and Goal of History*, first published in German in 1949. Within his opening paragraphs, he writes:

It would seem that the axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 BC, in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 BC. It is there (about 500 BC) that we meet with the *most deep-cut dividing line in history*. Man, as we know him today (mankind and his present civilizations) *came into being*. For short, we may style this the Axial Period." [p.1, emphasis mine throughout]

He advances on page 18, "It might seem as though I were out to prove the events of the Axial Period as a *direct intervention on the part of the Deity*, without openly saying so." This remark is especially interesting because Jaspers is agnostic. The fact is, however, there *was* intervention. The historical evidence, when combined with belief in the Bible, is so overwhelming that even the agnostic Jaspers has to mention the obvious appearance of supernatural involvement. Or, as he states it, "The Axial Period is in the nature of a *miracle*, in so far as no really adequate [human] explanation of it is possible within the limits of our present knowledge" (p.18). Nevertheless, there is an explanation because God was involved, and He left a record in the Bible. Notice, Jaspers posits this period to have occurred between 800 and 200 BC, a period that encompasses the writings of all prophets from Isaiah to Malachi.

Isaiah 10:5-7 states:

Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath I will give him charge, to seize the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Yet he does not mean so, nor does his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy, and cut off not a few nations.

Isaiah, the key prophet at the beginning of this period, is very interested in a dominating Gentile power, the Assyrians, and its threat to Israel and Judah. He begins to trumpet a warning to them of the impending commencement of the times of the Gentiles. Assyria is the first great Gentile power, but not the most influential.

Jeremiah, predominantly, and Daniel are the key prophets during the midst of this period, in the sixth century BC. Jeremiah began to prophesy as the seventh century ended and continued well into the sixth. Jeremiah 1:6-10 reveals some overall goals his commission included.

Then said I: "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth." But the Lord said to me: "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you," says the Lord. Then the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me: "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant."

Above all others, Jeremiah is the "Axial Man," prepared by God. God told him that he was a prophet not only to Israel and Judah, but to many other nations and kingdoms, and his job was to root out, pull down, destroy, throw down, build, and plant. Jeremiah 25:15-30 greatly fleshes out Jeremiah's commission. Notice how detailed God is as to which nations Jeremiah must prophesy:

For thus says the Lord God of Israel to me: "Take this wine cup of fury from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it. And they will drink and stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them." Then I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations drink, to whom the Lord had sent me: Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and its princes, to make them a desolation, an astonishment, a hissing, and a curse, as it is this day; Pharaoh king of Egypt, his servants, his princes, and all his people; all the mixed multitude, all the kings of the land of Uz, all the kings of the land of the Philistines (namely Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod); Edom, Moab, and the people of Ammon; all the kings of Tyre, all the kings of Sidon, and the kings of the coastlands which are across the sea; Dedan, Tema, Buz, and all who are in the farthest corners; all the kings of Arabia and all the kings of the mixed multitude who dwell in the desert; all the kings of Zimri, all the kings of Elam, and all the kings of the Medes; all the kings of the north, far and near, one with another; and all the kingdoms of the world which are on the face of the earth. Also the King of Sheshach shall drink after them.

"Therefore you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: "Drink, be drunk, and vomit! Fall and rise no more, because of the sword which I will send among you." And it shall be, if they refuse to take the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: "You shall certainly drink! For behold, I begin to bring calamity on the city which is called by My name, and should you be utterly unpunished? You shall not be unpunished, for I will call for a sword on all the inhabitants of the earth," says the Lord of hosts."

This is a tremendously broad commission to lay on one man's shoulders! His ministry embraced the totality of the biblical world, and some verses can be understood to encompass the entire world. Many of these nations had existed from the time God scattered the people by confusing the languages at Babel (Genesis 11). Did Jeremiah actually, in person, deliver this warning to these nations? We do not know because records are so rare. Jeremiah's writings include specific prophecies against Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Elam, Kedar, Hazor, and Babylon. Did he deliver these prophecies in person, or does the duality principle apply so that the literal fulfillment will occur in a time like ours, when rapid transportation and communication systems exist?

Collapse and Ascent

Jaspers makes an interesting comment about what was happening during the Axial Period that agrees with Jeremiah's commission in Jeremiah 1:10: "It was an age of *simultaneous* destruction and creation" (p. 5). On the next page he adds, "The thousands of years-old ancient civilizations are everywhere brought to an end by the Axial Period when it melts them down, assimilates them, or causes them to sink from view."

Where did they go? They virtually vanished because God set Jeremiah over those nations to pronounce His judgments. The Assyrian, Egyptian, Hittite, Elamite, Midianite, Phoenician, Philistine, Ammonite, and Moabite nations disappeared from view, and new nations rose as powers

to take their places. Within these few centuries, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, China, India, Europe, and Russia began their ascent to greatness. Jaspers further notes the process that was destroying and simultaneously making nations: "Mighty empires, made by conquest, arose almost simultaneously in China, in India, and in the West. Everywhere the first outcome of the collapse of the ancient order was an order of technological and organizational planning" (p. 5).

At this time lived such towering historical figures as Pythagoras, Confucius, Lao-Tze, Buddha, Zoroaster, Numa, Thales, and a bit later, Herodotus and Hippocrates. These and many others had an enormous impact on the formation of civilizations that exist to this day. Later, Jaspers comments on contemporary religious personalities who left their marks on the cultures they helped form:

It cannot possibly be an accident that six hundred years before Christ, Zarathustra in Persia, Buddha in India, Confucius in China, the prophets in Israel, King Numa in Rome and the first philosophers in Hellas made their appearance pretty well simultaneously as reformers of the national religion. (p. 8)

What was taking place? Jasper's book is devoted to his conclusions regarding this remarkable time. He writes, "In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we *still think* today, and the beginnings of the *world religion*, by which human beings *still live*, were created. The step into *universality* (one-worldism, Catholicism) was taken in every sense" (p. 2).

Jaspers asks a penetrating question that must be addressed to support the conclusions he reaches: "If the Axial Period gains an importance with the degree to which we immerse ourselves in it, the question arises: *Is this period*, or its creation, the *yardstick* for all that follows?" (p. 18). He is somewhat hesitant to answer this question in the affirmative, even though he leaves no doubt that he feels it is. However, the Bible, through the writings of Daniel, assures us that Jaspers should answer, "Yes." Notice Daniel 2:31-38:

You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

This is the dream. Now we will tell the interpretation of it before the king. You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of the heaven, He has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all—you are this head of gold.

Jaspers does not feel he has an absolute answer to this question, but with trust in the Bible, we can readily see this period dominated by Babylon *is* certainly a yardstick and standard. Babylon was the head of gold; it was the fountainhead, establishing patterns and influencing the rise of the new

civilizations that followed it. Those with a grasp of biblical prophecy see its reflection in all of history from the sixth century BC to the present. Here is the beginning of our world, the same system the apostle John calls "the world" in I John 2:15-17.

What emerged from that century or so is a reshaped world—our world. Certainly, at its beginning it did not possess much scientific technology, but the world's standards socially, politically, economically, philosophically, and theologically came into being at that time. These standards have undoubtedly been modified somewhat through time, but the New Testament confirms this conclusion by calling our present civilization "Mystery, Babylon the Great" (Revelation 17:5).

The Axis Turns Again

John writes in Revelation 17:3-5:

So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

The culture symbolized here is not mystery Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome, or Israel. It exists down to the time of the end because its ways are embedded in the nations to this day. Babylon is the fountain and yardstick even in Israel. In fact, Israel epitomizes Babylonish ways brought to their very peak. God's prophets were trumpeting its birth long before it occurred and as it was born.

In Luke 21:24, Jesus speaks of the circumstance the prophets were proclaiming: "And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." A new world, the times of the Gentiles, was ushered in through the Axial Period, and the Babylonian image has influenced the world since the sixth century BC, stamping its character on every culture. However, Gentiles have not always dominated politically or culturally. The last two hundred years have seen the rise and dominance of the Israelitish nations, featuring their syncretism of Christian and Babylonian concepts. This system, focused in the Israelitish nations, has risen to dominate the world scene to an extent no nation ever has.

There is no doubt God is preparing the world for the time of the end and the return of Jesus Christ. If an end-time parallel occurs, Daniel 4 contains an interesting possibility for the years just ahead. The tree, representing Babylon, is chopped down and its stump banded with iron. Then, Nebuchadnezzar is told he will become like an animal in behavior, and seven times will pass before it is concluded. In its literal fulfillment, the seven times became seven years, but prophetically, it is possible that the seven times ended in 1982.

The number of years in seven times is equal to the number of days in seven prophetic years (2,520). These compare to the sum of the numerical values of the handwriting on the wall (Daniel 5:24-28). Babylon was "chopped down" in 539 BC, and the iron band of Medo-Persia and subsequent empires

prevented its immediate revival. Adding 2,520 years brings us to 1982 (remember to add a year to account for the non-existent year 0). Perhaps in that year the band was broken and removed, permitting the "tree" to once again sprout into fullness.

God is manipulating the nations into the positions He desires them to be in at the end time. Habakkuk provides us with a small piece of insight:

"Look among the nations and watch—be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you. For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves." . . . "O Lord, I have heard Your speech and was afraid; O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy." (Habakkuk 1:5-7; 3:2)

This prophecy concerns the economic, political, and military machinations that will occur as the end approaches, but these maneuvers end with the return of Christ. Many parallel prophecies are fulfilled during the same period, for instance, the appearance of the Two Witnesses and their work. Even God declares that what He is going to bring to pass will be astounding, partly because it runs counter to what most believe could happen. Nonetheless, God will have His Two Witnesses expounding upon these prophecies and warning all who are willing to listen that a new world order is being ushered in through the tumultuous, worldwide events of the end-time "Axial Period."

It will not be the "New World Order" of human dreams, but Christ will return and continue to develop this new, God-devised revolution. The Babylonian image, which has governed and influenced the world since the sixth century BC, will be smashed on its feet, but the entire system will fragment into millions of pieces and be blown away into the dustbin of history, replaced by the Kingdom of God.

Isaiah 29:14 says, "Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work among this people, a marvelous work and a wonder; for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden." Whether men "see" it or not, a marvelous work of God is already underway as He maneuvers nations into their end-time positions. Revelation 17-18 show that spiritual and moral depravity combined with commercial and material success have blinded men, and they weep over the loss of the material aspects of Babylon without even realizing it has no true spiritual vitality.

Those of us able to "see" know that people are so absorbed with "getting" that they are totally ignorant of the impending judgment of God, even though we know God will show them. They are drunk with the wine of the wrath of her fornication, their minds warped by what they absorb from the Babylonish system around them. Because of their spiritual drunkenness, they do not grasp what is going on.

We must not allow ourselves to be caught up in the world's standards and ways of doing things. We cannot permit ourselves to absorb its attitudes. One might be word-perfect in his responses to questions about doctrine and habitually attend services, but knowledge is rote and church is merely ritual if one makes little or no connection between formal and personal Bible study and the business of life. God must become personal. Unless one's worldview is finely tuned to biblical truth, one's perception of events will be off-kilter.

Acts 3:19-21 reminds us:

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.

Here is a minister, an apostle, acting as a prophet. He is the voice of God proclaiming and expounding the coming Axial Period and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. A further new birth is awaiting the world.

Overall, God makes little use of prophets under the New Covenant. The office seems absorbed into the apostolic office, which is listed first by Paul in I Corinthians 12:28. However, in Revelation 11:10 the Two Witnesses are described as prophets, so as they fulfill their mission, the office will reappear.

Matthew 25:5 prophesies that, as the return of Christ nears, the church goes to sleep. Why? Perhaps it is because we have been somewhat misled since prophecy has not been fulfilled in the way we expected. However, the overall theme of what we were taught is still accurate. Babylon has a little longer to exist until the axis of history turns again. Now is not a time for wild-eyed fanaticism but for recapturing a steady sense of controlled urgency in preparing for Christ's Kingdom by resolving personal spiritual and moral problems.