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Messianic Prophecies
on the Transformation of Human Society

The interpretation of prophecies is laden with historical and contemporary misapplications. Some of these are for political purposes, and others are to support a particular interpretation of Scripture, such as extreme chiliasm.

Therefore, before directing attention to the Old Testament prophetic texts, it is necessary to introduce the methodology used in this article. Before doing this, however, I would like to point out that I do not favour any of the “travel guides to eschatology” written to support a particular political or theological bias.

The method used could be called a paradigmatic analysis. The paradigm, structure or model will be to note what God is doing – in this case in the transformation of human society.

This method comes from the reality that prophecies, without consideration of their time of fulfilment, talk about God’s values, which God expects from humans and society, and, according to the prophecies, safeguards in the end.

This is in sharp contrast to the usual method of using time as the paradigm, the main way of focusing on the prophecies, either when the prophecy was fulfilled, or when it will be fulfilled.

Using God’s work in society as the paradigm does not contravene the time limits of the prophecies or deny that the Biblical prophecies foretell the future, and in some cases deal with the past and present. This method simply allows us to avoid misapplications and draw from them timeless practical teaching as well as eschatological teaching and encouragement.

A. Two Extremes

The interpretation of the prophecies in Church history led to the start of many *chiliasm* movements. During general times of danger or momentous social changes, it especially became the source of fiery interpretations which in an *eschatological sense* coloured actual historical situations and particular historical characters. “Knowing the result influences the conditions and ways of approaching it”¹: it is a statement that well represents the motives that led humankind to endeavour to know when and how the “end of the world” was coming. Discerning the time should lead to vigilance and readiness, and discerning the players should lead to a separation from the wretched and a joining up with the “right” chosen people or groups, and therefore to salvation.

This fascination with, and misinterpretation of, the prophecies and their strong link with chiliasm movements and sects led Christian theologians to endeavour to rationalize Christian teaching and to almost “leave out” eschatology.

Eschatology remains part of the Christian confession, in the same way as the canon of Scripture includes John’s Apocalypse at the end. Leaving out eschatology might eliminate the controversies between various interpretations and also might avoid the fear that talk about the end of the world brings.

From this we can understand two extreme approaches to the prophecies. The first claims that prophecies are “newspaper reports of the future”, and we just need to find the right key to their interpretation.

The second extreme claims that prophecies cannot in any way be related to actual situations in the world; and this approach is a negative reaction to the many mistaken interpretations of the past.

B. The Reign of God according to Prophecy

In answer to the disciples’ question about the renewal of the kingdom of Israel, Jesus Christ gave a clear reply: “It is not for you to know the times and seasons” (Acts 1,7). The sending out of the disciples to preach the Gospel follows this statement.

¹ WEBER Eugen, *Apokalypsy*. Praha, 1999. 6.

In our present situation, the Church still somehow has the opportunity to influence state laws and this becomes part of evangelism, as the prophet Micah reminded the leaders of Israel: “Should you not know justice?” (Micah 3,1)

If it was not the place of the disciples or the early Church to know eschatological times and seasons, surely the same applies to the Church today. Instead, we need to know righteousness and justice.

The study of Messianic prophecies helps bring knowledge of righteousness and justice as the Messiah desires to realize it today through the Church and later when He assumes the reins of government.

For our time, His work of the future can become a model, which can be realized in our times, at least in part by means of the Gospel. Under no circumstances, however, can this realization of righteousness and justice by the Church be an attempt to fulfil the prophecy in its full meaning.

The prophetic picture of the future gives a paradigm for what the Church is trying to do for the world within its main mission, the proclamation of the Gospel. The question of the eschatological fulfilment of all the prophecies is left open.

C. Prophecies about Present and Future

It is also necessary to observe that interpretations of the prophecies cannot focus only on the future foretold in them. Though it is not for us to know the times and seasons, Jesus Christ nevertheless expects us to be able to discern the signs of the times when they happen (Matthew 16,3; 24,33).

It is exactly in this way that the Christian Church interprets and understands the fulfilment of the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, which they see as realized in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

This is why prophecies that were already fulfilled in history are equally as important (if not more important) for the Church to understand who she is as prophecies about her eschatological future.

It is necessary, however, in the same breath to add that to compare the significance of these two categories of prophecies is not possible, objectively, because hope in the future is as essential for living as is the knowledge of one's own identity.

I. The Meaning of the Prophecies for the Christian Church

The New Testament considers the birth of the Church as the beginning of the end of the ages. This is why it is one-sided and unbiblical to wait for the transformation of society to happen only in the future, after the second coming of Jesus Christ on Earth. Prophecies are also fulfilled by the transformational effect of the Church in society.

1. The Prophetic Identity of Christianity

The Christian religion was born in the midst of the Old Testament faith, and explained itself from the beginning as the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises and prophecies about the coming Messiah.

Jesus Christ started His teaching by announcing that the “kingdom of Heaven is near” (Matthew 3,2), which was considered as the fulfilment of the prophecy recorded in Isaiah 52,7: “who proclaim good (...) who say to Zion: Your God reigns!”

The Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Philippians (3,3) announces that true Jews are those who serve God rightly; that is every member of the Christian Church. The early Church fought with Judaism about the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament.

The result of this theological battle was named by Jaroslav PELIKAN “correction and fulfilment”². The Church considered itself as the “new Israel” and the one to carry on the history of salvation. THEODORET wrote in the fifth century: “Gather us one by one, Thy new Israel, building up Jerusalem, and gathering together the outcasts of Israel.”³

² PELIKAN Jaroslav, *The Christian Tradition I*. Chicago – London, 1971. 15.

³ *NPNF*. Second Series III. 330.

In the words of the theologian Jürgen MOLTMANN: “By its own utterance, Christian eschatology is not the *Greek* logos, but *promise*, as it was recorded by the language, hope and experience of *Israel*.”⁴ (emphasis added)

For the Church, this meant that the eschatological era had already started. It is not necessary to wait for the distant future; eschatology started to unwind in Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection, and continues in the preaching of the Church.

We can state that the “fulfilment of the age has come” (1Corinthians 10,11). This is a historical point, a so-called “replacement theology”, according to which the Church totally replaced Israel in God’s plan of salvation.⁵

This interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies points to the presence of the Church, and it means the confirmation of the eschatological identity of the Church as God’s foretold work in the history of humankind.

2. Prophecies and Hope for the Future

Apart from the confirmation of the prophetic word, fulfilled prophecies are a source of hope for the Church (2Peter 1,19). In history, hope was valued in various ways; from ARISTOTLE’s “dreams of a vigilant man”, to the philosophical integration of hope forming the true being of humans (Ernst BLOCH).

THUCYDIDES’ cynical mockery made him write the following: “It is a habit of humankind to entrust to careless hope what they long for, and to use sovereign reason to thrust aside what they do not fancy.”⁶

The loss of hope is the height of suffering for humans, which the poet Dante ALIGHIERI poetically expressed in his *Divina Comædia* (Divine Comedy) with a sign above the gates of hell reading: “Abandon all hope, you, who enter here.”

Modern research has shown the significance of hope for mental health, and has uncovered the link between suicide and hopelessness: “In our studies we found that suicidal wishes had a higher correlation with hopelessness than with any other symptom of depression.”⁷ Generally, human wisdom expresses the significance of hope with the phrase “hope is the last to die”.

We can say that Christianity is a religion of hope. In the words of Wolfhart PANNENBERG: “The eschatological salvation at which Christian hope is directed fulfils the deepest longing of humans and all creation, even if there is not always a full awareness of the object of this longing.”⁸

People without faith are described as being “without hope” (Ephesians 2,12). In the New Testament, God is the “God of hope” (Romans 15,13), and hope pointing to a living God is the very motivation for Christian work (1Timothy 4,10).

Hope is directly linked with the person of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1,27), and hope is similar to faith as a means of reaching salvation (Hebrews 3,6; 6,18–19). Jürgen MOLTMANN states that “Christianity is totally and consistently, not only in its addendum (*Anhang*), eschatology; it is hope, pointing and looking ahead, and this is why at the same time it is a reversal (*Aufbruch*) and change (*Wandlung*) of the present.”⁹

Faith in the form of hope awaits the resolving of contradictions, which at present exist between the message of Jesus Christ as ruler, and the reality that he was refused and crucified. “Eschatological existence is existence certain of its future liberation from this contradiction.”¹⁰

Jean CALVIN says: “Promised to us is eternal life, but it is promised to the dead; we are assured of a happy resurrection, but we are as yet involved in corruption; we are pronounced just, as yet sin dwells in us; we hear that we are happy, but we are as yet in the midst of many miseries; an abun-

⁴ MOLTMANN Jürgen, *Theologie der Hoffnung*. München, 1966. 34.

⁵ This is a very sensitive question in current relations of the Church with the state of Israel but it is beyond the purpose of this article to discuss it.

⁶ THUCYDIDES, *Dejiny peloponézskej vojny*. Bratislava, 1985. Chapter XIV.

⁷ BECK Aaron Temkin, *Depression: Causes and Treatment*. In BENNER David G. (ed.), *Baker Encyclopædia of Psychology*. Grand Rapids, 1993. 528.

⁸ PANNENBERG Wolfhart, *Systematic Theology III*. Grand Rapids, 1993. 527.

⁹ MOLTMANN Jürgen, *Theologie der Hoffnung*. München, 1966. 12.

¹⁰ BRUNNER Emil, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation*. Philadelphia, 1962. 343.

dance of all good things is promised to us, but still we often hunger and thirst; God proclaims that God will come quickly, but God seems deaf when we cry to God. What would become of us were we not supported by hope, and did not our minds emerge out of the midst of darkness above the world through the light of God's Word and of God's Spirit? Faith, then, is rightly said to be the subsistence or substance of things, which are as yet the objects of hope and the evidence of things not seen."¹¹

The theology of the XXth century took a very contradictory stand on the problem of eschatological hope. Albert SCHWEITZER commented that "instead of realizing eschatology, (Jesus Christ) destroyed it."¹²

According to Albert SCHWEITZER then, eschatology has been overcome and there is nothing left for Christianity but to give up its hopeful eschatological expectations. Karl BARTH, on the other hand, stressed that it is irreplaceable: "Christianity, which is not entirely, totally, and without odds eschatology, has nothing entirely, totally, and without odds, to do with Jesus Christ."¹³

Jürgen MOLTMANN's central theme of theology became eschatology (a theology of hope), when he replaced the talk of a transcendental God with the concept of a futuristic God, One Who is coming.

Contradictory evaluations on eschatology perfectly solve Ľudovít FAZEKAŠ' claims that "there is always tension between the present beginning and the future finishing, which the New Testament witnesses did not allow to be discarded. Jesus Christ is Lord and yet Jesus Christ is coming."¹⁴

All of these enlisted evaluations can be summarised and drawn together in Wolfhart PANNENBERG's statement that "eschatology (...) determines the perspective of Christian teaching as a whole."¹⁵

3. The Interpretation of Prophecies in History

A consequence of what has been written is that prophecies, as a source of self-understanding for the Church and as a source of eschatological hope, are important subjects for exegesis and historical study.

It is no wonder that in history so many great events happened around the prophecies; many important people in history conducted their lives by their own understanding of the prophecies, as they found the prophecies to relate to the time in which they were living.

It is easily understandable that the Christian Church as a whole agrees on the interpretations of the prophecies as they relate to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The differences in the prophetic schemas come out in the attempts to foretell the future using the prophecies.

These interpretations about future events usually divide up according to the Millennium (the thousand year reign of Jesus Christ, Revelations 20) into (1) amillennialism, (2) postmillennialism, (3) classical premillennialism and (4) dispensational premillennialism.¹⁶

A. The Church Fathers

"*Premillennialism* was probably the dominant millennial view during the early period of the Church."¹⁷ It was a chiliastic opinion, according to which at the end of the present era the suffering of the Church comes to a catastrophic breaking point, after which Jesus Christ's Reign will be installed.

In the fifth century, AUGUSTINE opposed this opinion with the doctrine that the Millennium is the age of the Church and proclaiming the Gospel; therefore the Reign of God is on Earth. This opinion is sometimes named as *amillennial*, and was generally accepted during the whole of the middle ages.

¹¹ CALVIN Jean, *Hebrews Commentary*. In AGES Digital Library. Albany, 1996. 11,1.

¹² SCHWEITZER Albert, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*. Berlin, 1906. 367. Quoted in MOLTMANN Jürgen, *Theologie der Hoffnung*. München, 1966. 33.

¹³ BARTH Karl, *Römerbrief*. Zürich, 1989. 325.

¹⁴ FAZEKAŠ Ľudovít, *Ježiš Pán. Zrod a rast Kristovho panstva v Novej zmluve*. Banská Bystrica, 2001. 10.

¹⁵ PANNENBERG Wolfhart, *Systematic Theology III*. Grand Rapids, 1993. 531.

¹⁶ GRUDEM Wayne, *Systematic Theology*. Leicester, 1994. 1109–1114.

¹⁷ ERICKSON Millard. J., *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids, 1994. 1209.

B. The Reformation

The main theme of the Reformation era was soteriology, and eschatological notes were restricted mainly to the refusal of the chiliastic sects, which came out of criticism of the Roman Catholic Church.

For example, the *Confessio Augustana* condemns “others also, who now scatter Jewish opinions, that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall occupy the kingdom of the world, the wicked being everywhere suppressed. The saints alone, the pious, shall have a worldly kingdom, and shall exterminate all the godless.”¹⁸

C. Revivalism

Daniel WHITBY, an Anglican theologian (1638–1726), is linked with the doctrines of *postmillennialism*. According to this, although the Millennium is of the future, it will be reached by a series of events, by which the principles of the Reign of God will be brought about in the life of society.

Postmillennialism corresponded with the optimistic expectations of the golden age. It was on the side of the advancement of enlightenment philosophy, and on the side of triumphal revivalism.

The return to the *premillennial* interpretations of the prophecies after the Reformation can claim such names as Johann Albrecht BENGEL (1687–1752) and the physicist and mathematician Isaac NEWTON (1643–1727).

D. Dispensationalism

A new element in the development of thinking after the Reformation was the birth of *dispensational premillennialism*, linked with the name John Nelson DARBY (1800–1882), which was made popular by means of the *Scofield Bible*.

The term *dispensation* is the translation of the Greek word (*oikonomia*). For dispensationalism, this word expresses the variety of God’s works in different eras in the history of salvation (for example, the age of law or the age of grace).

The most striking attributes of this system of interpretation are the literal interpretations of the prophecies, the futuristic and literal understanding of the Millennium: that the Church will be caught up (1Thessalonians 4,17) before the age of great suffering (lasting seven years), and the differentiation between the Church and Israel in the history of salvation.

Supporters of this interpretation were well known names such as Dwight L. MOODY (1837–1899), Reuben Archer TORREY (1856–1928), and Billy GRAHAM (1918–). One of the critics of dispensationalism states that it was “if not the backbone, at least much of the bony structure of American theological conservatism for the past hundred years.”¹⁹

“The number of American premillenarians may be conservatively estimated at eight million. Of the over twelve million Southern Baptists more than half may be counted as premillenarians, and the largest entirely premillenarian denomination, the Assemblies of God, lists over a million followers.”²⁰

In the second half of the twentieth century, this “prophetic schema” was propagated by such popular books as *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal LINDSEY. This book sold over twenty million copies, and the author was named the best-selling author of the 1970’s by the New York Times (NYT).

Other popular book titles include the following examples: *What the World is Coming to*²¹ by Chuck SMITH; or the book *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*²² by John WALVOORD.

Amongst Slovak evangelicals this interpretation of the future (with the rapture of the Church, the seven year suffering of the Jews, the Antichrist in the newly built temple, and the Millennium at

¹⁸ *The Augsburg Confession*. Art. XVII. In SCHAFF Philip (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. II. Vol. 3. (*Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches*). Peabody, 1994. 18.

¹⁹ GERSTNER John H., *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*. Morgan, 2000. 36.

²⁰ WILSON Dwight, *Armageddon Now*. Tyler, 1991. 12.

²¹ WEBER Eugen, *Apokalypsy*. Praha, 1999. 204.

²² Printed in 1974, the author revised it and the new edition is 1990. WILSON Dwight, *Armageddon Now*. Tyler, 1991. x.

the end of the seven years of suffering) was made popular through books and Biblical schemas (Biblical Panorama), and today, through films about the rapture.

Total denial of this interpretation is equally as irresponsible as to accept it without criticism and spread it around. A student of prophecies should surely first recognize the weaknesses of dispensationalism, before he declares it as unavoidable Biblical truth.

II. Journey to the Transformation of Society

1. The Prophetic Role of the Messiah

The dispensationalist, Dwight PENTECOST, presents fifty-nine Old Testament texts, which, according to the dispensational interpretation, speak about the future theocratic (Millennial) kingdom.²³

As this interpretation is controversial, we shall go through a rather short paradigmatical analysis of those prophecies, according to which the Messiah changes human society. We will start from the prophetic role of the Messiah as the *Servant of the Lord* (according to the songs about the Servant of the Lord) and *King of Israel* (according to the Kingship Psalms).

It is necessary to stress that the individual attributes of the Messiah's approach cannot be separated. In spite of this, we can see that the task of the Messiah as the *Servant of the Lord* says more about His work of salvation in the present, while His role as *King of Israel* expresses the righteous rule of the coming Anointed King.

Messianic prophecies about the Servant of the Lord are found in the so-called "songs of the Servant of the Lord". Karol NANDRÁSKY presents the following places: Isaiah 42,1–4; 49,1–6; 50,4–9; 52,13–53,12; 61,1–3.²⁴

The Royal (Kingship) Psalms²⁵ are these: 2; 18; 20; 21; 72; 101; 110; 132; 144,1–11. These texts could be supplemented by others, because the academic discussion is still not closed. Restricted attention to these texts could help to find the widest evangelical consensus.

An exegesis of these mentioned texts would take up more room than allowed here. The result of a thematic analysis according to the most important themes of the above texts is as follows:

<i>Theme</i>	<i>The Kingship Psalms</i>	<i>Songs of the Servant of the Lord</i>
Spirit of the Lord		42,1; 61,1
Proclamation, speech, word		49,2; 50,4; 52,15; 61,1
Suffering, substitutional death		50,6; 53
Salvation	20,6; 21,2–8; 72,12–14; 144,10	49,6
Justice	72,1–2; 101,1	42,3–4
God's wrath	2,5; 18,8	
Victory over the ungodly, and punishment	2,9; 18,15; 21,9–13; 72,4; 101,8; 110,1–5; 132,18	
Peace	72,7	

2. The Main Elements of the Transformation of Society

We can see from this short analysis of the texts that the aim of the Messiah's works in human society is *salvation* and *justice*, joint themes for the psalms and songs. These two concepts can be considered as the central idea behind the Messianic transformation.

²³ PENTECOST Dwight, *Things to Come*. Grand Rapids, 1977. 442.

²⁴ NANDRÁSKY Karol, *Ebed Jahve*. Bratislava, 1995. 5–6.

²⁵ HEMPEL Johannes, *The Book of Psalms*. In BUTTRICK G. A. (ed.), *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary III*. Nashville, 1985. 947.

A. Salvation

Salvation is the manifestation of the Messiah's help to the weak, poor and oppressed. We know that above all it is God showing God's love to people in distress. An important reality is that the Messianic transformation of society starts with those who are *reliant on the help of others*.

In this way the ideal goal is not individual prosperity and abundance, but compassion, fellowship of humans with God, and solidarity amongst people. People who are successful and economically strong are led by the Messiah's example not to oppress the poor, but to take a serious interest in the problems of the weak. They should see their possessions as an opportunity to fulfil the Messiah's calling to compassion.

B. Justice

The Messianic transformation of society might start with the poor, but under no circumstances does it mean bringing force against the rich. The poor, who are reliant on the help of others, are *humble* and *godly* and are therefore obedient to the Torah.

They are not rebels prepared to seize the possessions of the rich, and the Messiah is not the leader of an angry proletariat. Justice in the Messiah's transformed society is the same for all. Impartial judgment is one of the basic signs of the Messianic society.

By joining together compassion and righteousness, the Messianic transformation becomes a paradigm for our attempts to achieve a prosperous and just society. Long explanations are not needed for it to be clear that these two values do not easily merge in one transformation process, and if they are to come together, we first need to change that human attitude, which the Bible calls the *heart of man*.

3. The Messiah's Approach to the Transformation of Society

A. Word and Spirit

From the analysis of texts we can see that the Servant of the Lord achieves the transformation of society by the power of the Spirit of God and by God's Word (Isaiah 50,4). God's Word concentrates on salvation and justice by means of proclamation (Isaiah 61,1).

If this proclamation is to be really effective, it requires most of all faith and a willing obedience from the receivers. As this only occurs in part, the servant of the Lord suffers from rejection (Isaiah 50,6).

But, in spite of this, God's Word becomes salvation for people in the whole world (Isaiah 49,6), and the result of the suffering of God's Word is the justification of sinners (Isaiah 53,11) and the joy of the righteous from salvation (Isaiah 61,3).

From these findings we see that the work of the Servant of the Lord leads to a *transformation of inner attitudes* and to a *righteousness based on the forgiveness of sins*. Liberation is aimed above all at the problem of disobedience towards God: sin. The extent of the transformation of society is, therefore, dependent on the number of followers of the Messiah and their influence on society.

B. Conflict and Punishment

The anointed Messianic King achieves the transformation of society by victory over God's enemy (Psalms 2,9) and by installing Messianic peace (Psalm 72,3.7). His work does not lie in proclaiming and sacrifice, as with the Servant of the Lord, but in the powerful abolition of injustice (Psalm 101:8).

The Messiah-King rules from Zion (Psalm 2,6; 20,3; 110,2) over foreign nations also (Psalm 18,44, Psalm 72,11), and the Lord's enemies are destroyed (Psalm 21,11). Messianic peace will bring with it joy and abundance (Psalm 72,16). It is obvious that the Messiah's actions, in this way, are still in the future.

4. Messianic Prophecies and the Activity of the Church

The realization of these roles of the Messiah is also based on the New Testament view of the Church as the Body of Christ, in which the Messiah at the same time realizes His work in the world. In this sense, then, what can we really expect about the activity of the Church in society?

First of all, it is imperative to stress that the kingdom role of the Messiah is also a subject of eschatological expectation and voluntary following. In history, when the Church had sufficient influence and opportunity, she quite often gave in to the temptation to use power to install righteousness.

Efforts to make following Jesus Christ compulsory by means of state laws always failed miserably and tragically compromised the Church. This way of government must remain a subject of eschatological faith for the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Church, therefore, as a Servant of the Lord, should give the kind of service in which the only power used is of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel.

Does this mean that the Church must not take any part in social and political life, and not even take an interest in righteous legislation? In the past there have been, on principle, negative answers to this question given, for example, by the Anabaptists.

But historical research shows that if the Church stops taking an interest in political and social problems and stops expressing its views on them, than it easily stops being society's conscience. Its message is thus directed at a different world and stops being relevant in the present world.

Avoiding the driving forces of world power (politicians, the army, the police) should not mean that the Church does not speak about these problems. But, actually, the Church should concentrate on what results from an analysis of the Messiah's works.

Namely, she must concentrate on stressing universal help to the weak and impartial justice leading to a peaceful life. Messianic power in the Spirit, in principle, does not stand *against* worldly power, but it *complements* it and even *transforms* it.

Suggested Reading

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