

# The Predictions of the 1856 Vision

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## Introduction

Concerning a conference in 1856 Ellen White declared: “I was shown the company present at the conference. Said the angel, ‘Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus.’” All who were alive then are now dead. Does this unfulfilled prediction mean that Mrs. White is a false prophet? We offer a more extended answer to this question because it illustrates a fundamental misconception regarding the gift of prophecy.

Deuteronomy 18:22 reads: “If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken” (NRSV). This text, taken alone, would indict a number of Bible prophets. Deuteronomy 18:22 is to be understood, even as any other lone text, in the context of all Scripture. Other scriptures reveal that there are qualifying factors that operate in relation to a prophet’s predictions, particularly where the free will of humanity may be involved. It may come as a surprise to some to think that God’s promises of blessings and His threats of judgments are conditional. But the Scriptures are explicit on this. Notice the words recorded by Jeremiah:

“At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.” Jer. 18:7-10 (NRSV).

The Bible presents a number of illustrations of the application of this principle set forth by Jeremiah. Indeed, we may be thankful for Jeremiah’s words; they help us rightly to understand some texts of Scripture that might otherwise seem to indict the divine claims of certain prophets. Consider these two instances that illustrate both parts of Jeremiah’s statement. The first is a divine threat to bring judgment upon a nation. We see in parallel columns the threat of judgment and its reversal:

## **Chapter 1—*The Threat of Judgment Reversed***

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“So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days’ journey. And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” Jonah 3:3,4.

“So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.” “And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.” Jonah 3:5, 10.

## **Chapter 2—*A Promise Reversed***

Here is an example of a promise of blessing and its reversal:

“And God spake unto Moses,” “say unto the children of Israel...I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage.” Ex. 6:2, 6-8.

“And the Lord spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, How long shall I bear with this evil congregation, which murmur against me? . . . Say unto them . . . your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number . . . doubtless ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I sware to make you dwell therein. . . . And ye shall know my breach of promise.” Num. 14:26-34.

How clearly these parallel passages on the promise to Israel illuminate the words of Jeremiah! Said the Lord to Israel, “Ye shall know my breach of promise.” Or, as stated in the alternate reading in the margin: “Ye shall know my altering of my purpose.”

## **Chapter 3—*The Case of Eli***

Again, take the words of “a man of God” who came to Eli to declare judgment against him because of the vile conduct of his sons. This “man of God” asked Eli if he remembered the promise that the Lord made to his family “when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh’s house,” that they should serve as God’s priests. Then he follows with this reversal of the promise:

“Wherefore the Lord God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father’s house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house.” 1 Sam. 2:30, 31.

Have sincere Bible students been disturbed by these reversals of God’s decrees, have they in any way lost confidence in the claims of the Bible prophets because their predictions failed of fulfillment?

Why not? Because in view of Jeremiah's words they read into each prediction an implied qualifying clause:

#### **Chapter 4—*The Implied Qualifying Clause***

1. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown"—if the Ninevites do not repent.
2. "I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it"—if ye will keep My covenant. (See Ex. 19:5, 6, where the Lord, speaking to Moses en route to Canaan, inserts the qualifying "if.")
3. "I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever"—if ye will walk in the ways of righteousness.

If it is proper—and it is—to add to these predictions a qualifying clause, why is it not proper to do so with Mrs. White's 1856 prediction?

#### **Chapter 5—*Theologians Comment on Predictions***

The conditional character of Bible predictions may be explained on the altogether reasonable ground that God, though sovereign, is not arbitrary. He does not deal with people as if they were lifeless objects on a chessboard to be moved about exclusively at His will. He mysteriously holds in check, as it were, His own plans oftentimes, because He will not override the free will of anyone. That is what gives to divine predictions their conditional quality, and that is what caused God to speak of "my breach of promise," or "my altering of my purpose."

Well-known Bible commentators have written of this:

"God's promises are as conditional as his threats. It would be neither just nor merciful to us for God to continue his favours unabated after we had departed from him. The removal of them is a wholesome warning to us. It springs naturally from the personal relation of God to his people, one which depends on reciprocal sympathy."—*The Pulpit Commentary*, Notes (Homiletics) on Jeremiah 18:7-10.

"The majority of the [Old Testament] prophecies, however, were of the conditional type. They contain a suppressed 'unless' or 'if you keep my commandments' type of conditionality. . . . It is this provisional nature to the threat or promise delivered by the prophet that explains such a famous case as that of the prophet Jonah."—*Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, Manfred T. Brauch (1996).

#### **Chapter 6—*Factors That Affect the Promise of the Advent***

The Scriptures reveal that one of the reasons why God seems to us to be slow in carrying out His plan and promise to create a new earth for the righteous is because He desires to give everyone a little longer time in which to exercise their free will to flee from the wrath to come. Peter thus answers those who would doubt the certainty of God's promise to bring an end to this world of evil simply because time has tarried:

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9.

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Peter also declares that the children of God may hasten the Advent by exercising their free will. There is something that we can do about bringing the Advent nearer. We read, “Waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God” 2 Peter 3:12 (NRSV). Commentators have observed on this text:

“God appoints us as instruments of accomplishing those events which must be first before the day of God can come. By praying for His coming, furthering the preaching of the Gospel for a witness to all nations, and bringing in those whom ‘the long-suffering of God’ waits to save, we *hasten the coming of the day of God.*”—Jamieson, Fausset, Brown, *Commentary*, Notes on 2 Peter 3:12.

That the coming of Christ is related to an action of human free will—the preaching of the gospel by Christ’s followers—is clearly revealed in our Lord’s prophecy as to the time of His coming: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.” Matt. 24:14.

### **Chapter 7—*No Failure in the Word of the Lord***

Thus it is evident that if the free will of men and women is so vitally related to the second coming of Christ, both as regards the unbeliever and the professed children of God, any prediction concerning it would have to be tempered and qualified by that fact.

Numerous statements made by Ellen White in the decades following the 1856 vision demonstrate that she clearly understood that there is an implied conditional quality to God’s promises and threatenings—as Jeremiah declared—and that the conditional feature in forecasts regarding Christ’s Advent involves the state of heart of Christ’s followers. The following statement, written in 1883, is especially relevant on this point:

“The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional. . . .

“It was not the will of God that the coming of Christ should be thus delayed. God did not design that His people, Israel, should wander forty years in the wilderness. He promised to lead them directly to the land of Canaan, and establish them there a holy, healthy, people. But those to whom it was first preached, went not in ‘because of unbelief.’ Their hearts were filled with murmuring, rebellion, and hatred, and He could not fulfill His covenant with them.

“For forty years did unbelief, murmuring, and rebellion shut out ancient Israel from the land of Canaan. The same sins have delayed the entrance of modern Israel into the heavenly Canaan. In neither case were the promises of God at fault. It is the unbelief, the worldliness, unconsecration, and strife among the Lord’s professed people that have kept us in this world of sin and sorrow so many years.”—MS. 4, 1883. (Quoted in *Evangelism*, pp. 695, 696.)

These words from Mrs. White harmonize with what we have already discovered of the ways of God toward humanity, that free will plays an awesome part in the operation of the plans of God for this earth. We can better understand Mrs. White's unfulfilled prediction of 1856 when it is examined in the light of the conditional character of prophetic promises found in the Scriptures.

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