

FORTHTELLING, FORETELLING, & THE FUTURE

In my hearing a few days ago, an honorable preacher said "I tell my people Jesus was wrong" in predicting a soon end to history (in Mark 9.1). "Wrong in details, right in direction," was my reply. Let's see....

1 "Prophecy" being a transliteration from Greek & Latin; & the Latin being a transliteration from the Greek (with no significant changes of meaning), we go to Greek--where we find that "-phesy" means "speak" & "pro-" can mean "in front of" (of place), "beforehand" (of time), or "forth" (intensive, as in the ugly neologism "pro-active"). The ancient-&-modern Hebrew parallel root is "nb'," meannig "speak or sing by [divine] inspiration." Our biblical Greek & Latin being colored by the underlying Hebrew, we get the commonest English meaning of the prophet as one who speaks "forth for & on behalf of God."

Why this language-note? It's a way of setting forth the negative fact that foretelling (predicting, prognosticating, forecasting) is not the primary meaning of "prophecy/prophet" in the Bible, & accordingly is not the primary lens through which the Bible's prophets--including Jesus--should be viewed.

Legitimate extrapolation: A biblical prophet's prophecy may be fundamentally right (in intention [to speak for God] & in direction [to envisage God's ultimate victory]) but be wrong in the details of how ^{to} get there (the End, Eschaton, "the Kingdom of God") from here. *The rightness is major, the wrongness is minor.*

2 Further, the rightness is so powerfully impressive that the wrongness is barely noticeable. Michael Jackson's basketball performance was so awesome fans scarcely observed his occasional slip-ups. Another figure: The hungry separate out the inedibles & go for the food.

3 Further, the inedibles (the failed foretellings) are comparatively few & forgotten. We Jews & Christians remember that Jeremiah was right: Jerusalem was destroyed (though only after it survived several times when he thought it wouldn't). He was right: the Jews returned to Jerusalem (though not in his foretold 70 years but in 70 *weeks of years*: in Dan.9, contrast vs.2 [70 years] with vs.24 [an additional 420 years!]). But since both of Jeremiah's major foretellings--the exodus & the return--came true, their category is not "failed" but "delayed" foretellings.

What's in the category of "failed foretellings"? Very little. The royal (Davidic-supportive) prophets, in the Near-Mid Eastern "May the king live forever!" style, predicted that the Davidic dynasty would prove perpetual (e.g., Is.9.7 TEV: "from now until the end of time") on the model of Yahweh's royal rule (e.g., Lam.5.19; "the Son" as king, Heb.1.8). Hardly forever: the Davidic dynasty could be stretched to only less than a half millenium (1,000-586 BC/BCE). But when Jesus inherited David's shoes, Christians experienced the two "forever"-kingship prophecies as ful-filled in (a phrase of Wm.Placher) "two whats (Jesus' divine & human natures) and a who (Jesus the incarnate Son of God)." The messianic prophets were wrong in their envisionings (of how & who) but right in their hope (of a divine provision & protection of "the Kingdom"): (as I put it in this Thinksheet's second sentence) "wrong in details, right in direction." Of course nonChristian Jews reject as merely metaphoric the Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah (& so exhausts, empties, the category of messianic expectation, which for most Jews continues to have some content [paralleled in Christianity by the parousia, the "second coming"])).

4 The pawn of successive empires, Israel-Judah gradually lost belief in the phetic historical-continuity messianic hope & transposed it to the apocalyptic trans-historical-discontinuity vision (from 2nd-c.BC/BCE Daniel onward). Straddling these paradigms, Jesus preached non-violent resistance to the powers that be & courageous life to welcome the incoming-oncoming Power that both is & will be. Oddly (?), one of his disciples (a "Zealot") believed in violent resistance to the Roman hegemony, a strategy which died at Masada (AD/CE 76). Another party (the Sadducees) compromised enough to keep the Temple religion alive and well (&, as this-worldly disbelievers in the resurrection, were distinguished from the Pharisees [including Jesus] in their synagogues). Finally, among the major parties, the Qumran sectaries believed that messiah would come when the full cup of radical obedience (such as they practiced) was filled. All the messianic question's answers were in 1st-c. action.

Herod? The diametrical of Jesus, Herod saw no Jewish future except within the Roman future: Jesus forthtold/foretold the future as a divine gift for which only repentance & faith could prepare one, a future somehow already present in him (& of which, to that extent, he was himself his forthtelling's realization & his foretelling's fulfillment).

5 Tim LaHaye & the LEFT BEHIND best-sellers, in their detailed knowledge of the future, have made an advance on Jesus, who (it must seem to such futurists) is surprisingly disinterested in the future's details ("only the Father" knows the future [Mt.24.36; also, Ac.1.7]). Jesus' order of interest was who/what/when: **who** (the future's center is God), **what** (the future will see God's "will...done on earth as it is in heaven"), **when** ("only the Father" knows, so it can't be important that we speculate/predict). If he was somewhat wrong about "when," the wrongness was thus only at the third level of importance. The interpreter of an oracle can be wrong, as was the defeated king who had asked the Pythia at Delphi whether he would win the battle & was told "A great king will fall": he thought the orade meant the opposing king. The diviner of entrails or the sky can be wrong: if the prediction is wrong, don't blame the disemboweled animal or the protean sky. And don't blame God when a usually reliable reader of "the signs of the times" misreads. Our trajectories past-through-present-to-future can do not more than feel toward tomorrows now only dimly glimpsable....

6so that's one biblical response to apparently unfulfilled prophecies: in his own wisdom, God has not disclosed to us the future's details (such as time-when), so he thinks either that it's unimportant that we know or important that we not know --so no sweat if prophets, while succeeding in forthtelling, sometimes fail at foretelling. A **second** response is that the time senses, God's & ours, are different: "There is no difference in the Lord's sight between one day and a thousand years" (2P.3.8 TEV--in specific reply to doubters of the Second Coming; another aspect being God's reluctance to destroy his enemies, & therefore delay of the "fire" [vs.7]; he "wants all to turn away from their sins" [vs.9]). And a **third** response is so thoroughly to believe that all prophetic-apocalyptic foretellings come true that some foretellings are used to fill in the details of ful-fill-ments (a process scholars call "vaticinium ex eventu" [prophecy from outcome] when in reverse, viz., the details known & the prophecy assumed---but it's rare in either direction).

7 **Jesus** believed that "The right time has come, and the kingdom of God is near" (M.1.15 TEV; NRSV, "has come near" mg. "is at hand"). Some in his presence would live to see the kingdom come "with power" (9.1; 13.30 [NRSV: "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place"]); compare Mt.10.23: "you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel [in fleeing your persecutors] before the Son of Man comes"). Further on M.9.1:

(1) What occasioned this Thinksheet was a pastor's asking about the 1st vs. of Mark 9 (as I noted in small type after the title). We're bothered by a Jesus saying (dominical logion) we may have to judge as wrong, but the ancients weren't: The verse isn't commented on in the Mark volume of ANCIENT CHRISTIAN COMMENTARY ON SCRIPTURE (InterVarsity/98). B.H.Branscomb (THE GOSPEL OF M., H&B/nd, 159) says it's "doubtful if He formulated any such exact chronology," but "a later teacher" may have sharpened the saying "to encourage a generation whose faith in the coming of the End was beginning to waver."

(2) The promise of soon victory is the last vs. (Mt.16.28; M.9.1; L.9.27) of a discourse-section on the cost of discipleship, & it's "on message": the cost will be worth it! M.'s chapter-divider, by cutting the promise off from the section & thus making it head the transfiguration story, showed he saw the latter as the fulfillment of the promise. Very commonly, early interpreters saw Easter as the fulfillment; some so saw Pentecost (the gift of the Spirit), the spread of the gospel, or the fall of Jerusalem. But if Jesus' prediction was as definite as M.9.1, why would not the bereaved disciples have been expectant (rather than depressed) between the cross & the resurrection? C.F.D.Moule convinced me that M.9.1 is a trajectory from Transfiguration to Resurrection to Parousia (Return, Second Coming).

(3) Possible is C.H.Dodd's "realized eschatology" view that the disciples will soon come to see that the kingdom of God, in Jesus, has come "with power." But he allows it may be an incarnation-underlining error: human imperfection.