

Messianic prophecies on the transformation of human society

by Pavel Hanes

Summary

Prophecies about the transformation of societies are at the same time promises for the future and commands for the present. They are promises about the eschatological era in which “the Messiah puts everything in order”. However, this does not mean that they are not meant to be an inspiration for the church as the body of Christ and that it should not expect the proclamation of the Gospel to bring changes even though they will only come in full in the eschatological time.

Introduction

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

The method which I shall use could be called “a paradigmatic analysis”. The paradigm, structure or model which I shall use 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 fulfillment, talk about God’s values which he expects from man and society and, according to the prophecies, safeguards in the end.

This is in 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 is not contravening the time limits of the prophecies or denying that the Biblical prophecies foretell the future - in some cases 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.

Two extremes

The interpretation of the prophecies, in church history, led to the start of many chiliastic movements. During general times of danger or momentous social changes it especially became the source of fiery interpretations which in an “eschatological sense” colored actual historical situations and particular historical characters. “Knowing the result

influences the conditions and way of approaching it”¹ is a statement which well represents the motives that led mankind to endeavor 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 chiliastic movements and sects led Christian theologians to endeavor to rationalize Christian teaching and to almost “leave out” eschatology. Eschatology remains as part of the Christian confession, in the same way as the canon of Scripture includes John’s Apocalypse at the end, but not much is spoken about it. Leaving out eschatology eliminates the controversies between various interpretations, and also avoids the fear, which 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” – we just need to find the right key to their interpretation. The second claims that prophecies cannot in any way be related to actual situations in the world - this approach is a negative reaction to the many mistaken interpretations of the past.

The kingdom of God according to prophecy

In answer to the disciples’ question about the renewal of the kingdom of Israel, Jesus 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. In our present situation, when the church has the opportunity to influence the making of state laws - a situation which may not last long - part of evangelism becomes what the prophet Micah reminded the leaders of Israel: “Should you not know justice?” (Mic. 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 what is righteousness and justice.

The study of Messianic prophecies helps to bring to us a knowledge of righteousness and justice as the Messiah desires to realize it today through the church, and how he will realize it 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. We probably need to stress that under no circumstances can this realization of righteousness and justice by the church be an attempt to fulfill 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 fulfilling of all the prophecies is left open.

Prophecies about the present and future

It is also necessary to observe that interpretations of the prophecies cannot focus only on the future foretold in them. In spite of the fact that it is not for us to know the times and seasons, Jesus nevertheless expects us to be able to discern the signs of the times when they happen (Matt. 16:3; 24:33). It is exactly in this way that the Christian church interprets the fulfilling of the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, which they see

¹ WEBER, E., *Apokalypsy*, Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1999, p. 6.

as realized in Jesus of Nazareth. This is why prophecies already fulfilled in history are equally important (if not more important) for the church to understand who she is, than are prophecies about her eschatological future. However, it is necessary in the same breath to add that 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 knowing one's own identity.

1. 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 Christ on earth). Prophecies are also fulfilled by the transformational effect of the church in society.

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 started his teaching by announcing that “the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt: 3:2), which was considered as the fulfilment of the prophecy recorded in Is. 52:7 (“...who proclaim good....who say to Zion: Your God reigns!”). The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians announces that the true Jews (by circumcision) are those who serve God rightly (Phil. 3:3) – 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 J.Pelikan “correction and fulfillment”². The church considered itself as the “new Israel”³ and the one to carry on the history of salvation. In the words of 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 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' life, death and resurrection, and continues in the preaching of the church.

We can state that the “fulfillment of the age has come” (1Cor. 10:11). This interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies points to the presence of the church and means the confirmation of the eschatological identity of the church as God's foretold work in the history of mankind.⁵

Prophecies and hope for the future

Apart from confirmation of the prophetic word, fulfilled prophecies are a source of hope for the church (2 Pet. 1:19). In history, hope was valued in various ways; from Aristotle's

² PELIKAN, J., *The Christian Tradition I.*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971, p. 15.

³ Theodoret wrote in the fifth century: “Gather us one by one, Thy new Israel, building up Jerusalem and gathering together the outcasts of Israel.” (*NPNF*, Second series, Vol 3 p. 330)

⁴ Moltmann, J., *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966, p. 34.

⁵ This is a historical point so called replacement theology, according to which the church totally replaced Israel in God's plan of salvation. This is also an important personal question for the political stance of a Christian towards Israel but it is not the subject of this paper.

“dreams of a vigilant man”, to cynical mockery (Thucydides⁶), to the philosophical integration of hope forming the true being of man (E. Bloch). The loss of hope is the height of suffering for man, which the poet Dante poetically expressed in his *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 hopelessness⁷. Generally, human wisdom expresses the significance of hope with the phrase “hope is the last to die”.

We can say about Christianity that it is a religion of hope. In the words of W. Pannenberg “The eschatological salvation at which Christian hope is directed fulfills 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” (Eph. 2:12). In the New Testament, God is “the God of hope” (Rom. 15:13), and hope pointing to a living God is the very motivation for Christian work (1Tim. 4:10). Hope is directly linked with the person of Christ (Col. 1:27) and hope is similar to faith as a means of reaching salvation (Heb. 3:6; 6:18-19). 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 Christ as ruler and the reality that he was refused and crucified.¹⁰ “Eschatological existence is existence certain of its future liberation from this contradiction.”¹¹

The theology of the 20th century took a very contradictory stand on the problem of eschatological hope. A. Schweitzer commented that “instead of realizing eschatology, (Jesus) destroyed it”.¹² According to Schweitzer then, eschatology has been overcome and there is nothing left for Christianity but to give up its hopeful eschatological expectations. K. 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

⁶ It is a habit of mankind to entrust to careless hope what they long for, and to use sovereign reason to thrust aside what they do not fancy. E.g. see THUCYDIDES, *History of the peloponesian wars (in Slovak language)*, Bratislava: Tatran, 1985, ch. XIV.

⁷ “In our studies we found that suicidal wishes had a higher correlation with hopelessness than with any other symptom of depression.” (Beck, A. T. *Depression: Causes and treatment*. Benner, D. G.(ed.), *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 1993, p. 528)

⁸ Pannenberg, W., *Systematic Theology III.*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, p. 527.

⁹ Moltmann, J., *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966, p. 12.

¹⁰ 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 abundance of all good things is promised to us, but still we often hunger and thirst; God proclaims that he will come quickly, but he seems deaf when we cry to him. 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 his 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.“ (Calvin, J., *Hebrews Commentary*. In *AGES Digital Library*, Albany: Ages Software, 1996, 11:1)

¹¹ Brunner, E., *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962, p. 343.

¹² Schweitzer, A., *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, p. 367 (printed 1906). Quoted in: Moltmann, J., *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966, p. 33.

odds, to do with Christ“¹³. Jürgen Multan’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 Fazekas’s 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 is Lord and yet Jesus is coming...”¹⁴ All of these evaluations can be drawn together in Pannenberg’s statement that “eschatology ... determines the perspective of Christian teaching as a whole.”¹⁵

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 an important subject for exegesis and historical study. It is no wonder that in history so many great events happened around them and that many important people in history conducted their lives by their own understanding of the prophecies as, according to them, they related 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. 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 Christ, Rev 20), into (1) amillennialism, (2) postmillennialism, (3) classical premillennialism and (4) dispensational premillennialism.¹⁶

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 era the suffering of the church comes to a catastrophic breaking point after which 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 and therefore the Kingdom of God is on earth. This opinion is sometimes named as amillennial and was generally accepted during the whole of the middle ages.

The Reformation

The main theme of the Reformation was soteriology, and eschatological notes were restricted to 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

¹³ Barth, K., *Römerbrief*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1989, p. 325.

¹⁴ Fazekas, L., *Jesus the Lord (in Slovak language)*, Banská Bystrica: ZEC, 2001 p. 10.

¹⁵ Pannenberg, W., *Systematic Theology III*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, p. 531. (I leave aside the discussion on the problem of weak emphasis on historical events in the Christian message due to the “futuristic“ approach towards Christian theology in Pannenberg and Moltmann.

¹⁶ Grudem, W., *Systematic Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 1994, p. 1109 – 1114.

¹⁷ Erickson, M. J., *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994, p. 1209.

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

Revivalism

The name of 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 Kingdom 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 J. A. Bengel (1687 - 1752) and the physicist and mathematician, Isaac Newton.

Dispensationalism

A new element in the development of thinking after the Reformation was the birth of dispensational¹⁹ premillennialism, linked with the name J. N. Darby (1800 - 1882), which was made popular by means of the *Scofield Bible with notes*. The most striking attributes of this system of interpretation are the literal interpretation of the prophecies, the futuristic and literal understanding of the Millennium - that the church will be caught up (1 Thess 4:17) before the age of great suffering (lasting 7 years) - and the differentiation between the church and Israel in the history of salvation. Supporters of this interpretation were well known names such as D. L. Moody (1837 - 1899), R. A. 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”.²⁰ In the second half of the twentieth century this “prophetic schema” was propagated by such popular books as *The Late Great Planet Earth*²¹ (Hal Lindsey), *What the World is Coming To* (Chuck Smith) or *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*²² (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 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 to spread it around.

¹⁸ The Augsburg Confession Art. XVII. In Schaff, P. (ed.), *Nicene and Post-nicene Fathers II*, Vol. 3: *Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994, p. 18.

¹⁹ The term dispensation is the translation of the Greek word (oivkonomia). For dispensationalism this word expresses the variety of God’s works in different eras in the history of salvation (e.g. age of the law, age of grace).

²⁰ Gerstner, J. H., *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000, p. 36. (“The number of American premillennarians may be conservatively estimated at eight million. Of the over twelve million Southern Baptists more than half may be counted as premillennarians, and the largest entirely premillennarian denomination, the Assemblies of God, lists over a million followers.” Wilson, D., *Armageddon Now!*, Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991, p. 12)

²¹ This book sold over 20 million copies. The author was named the best-selling author of the 1970’s by the New York Times. (WEBER, E., *Apokalypsy*, Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1999, p. 204.)

²² Printed in 1974, the author revised it and the new edition is 1990. (Wilson, D., *Armageddon Now!*, Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991, p x)

A student of prophecies should surely first recognize the weaknesses of dispensationalism before he declares it as unavoidable biblical truth.

JOURNEYS TO THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

The Prophetic role of the Messiah

The dispensationalist, D. 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 paradigmatic analysis of those prophecies, according to which the Messiah changes human society. I 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 Slave (servant) of the Lord are found in the so called "songs of the Servant of the Lord". Nandrasky presents the following places:²⁴ Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-3. The Royal (Kingship) Psalms are these:²⁵ 2; 18; 20; 21; 72; 101; 110; 132; 144:1-11.²⁶ An exegesis of these texts would take up more room than we could be 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 about 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 and 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	

The main elements of the transformation of society

²³ Pentecost, D., *Things to Come*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977, p. 442.

²⁴ Nandrasky, K., *Ebed Jahve*, Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, 1995, p. 5-6.

²⁵ Hempel, P., The Book of Psalms. In Buttrick, G. A. (ed.), *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary III.*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985, p. 947.

²⁶ These texts could be supplemented by others because the academic discussion is still not closed. Restricted attention to these texts should help to find the widest evangelical consensus.

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.

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 his love to people in distress but, as long as we are talking about the transformation of society, an important reality is that the *Messianic transformation of society starts with those who are reliant on the help of others*. This way the ideal goal is not individual prosperity and abundance, but compassion, fellowship of man 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 fulfill the Messiah's calling to compassion.

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*.

The Messiah's approach to the transformation of society

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 his Word (Is. 50:4). His work concentrates on salvation and justice by means of proclamation (Is. 61:1). If this proclamation is to be effective it requires faith and a willing obedience from the receivers. As this only occurs in part, the servant of the Lord suffers from rejection (Is. 50:6), but in spite of this he becomes salvation for people in the whole world (Is. 49:6) and the result of his suffering is the justification of sinners (Is. 53:11) and the joy of the righteous from salvation (Is. 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.

Conflict and punishment

The anointed Messianic king achieves the transformation of society by victory over God's enemy (Ps. 2:9) and by installing Messianic peace (Ps. 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 (Ps. 101:8). The Messiah-King rules from Zion (Ps. 2:6; 20:3; 110:2) over foreign nations too (Ps. 18:44, Ps. 72:11) and the Lord's enemies are destroyed (Ps 21:11). Messianic peace will bring with it joy and abundance (Ps. 72:16). It is obvious that the Messiah's actions, in this way, are still in the future.

Messianic prophecies and the activity of the church

The realization of these roles of the Messiah is at the same time based on the New Testament view of the church as the body of Christ (Messiah), in which the Messiah at the same time realizes his work in the world. In this sense, then, what can we expect from the activity of the church in society?

First of all it is imperative to stress that the kingdom role of the Messiah is at the same time a subject of eschatological expectation and voluntary following. In history, when the church had sufficient influence and opportunity it quite often gave in to the temptation to use power to install righteousness. Efforts to make following Christ compulsory by means of state laws always failed miserably and the church tragically compromised. 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 where the only power used is the power 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 (e.g. Anabaptism). But historical research shows that if the church stops taking an interest in political and social problems, and stops expressing its views on them, it easily stops being society's conscience and its message is so directed at a different world that it stops being relevant. Avoiding the driving forces of world power (e.g. politicians, the army, the police) should not mean that the church does not speak to these problems. But, actually, the church should concentrate on what results from an analysis of the Messiah's works, namely, 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.

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