

A RESPONSE TO VATICINIUM EX EVENTU

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Introduction

There is no denying that the landscape of Scriptural truth is covered with prophecy from both the Old and New Testaments. Hundreds of prophecies have been fulfilled and yet many hundreds more await fulfillment. Since these fulfilled prophecies lend such strong evidence to the veracity to the claims of the Bible as well as to those of Jesus Christ Himself, many of the enemies of the cross have sought to silent these witnesses and to put an end to their testimony of the powerful hand of God acting in human history.

There are many ways in which modern critics have sought to denigrate the claims of prophecy. One way in which radical critics attempt to silence the word of biblical prophets is by stating that later writers invented the fulfillment of a prophecy that they knew about, in effect manufacturing the fulfillment so as to make it coincide with the prophecy made long before. With this argument, there is no denying that the prophecy was made before the fulfillment. The critic claims that the actual fulfillment never occurred except in the mind of some devout writer who sought to give credence to the prophecy by writing a fictional account of its fulfillment as if it had occurred. This is the explanation that J. M. Creed gives for the fulfillment of Psalm 22:18 (the soldiers casting lots for Jesus' garments) as fulfilled in Luke 23:34.¹ This in spite of the fact that Luke

¹ J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to Saint Luke* (London: McMillan, 1957), 287.

states in his prologue that he set out to put together a carefully investigated account based upon eyewitnesses. The liberal sweeps all of this under the rug and discounts the prophetic fulfillment with very little explanation.

Another argument used by the critic to deny fulfilled prophecy also does not deny the fact that the prophecy was made much earlier, but that the fulfillment was staged to coincide with the words of the prophet. Some critics point to issues such as Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday" (Matt 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-38) as a carefully staged response to what He knew was a prophecy (Zech 9:9). Jesus desired to be seen as the Messiah of the Old Testament, so He acted in a way that would give the Passover pilgrims that impression.² This interpretation discounts the fact that if Jesus is who He claimed to be, then His acting according to the prophecy, even knowingly, was entirely appropriate and not deceptive. It would only be deceptive if He were not in fact the Messiah spoken of in the prophecy. Knowing or not knowing of the prophecy does not negate its validity alone.

Other desperate acts for explaining away fulfilled prophecy involve calling fulfilled prophecy "coincidence" or stating that the prophecy is so vague that it could have been fulfilled in many ways because of its obscure wording.

The topic of this paper is to respond to the critic's use of *vaticinium ex eventu* as a valid reason for discounting prophecies as impossibilities. *Vaticinium ex eventu* is the Latin term used by critics to refer to a written prophecy that appears to be written before the actual event (and thus is genuine) but which was in actuality really written after the

² Hugh J. Shonfeld, *The Passover Plot* (New York: Bernard Geis, 1965), 119.

event occurred and is therefore a farce.³ The use of *vaticinium ex eventu*⁴ usually assumes a rationalistic or anti-supernatural presupposition as a starting point. Predictive prophecies (especially those of such great detail as in certain portions of the Bible) are not a possibility; hence there must be a rational way of explaining their occurrence and apparent fulfillment. For the critic appealing to *VEE*, he must re-date the writings of the prophets to a later date that is close enough to its fulfillment so that he can claim that the “prophet” was, at best, merely a keen observer who could foresee the events that were to soon unfold, or at worst, was a simple deceiver who meant to mislead his readers into believing that someone else wrote the prophecy years earlier and that it was now being fulfilled in their presence. Such is the case with a wide range of prophecies, most notably in Daniel.

The book of Daniel has been a favorite of liberal critics because it is filled with such exact prophecies that they reason that there can be no possible explanation for their accuracy other than the later writing of Daniel (by an author other than Daniel). Gleason Archer notes in his response to the modern rationalists claims against Daniel that the attitudes of such critics has been that:

Revealed prediction by a supernatural God was completely out of the question so far as these rationalists were concerned. All apparently successful prediction had to be explained as *vaticinium ex eventu* (“prophecy after the event”). According to this view, no attention should be given to the arguments of Bible-believing

³ F. B. Huey and Bruce Corley, “*Vaticinium ex eventu*,” in *A Student’s Dictionary for Biblical and Theological Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1983), 196; M. E. Manton, “*Vaticinium ex eventu*,” in *A Dictionary of Theological Terms* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1996), 122.

⁴ *VEE* hereafter.

scholars, no matter how learned they might be, for genuine predictive prophecy was a sheer impossibility. Ever since 1806 the rationalist school of biblical criticism has been content to restrict their reading to the works of one another. They have felt no need of working out any serious refutation of evidence advanced by conservative scholarship. They only mention such authors in order to scoff them away.⁵

It is curious to find such an attitude in anyone who would bill themselves as a “liberal scholar”, since a “liberal” is supposed to be one who is open-minded and a “scholar” is supposed to be one who is in search of the truth. Yet the attitude in the above quote by Archer shows that liberal scholars are not in search of the truth, but are committed to another agenda. In order to properly respond to the liberal critics’ appeal to *VEE*, I would like to address two issues in the form of two questions that I hope will get to the heart of the underlying agenda of liberal critics who deny the supernatural work of God through His prophets. First is the question of presuppositions, or what is the starting place of hermeneutics? Second is the question of authority, or who is the final arbiter of truth? Although the scope of this paper cannot begin to adequately deal with these issues, it is my hope that these questions will begin to poke holes in the thin veneer that liberal critics call “scholarship” which are really anti-Christian tendencies masquerading as truth.

The Question of Presupposition: Where Do We Start?

Because every man comes to the text with a set of presuppositions, it should be ascertained if the liberal critic has come to the prophetic passages of the Bible with a starting point that would invariably lead him to negate their existence as genuine

⁵ Gleason L. Archer, Jr. “Modern Rationalism and the Book of Daniel,” *BSac* 136 #542 (April 1979):130.

prophecy. Thomas Paine rejected revelation outright, conceding that if God should so please, He could communicate with individuals. However if such were true (he states for the sake of argument), then the revelation is only revelation to the one whom received it. Paine argues, “When he tells it to a second person, a second to a third, a third to a fourth, and so on, it ceases to be a revelation to all those persons. It is a revelation to the first person only, and *hearsay* to every other, and, consequently they are not obliged to believe it.”⁶ So for Paine, if a person states that he has received a prophecy, it ceases to be revelation except to the person who was the original recipient, and thus with one fell swoop Paine obliterates not only the Bible as authoritative revelation, but all religious claims to revelation. But is this reasoning logical, much less biblical?

First, revelational truth does not cease to be truth after it is spoken to another person. Surely Mr. Paine and his progeny would not dispute that when a law is made known to the public (or revealed) that it has not lost its truthfulness once it is spoken of by politicians, police officers, judges, newspapermen and the general public. Because this revelation of government has been passed down to the man on the street through so many hands it is possible that in some occasions the wording, intent or motive of the law has been fouled up by inaccurate journalism or some such error. But the law was written in a precise way in some office in the government and still stands as an authority over all men under that government. If this is true of man-made revelation how is it that God-revealed truth of infinitely more importance which is superintended by the Holy Spirit has become

⁶ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Being An Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1896), 23.

impotent when it is passed along even to one other person by a prophet? Is this truly to be called “hearsay” or is it merely the rebellion of man’s heart against the God who tells man that he has no excuse:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. (Romans 1:18-23)

Just as Paine excuses the possibility of true revelation, modern critical scholars refuse to accept as truth anything that seems to be supernatural in the Bible. Paine, along with Spinoza, Descartes, Leibniz, Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, Locke and other rationalists rejected anything that does not allow for truth to be perceived by human reason and regarded natural science as the means by which truth can be found and verified. It is notable that Spinoza, Descartes, and Leibniz were mathematicians, for they looked at life, philosophy and religion through the eyes of science. Spinoza argued that, “all truth, even religious truth, is knowable only through self-evident mathematical axioms.”⁷ For the rationalist or empiricist the supernatural is not a possibility and must be rejected outright. Since the modern critic comes to the table outright rejecting the possibility of the supernatural, he must find a way to explain away the fulfilled prophecy.

⁷ F. David Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis*. Robert L Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 89.

This is putting the cart before the horse and is a sham of scholarship. It is no wonder that liberal critics must ignore the arguments of biblical scholars and merely scoff, for they have no other answer for their conjecture and speculation built upon shoddy human assumption.

Then where should one start? Milton Terry states,

There are certain general principles of thought and language that underlie all intelligible writings. When one rational mind desires to communicate thought to another it employs such conventional means of intercourse as are understood by both.... In general, therefore, we hold that the Bible, as a body of literature, is to be interpreted like all other books.⁸

So, the critic should look at what the Bible claims for itself and allow this to be the starting point as to how it should be judged. *VEE* is a means used by the critic to avoid accepting the Bible at face value and seeking to spin a different reason for the accuracy of its fulfilled prophecy.

Second Peter 1:20-21 says, "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter* of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." Paine may claim that man is incapable of passing on revelation truthfully without degrading the message into hearsay, and he may be right to a certain extent, for man is infamous for botching up truth through gossip, rumors and hearsay. However, Paine and other empiricists of the same ilk have discounted the power of the Holy Spirit in His preservation of His message. If God gave a message of revelation to man, then should He not also be fully

⁸ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Hunt & Eason, 1890. Reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 71.

capable of preserving it accurately for all whom He expects to hear it? “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Is. 40:8).

The Question of Authority: Who is the Final Arbiter of Truth?

Of course the liberal critic may object to the so-called circular reasoning of appealing to Scriptures as proof for the authority of those same Scriptures. But there must be some standard of truth that is appealed to in order to ascertain what is true. Thomas Paine was more blunt than most modern rational critics when he stated, “I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.”⁹ We would agree with Paine if he is stating that there is no inherent power in the authority of the church over the Scriptures, but rather that the authority comes from the Word of God itself. But for Paine and other rationalists, the only way to be assured of what is truth is to come to that truth by means of human reason alone. For someone to put supernatural prophecy as a means of knowing the future is an impossibility and thus *VEE* is one outworking of that philosophy.

Porphyry (A.D. 232–ca. 305), a Neo-platonic philosopher could not accept the accuracy of the prophecies in Daniel and had no other recourse than to attribute them to a Maccabean author.¹⁰ Bruce Waltke writes,

Porphyry commenced his reasoning from the *a priori* assumption that there could be no predictive element in prophecy (*si quid autem ultra opinatus sit, quia futura*

⁹ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Being An Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1896), 22.

¹⁰ Archer, “Modern,” 129.

nescient, esse mentitum), so that the Book of Daniel could be only historical in nature, and therefore of a late date. This formidable heathen antagonist of the Christian faith maintained that the author of Daniel had lied in order to revive the hopes of the contemporary Jews in the midst of their adversities.¹¹

In his attack on Daniel, as in the writings of other radical critics, Porphyry needed no rational reason to conclude that there is no predictive prophecy except his own personal hostility toward Christianity. Jerome and many others have refuted Porphyry's attack yet many in the spirit of Porphyry still tenaciously cling to their personal authority over and against the inherent authority of God's Word.

The anti-supernatural empiricist places himself as the highest authority. He cannot place his trust in anyone other than himself and what he proves to his own satisfaction. He is his own god. The Christian places the final authority in the Word of God and in that alone as the ultimate source of truth. It has been accurately passed from holy men of God to us today and has been protected by the divine providential oversight of God.¹² The inner testimony of the Holy Spirit and His illumination allow for the believer to understand the things of God where the unbeliever cannot because they are spiritually appraised (1Thess 1:5; Rom 8:15-16; 1Cor 2:14). This is the difficulty that the radical critic has with prophecy. He has come to the Scriptures as a hostile enemy of God who is seeking to disprove what he knows nothing about. He is willing to push and pull and distort the Bible in whatever ways or means he can in order to assuage his conscience to

¹¹ Bruce Waltke, "The Date of the Book of Daniel," in *Bsac* 133 #532 (Oct-Dec 1976), 319.

¹² William D. Barrick, *Old Testament Introduction* (Unpublished syllabus: The Master's Seminary, Spring 2003), 14.

believe that the Bible is just a fairytale that has no bearing upon his soul. It is amazing that so many men for so many ages have sought to destroy the faith of others when they themselves do not believe it.

Conclusion

If the radical critic looked at the Word of God without the rationalistic presuppositions that deny the supernatural occurrence of prophecy, then *vaticinium ex eventu* as an explanation for fulfilled prophecy would die. If he would take the Bible and seek to understand it in a fair manner as he would any other book he could come to no other conclusion than that the Bible purports to be a book about a supernatural God who does act in miraculous ways in human history, whether he believes this to be true or not. The critic seeks to have his cake and eat it too. He wants to accept some historical aspects of Scripture, but he wants to do it on his own terms. He wants to pour in his own meanings and his own timeline of writing to coincide with his own personal presuppositions. He enjoys allegorizing or rationalizing or spiritualizing the Bible so that Christianity is nothing but an impotent set of moral platitudes. He cannot come to terms with the power of the Gospel or the risen Lord. King Jesus will not accept our terms of surrender. He has set His own terms, all or nothing. Accept Him fully or reject Him completely.

The question regarding authority shows that the heart of the critic desires to worship a god of his own making that is remarkably similar to himself. He cannot conceive of a God who is so loving of His creatures that He would reveal His divine plan

and then accurately spread that prophecy to the world, much less a God who would send His Son to die for sinful men and be resurrected on the third day. How can this be really true in a purely “rational” world-view? To the critic it must all be rejected. And with that rejection goes eternal life. For the critic, his work is futile. He strives his whole life to destroy other men’s faith but having no alternative to replace it. He himself is without an answer. The god of his own making is powerless to save.

One thing will prove the radical critic once and for all that he is wrong. One day he will stand before the risen Lord he denied and he will bow the knee and recognize Him as Sovereign. As John the Revelator prophesied,

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, *be* blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.” And the four living creatures kept saying, “Amen.” And the elders fell down and worshiped. (Rev 5:10-14)

The critic will not see that event unfold in heaven, but he will know that was all true. On that day, *vaticinium ex eventu* will no longer work. May God save the critic before that day.

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