

## Multiple Fulfillments of Prophecy

The experience left them breathless with excitement. There on the mountain they had seen Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus! Then, as if that wasn't enough, they heard the voice of God declaring that Jesus was indeed His Son! They were certain that the Kingdom could not be long in coming. For years they had waited for this time, and now – at last – it was at hand. They had been taught that Elijah would return before the Messiah set up His kingdom – and NOW THIS HAD HAPPENED! They could hardly wait to get back down the mountain and tell everyone what they had seen.

Imagine then, their absolute lack of comprehension as Jesus turned to them and cautioned them not to say anything about what they saw *to anyone* – until he was raised from the grave. Grave? Death? What?!! Wait a minute....

“But Lord,” they ask, “What about Elijah? Malachi said he would return before the Great Day of the Lord. Doesn't this mean...”

At this point Jesus interrupted them and made another confusing statement. “Elijah truly shall come first and restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him, but have done to him whatever they desired.”

The Bible tells us that the disciples understood that He was referring to John the Baptist, but we must wonder if they realized the other implications of Jesus' statement.

Jesus started by saying that “Elijah truly **shall** come...” By pointing them to the future fulfillment of this prophecy, he was affirming its legitimacy and confirming its future fulfillment. Elijah will come to prepare people before Jesus returns again. “Look,” he was saying, “This prophecy is still going to be fulfilled.” He was also telling them – without saying it directly – that Elijah's appearance on the mountain **did not fulfill** Malachi's words – the fulfillment was still ahead.

Then he whipsawed them in the opposite direction, “...but I say to you that Elijah has come already...” pointing them backward to his cousin John the Baptist.

By now their heads must have been reeling. Their recent dreams of the coming Kingdom – and their place in it – had vanished, replaced by the ominous words of Jesus that he would be treated as badly as the beheaded Baptist.

But did they catch what Jesus had just taught them about prophecy? Did they learn what we can learn?

1. The “obvious” fulfillment may not even be relevant. Just because Elijah showed up – as the Bible says he did – didn't mean anything in terms of the prophecy. Why? Because the prophecy pointed to “Elijah's” role in working *with people* to prepare their hearts for the coming of Christ. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Elijah had no such role. He came to minister to Jesus himself, to encourage him as He faced His

life's greatest challenge. No, the prophecy pointed to an "Elijah" that would do as the first Elijah did – prepare people for a return to God.

2. By stating that "Elijah truly shall come", Jesus was showing that the **primary** fulfillment of this prophecy was yet future.
3. By stating that "Elijah has come", He declared that the prophecy had met a true fulfillment in the life and service of John the Baptist, and was showing that a prophecy may have **more than one** valid fulfillment.
4. Both the former fulfillment (John the Baptist) and the future fulfillment are valid because they both meet the specifics of the prophecy. They both work as Elijah did to influence people to return to a true-hearted worship of God in a time just before He is about to take decisive action. As such, the earlier fulfillment may serve as a model, showing what the greater fulfillment will be like.

There are some Christians who are just a little bit reluctant – some even more than a bit – to accept the idea of multiple fulfillments of prophecy, but the Bible clearly demonstrates the principle. Often – as in the example above – the fulfillments can be seen as a "lesser" fulfillment and an "ultimate" fulfillment. When that happens, the earlier fulfillment often paints – in miniature – a picture that can teach us what the ultimate fulfillment may be like.

Another example may help make the point.

### **Dual Application – Applied to Pentecost**

Remember Pentecost? The book of Acts is clear on what that experience was like. Obviously nothing like that had ever happened before, so Luke recorded it in stark detail. He noted that while the assembled group was praying, the house they were in (and it must have been a very large house for 120 people to meet in) was filled with the sound of a "rushing mighty wind." At least that's what the King James Bible says. Others give a more vivid translation:

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| • "the roar of a violent wind"        | CJB  |
| • "a violently blowing wind"          | GW   |
| • "the roaring of a mighty windstorm" | ISV  |
| • "like a strong wind, gale force"    | GW   |
| • "a violent rushing wind"            | NASB |

Now if there is one thing I do know, it's the sound of a powerful, even violent, windstorm. At the time of this writing, I am living just to the side of Mt. Norway near the mouth of the Columbia River Gorge at about the thousand foot elevation level. Those of you who are familiar with the "East Winds" of the Northwest know that when the air pressure on the west side of the

Cascade Mountain Range is higher or lower than on the east, the Columbia River Gorge – the only breach between these regions – becomes a wind-tunnel of giant dimensions.

The violent windstorms produced by this tunnel can last for days with steady winds of 35 miles an hour and gusts up to 70. Add in sub-freezing temperatures and a powerful winter snowstorm, and you have all the elements for a truly frightening blizzard. In fact, just last week my wife, Shirley, and I were visiting at our neighbor's house under just such conditions. While we were supposed to be watching a movie together, we were all, in fact, watching out the picture windows as the blizzard wind raced past the house, howling its anger at having to go around the house instead of through it and shaking the house for good measure just to make sure we noticed it.

Such is a mighty, violent wind.

Luke says that as this wind filled the house with its violent howling noise, flames of fire leapt from head to head, filling those assembled Christians with unprecedented Holy Spirit power.

This event was so *real* that it was heard by everyone in the surrounding neighborhood. It wasn't just a *symbolic* wind. Luke goes on to say that people from the surrounding area came running to see what was happening to this house because they too had heard this powerful, violent wind.

Pentecost was a dramatic event.

Now here is where prophecy comes in. Later that same morning in an address to thousands of people, Peter was trying to explain what had happened. He told them that what they were seeing was a fulfillment of an ancient prophecy by Joel and went on to loosely quote him:

“And it shall be in the last days,” God says, “That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy.” “And I will grant wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Acts 2:17-21

So, was Peter right or wrong? Well, since he was speaking while filled with the Holy Spirit, we must presume that he was being moved by the Holy Spirit to make this application of the prophecy of Joel. We – who have never known this kind of infilling – can reach no other conclusion than that this was a valid fulfillment of prophecy.

But was it the ultimate fulfillment of Joel's prophecy?

No. There are multiple aspects of Joel's prophecy that did not find their fulfillment in the events of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was not poured out on "all mankind," but only on a limited group in a limited area. Not only were the wonders in the sky and earth (blood and columns of smoke) not present at Pentecost, but the Day of the Lord did not come. We can only conclude that the **ultimate** fulfillment of Joel's prophecy is yet ahead of us; that the great end-time Pentecost will be worldwide in scope, that it will be associated with dramatic physical signs, and will lead up to the return of Jesus Christ.

But it is important to note that this conclusion on our part does not mean that we are arguing with Peter over his application of that prophecy. Peter wasn't wrong! He was making a valid application of prophecy to his day and time under the instruction of the Holy Spirit. That the ultimate fulfillment of that prophecy may take place in our time doesn't invalidate Peter's teaching. The opposite is true!

Because we see both events as valid applications of prophecy, we should be earnestly studying the "model" of Pentecost to see what it can teach us about what it will be like when the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy takes place! How dramatic will that event be? How powerfully will God move through His end-time disciples? What manner of miracles will be common? What level of evangelism? The answer to these questions can only be found in one place – because only once before has God moved in such manner.

The principle of "Multiple Fulfillment" does not invalidate the earlier fulfillment. Instead we learn that a single prophecy can validly point to **two or more different fulfillments**.

## **Enlarged Understanding – Prophetic Creativity**

The New Testament is full of another type of "multiple" fulfillment. These are cases where the fulfillment of a statement – prophetic or not – was already "in the books," where the principle understanding was already clear; and yet another prophetic application is drawn from it. Here are a few examples:

1. **The Virgin Birth**. Matthew makes it clear that the virgin birth of Jesus was a fulfillment of prophecy. In fact he states that explicitly. In Matthew 1:21-22 he records: "Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet; 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us.'"

This enlargement of Isaiah's original prophecy must have surprised a number of the early Gospel readers. They would have been very familiar with the story of Israel and Aram attacking Judah. Isaiah was sent to Ahaz (the king of Judah) to assure him of God's protection. When Isaiah asked Ahaz to name a sign, so that God could give him evidence of this protection, Ahaz refused. "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a

sign: Behold a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” Isa 7:14 Isaiah went on to specify that before the child would know how to choose between good and evil, the lands of the two opposing kings would be forsaken. (Verse 16)

This prophecy was directly fulfilled by the birth of Isaiah’s own son. But in the choice of the name “Immanuel” we can hear suggestions of some distant, grand fulfillment that went beyond the local application. The Holy Spirit helped Matthew understand this connection to Jesus, even though it was deeply shrouded in the story of Ahaz.

2. **The Flight to Egypt.** Matthew points out that in the flight to (and return from) Egypt, prophecy was fulfilled. Matt 2:14-15 “So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called My Son.’”

The “prophecy” referred to this time is found in Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.” In context, it’s hard to see this as a prophecy at all. Instead, God is talking about how Israel rejected God’s love even after He delivered Israel out of Egyptian slavery.

The love of God toward unfaithful Israel is the main point of Hosea. To get the point across, Hosea was told to marry a prostitute, Gomer. It was no small surprise to the neighbors when Gomer was unfaithful to Hosea, and ended up being sold into slavery. What *did* surprise the neighbors was that Hosea went to the slave auction and bought her back. Unfortunately, Gomer was unfaithful to Hosea even after he bought her from slavery, just as Israel was to God.

3. **From the Village of Nazareth.** Again, Matthew pointed to direct fulfillment of prophecy: “...and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” Matt 2:23

Matthew seems to be taking more “liberty” with this application than ever. The Old Testament text he was quoting was indeed a prophecy – about Samson. It is found in Judges 13:5, “For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”

This prophecy can only have a primary application to Samson. To make it apply to Jesus requires that we bend the word Nazirite – which was a term applied to Hebrews fulfilling a special oath to God – into Nazarene – meaning an inhabitant of the village of Nazareth.

In each of these cases, the principle meaning was clear. The event referred to had already taken place. The case was closed. And yet, in each case the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to find new truths and new applications. I'm sure that some of his earliest readers might have said, "What's he talking about? That prophecy (or story) didn't have anything to do with Jesus." And in the primary application they were right.

But in each of these cases, the Holy Spirit enlarged the understanding of the New Testament author, so that he saw in those earlier words a powerful, new prophetic application to Jesus.

For our purposes it is important to note two points:

- Even when the prophecy is fully understood – even when the case is closed – the Holy Spirit can bring new, and different, applications from scripture; sometimes pointing it in entirely new ways.
- The new prophetic understandings that the Holy Spirit inspired did not – in any of these cases – set aside or invalidate the original meaning of the prophecy.

## **On To Matthew 24**

We'll be referring often to Matthew 24 as we study the Book of Revelation. The links between the statements of Jesus in Matthew and Revelation are clear. In fact, many of the disagreements that scholars have with each other regarding the Book of Revelation have their roots in Matthew.

For example, we have explained elsewhere that when the Preterist sees the links between Revelation and Matthew, and then reads that "This generation shall not pass until all these things are fulfilled – he takes it quite literally to mean that all of Matthew and Revelation were to be fulfilled in the lifetime of those hearing Jesus words. He does not allow that the prophecies of Jesus might apply to more than one event – that the history of the destruction of Jerusalem might tell us something about the larger, worldwide events yet ahead.

The Historicist also sees the links between Matthew and Revelation, and because he has come to see the first half of Revelation as a long overview of the course of history, he turns and imposes that same view on the words of Jesus in Matthew 24. He understands that the warfare, famine, persecution and signs from the heavens (mentioned in Luke 21) are mirrored in the story of the Seals of Revelation but finds it hard to see these as future events because he has already assigned them a historic meaning.

Such differences in perspective are bound to cause disagreement!

Jesus' great prophetic sermon found in Matthew 24 and 25 and in Luke 21 provides us with one of the best examples of a multi-layered prophecy in the entire Bible. You can find hints of its multiple layers in the questions that prompted His discussion.

Jesus and his disciples had just left the temple compound. His disciples, looking back, commented to Jesus about the beauty and strength of the Temple and its buildings. How surprised they must have been to hear Jesus' reply! He simply told them that in the future every single stone would be thrown down and the entire structure ruined. I'm sure they walked on in stunned silence! But the questions were swirling through their minds; and when they got to the Mount of Olives, they could no longer contain themselves. "Tell us when all this will be," they asked, "and what will happen to show that it is the time for your coming and the end of the age?"

They believed the temple was sure to last until the final destruction at the end of the world, and that is exactly how they couched their questions. When is the temple going to be destroyed? What signs shall we look for to tell us that you are coming again, and that the world is coming to an end?

Jesus answered those questions. In a prophetic tour de force he described to them the events that would lead up to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 A.D., and he used those same events as a microcosm of the great events that would signal that His return to earth was near.

Was He speaking of local events that would be fulfilled in the lifetime of his hearers? Yes. Was He speaking of globe-spanning events that would overtake the entire world? Yes.

The principle of multiple fulfillments allows us to answer "yes" to both of those questions at the same time without invalidating either. It helps us to understand that while the impact of his words *to his listeners* was primarily local, that he was using those local events as a model of global events yet to come.

So it is perfectly legitimate for us to ask, "What can these prophecies teach us who are awaiting Christ's return? What specific end-time meanings have yet to emerge?"

## **The Challenge of Multiple Fulfillments**

In Adventism we have a saying that "truth is progressive." We often make use of this maxim when comparing other Christian denominations to our own, and have perhaps come to feel that our church sits at the end-point of advancing truth. By this reasoning, everyone else needs to be willing to follow "advancing truth," as that will lead them to our position. But we don't – we're already there.

I have often heard the strong appeals at evangelistic meetings stating the importance of following truth wherever it may lead. We know that accepting the Sabbath, for example, may result in economic hardships or even create schisms within families. But we urge upon people the importance of following "truth" regardless of the cost. And we are *right* to do so.

But we must be willing to apply that standard to ourselves before we can ask it of others. Are we willing to follow truth wherever it leads? Do we search the scriptures to determine our duty? You see, advancing truth implies a challenge to *everybody*.

The reason I bring up this point is that the two concepts of “multiple fulfillments” and “progressive truth” both speak to *the need of allowing a change in perspective*. Truth does not quit moving forward. We can never say that we have nothing left to learn.<sup>1</sup> And the Bible principle of “multiple fulfillments” tells us that even prophecies that we thought we had nailed down can burst with new meaning and new applications.

Our spiritual forefathers followed the truth as they were led by the Holy Spirit. They learned from the prophecies what they could. But if we think that the prophecies can teach us nothing other than what they taught the pioneers, we are not allowing for “progressive truth” or “multiple fulfillments.” In fact, if we truly believe that truth is progressive, then we should actively be seeking those areas where the Holy Spirit may be leading us in new directions.

## **The Comfort of Multiple Fulfillments**

What gives me great comfort is that the principle of “multiple fulfillments” shows me that a new understanding, or a new application, of prophecy *does not invalidate the earlier understanding*. To the contrary! We can accept the fact that God led others to the truths He wanted them to see, just as we must trust Him to lead us in our study of His Word.

Coming to a different conclusion than William Miller or Uriah Smith does not mean one of us is right while the other one is wrong! New prophetic applications don't require that earlier understandings be labeled ***incorrect***. It's OK just to understand the new application while allowing that the earlier application was valid for that time.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen White made numerous statements on this subject. The following is taken from *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, page 32, “We must not think, ‘Well, we have all the truth, we understand the main pillars of our faith, and we may rest on this knowledge.’ The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light.”