

Is Prophetic Time Elastic

Written by [Don Preston](#)

In the March, 1991 issue of the Christian Courier, brother Wayne Jackson, an outspoken opponent of realized eschatology, continues his attacks.

This and subsequent articles will examine in-depth brother Jackson's articles. Jackson, whom we count as a friend and brother, correctly appraises one issue, the centrality of the time issue to the eschatology debate. He writes "The root fallacy of the whole theory is a failure to recognize the nature of time references as such are employed in Bible prophecy." Proper understanding of the time issue is not only central to realized eschatology, but to the amillennial and premillennial views also. If it can be shown that the traditional concepts of the ambiguity and relativity of prophetic time statements are incorrect (thus when God said something was imminent it was indeed imminent; when God said something was to be protracted it was indeed to be protracted), then the preterist construction of prophecy will have been largely vindicated. It is a FACT that scripture says the coming of the Lord, judgment, etc., was imminent in the first century. (Even Jackson admits some of the verses "superficially" appear to indicate the imminent return of Jesus.) Therefore, if those time statements express actual imminency; if Bible time statements are not "very elastic," then realized eschatology, by our brother's own admission would have been verified.

Jackson seeks to prove "the flexible nature of time..." by appealing to Obadiah's statement, "The day of the Lord is near;" vs. 15. Since he has repeatedly appealed to this prophecy let us examine it and our brother's arguments.

The Courier cites two facts; Obadiah says the day of the Lord was near, and it was to be on all nations. We are then informed that the prophecy does deal "primarily with the destruction of ancient Edom, but the prophecy was not fulfilled in that day...." He insists Obadiah's words were not finally fulfilled "until centuries after the era of Obadiah."

Our brother obviously believes that "centuries" can be involved in prophecy even when the inspired writer said the event was near. This is very interesting.

In 1983 Jackson debated Millennialist Robert Shank at the Denton Lectureship, Denton, Texas. During his speech Jackson ridiculed brother Shank by noting he (Shank) "would squeeze two thousand years into the comma between "bowels" and "and" in II Samuel 7:12. In the lectureship book Jackson comments on the millennial practice of inserting gaps of time into prophetic statements: "The premillennialists have the unusual ability to find many "gaps" where the Bible indicates none." He gives examples of such ELASTICIZING (that is what you would call it, isn't it?) of prophecies, Isaiah 9:6-7; Daniel 2:43-44; and the 69 and 70th week of Daniel 9. (See p. 510, footnote 9.)

In the October, 1979 Courier, Jackson addresses whether there is a 2000 year gap between the 69th and 70th week of Daniel's seventy weeks: "There is absolutely no justification for such a gap...."

If there is no justification to insert two thousand years into the text of Daniel 9, or II Samuel 7, why is it justifiable to insert 2600 YEARS into Obadiah's prophecy? If, as Jackson correctly notes, there is no indication of a two millennium gap in Daniel 9, Isaiah 9, etc., NONE OF WHICH SAYS "AT HAND," where is the indication of a two and a half millennium gap in Obadiah's words when Obadiah specifically says his prediction was "near"? How can our brother condemn the premillennialist for inserting two thousand plus years between "bowels" and "and" in II Samuel 7 but insert, as he does, two thousand years between Matthew 16:27 and verse 28? Our good brother does the very thing which he condemns in others! When our millennial friends apply Jackson's principle of elasticity to prophecy he becomes very INFLEXIBLE; but when the preterist accepts this principle of inflexibility brother Jackson suddenly becomes VERY FLEXIBLE and demands we do likewise! To stretch or not to stretch seems to be the question; our brother demands different things in regard to prophetic interpretation. Yet he says the PRETERIST is inconsistent!

How Many Fulfillments?

In his September, 1989 Courier, Jackson insists Obadiah's prophecy has not yet climaxed history. In the current issue he concedes the prophecy concerned the destruction of ancient Edom, yet insists that prophecy was not even finally fulfilled until centuries after Obadiah's time. (By this he would mean the subjugation of the Edomites by John Hyrcanus.) Is our brother postulating a three-fold fulfillment of Obadiah's prophecy? Is he saying it did in fact have an imminent application to the time of Obadiah? IF SO, ALL HIS INSISTENCE ABOUT THE FLEXIBILITY OF TIME, AND DEMANDS THAT WE IGNORE THE IMMINENCE FACTOR IN PROPHECY, IS TOTALLY IRRELEVANT!

If our brother is saying there was no contemporary application and fulfillment of Obadiah's words he is CLEARLY IGNORING THE TESTIMONY OF HISTORY AND SCRIPTURE! The New International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised, 1988, Vol. Two, p.20, article "Edom," says "Edom, like Judah, was subject to destruction by the Babylonians in the 6th century. (Jer.27:2f,6; 49:7-22; Ezekiel 32:29)." (The time of Obadiah's prophecy.) In Volume Three, p. 574, article "Obadiah," it says "Obadiah announces the imminent end of Edom. Its closing days came at the end of the 6th cent. and the beginning of the 5th when the Nabateans occupied the country." See also the Interpreters Bible, Vol. 6, p. 858 for more historical data on the Edomites. McClintock and Strong Cyclopedia of Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol. VII. p. 267 says Babylon conquered Edom in 583 BC.

More important even than this impressive historical evidence is the testimony of scripture that Obadiah's words did have an imminent application. In Malachi, written only about 130 years after Obadiah, Jehovah said, "Esau I hated,

and made his mountains a desolation, and gave his heritage to the jackals of the wilderness..." ASV, vs. 3. You will notice that Jehovah said he HAD DONE what Obadiah predicted; make Edom a desolation.

Now if our brother demands the absolute finality of Edom as fulfillment we would remind him of his own words in regard to fulfillment of prophecy.

In the May, 1990 issue of "Reasoning From Revelation," 230 Landmark Drive, Montgomery, Alabama, 36117, a reader queried Jackson about Isaiah's prediction of Babylon's fall. The questioner observed that Isaiah said Babylon "would never be inhabited," 13:20; yet news reports indicate Saddam Hussein is/was attempting to rebuild the ancient city. Jackson responded that "the language need not demand absolute finality." Our brother correctly noted that "prophecy is sometimes couched in the language of hyperbole (i.e., exaggeration for the sake of emphasis)." Since he has insisted that Isaiah's words "do not demand absolute finality" how can he demand that Obadiah's words be fulfilled in "absolute finality"?

The number of fulfillments Jackson posits for Obadiah is important to understand how he may interpret the entire prophetic corpus. If he denies any imminent application in Obadiah's time it raises the question of relevancy of Obadiah's words to his contemporaries. IF HE SEES ANY IMMINENT APPLICATION WHATSOEVER HIS REJECTION OF THE IMMINENCE FACTOR IS DESTROYED! If he allows an imminent application in Obadiah's day, an ultimate fulfillment against Edom centuries later, perhaps a Messianic application also, and a still future application at the end of time, he has a quadruple application of prophecy! If our brother can find FOUR APPLICATIONS of prophecy, how can he condemn the premillennial practice of dual application of prophecy without which their system is doomed?

Where will this practice lead? Shall we look for the future establishment of yet another kingdom if there are multiple fulfillments of prophecy? Shall we look for yet another Messiah who will be the second, or third fulfillment of Isaiah 53?

We recognize some prophecies have an imminent and an ultimate fulfillment. But we know this because scripture makes the application. In such cases the imminent aspect of the prophecy received fulfillment in the generation of the ones to whom it was spoken, see Haggai 2:6-7 and compare Ezra 6:8; 7:20. The ultimate fulfillment was Messianic. See Hebrews 12:25ff which cites Haggai as predictive of the final removal of the Old Heaven and Earth/World of Judaism.

Sound Scholarship

The Courier says of the statement of imminency in Obadiah 15 "Sound biblical scholarship has noted that 'near' does not have chronological significance in this passage, 'Its character is emphasized rather than its exact time....'" Appeal to this "sound biblical scholarship" is revealing. The quote is from the New Bible Commentary, Revised, Eerdmans, p. 744, Donald Guthrie editor.

Our brother fails to tell the reader the commentator's reason for rejecting the imminence of Obadiah 15! The commentator is premillennial and views the prophecy of vs. 15ff as a prediction of the yet future restoration of national Israel and establishment of the millennium! Since that has obviously not happened, then, in the view of the Millennialist commentator the imminence of the passage must be obviated. His eschatological predisposition has forced the commentator to explain away the time statement; Jackson has happily adopted that distorted interpretation and called it "sound biblical scholarship"!

Looking closer at brother Jackson's "sound scholarship" is revealing. In James 5:8f the New Bible Commentary says of James' statement "The coming of the Lord is at hand;" "The verb is at hand implies nearness but not actual 'arrival.' The coming had obviously not taken place. This is important evidence in the interpretation of Mark 1:15 where the same verb is used. The kingdom is similarly at hand in Jesus but there is still room for its final coming in the second advent. If this is not so, James was completely wrong." p. 1234. Jackson's "sound biblical scholarship" says the kingdom is imminent in the same sense that the coming of the Lord is imminent. Jackson calls their doctrine of a delayed kingdom a "system of infidelity;" he calls their interpretation in regard to the parousia "sound scholarship"!

Interestingly, Jackson condemns the kind of scholarship demonstrated in the very commentary he calls "sound scholarship." Speaking in his book "The AD 70 Doctrine: A Review of The Max King Doctrine," p. 41, he says "Of course unbelievers and theological modernists have argued that the New Testament writers were clearly mistaken about the time of the Lord's return...." Here is an interesting dilemma. Jackson calls a commentary "sound biblical scholarship;" and that commentary says the biblical writers were "completely wrong" about the coming of the Lord. Yet Jackson has written that those who say the NT writers were wrong are "unbelievers and modernists"! Our brother thus has the same commentary labeled as "sound biblical scholarship" and "unbelievers and modernists" IN REGARD TO THE SAME QUESTION - IMMINENCE!

God and Time - A Matter of Relativity and Ambiguity?

As our friend has noted, time is a central issue in the eschatological debate.

The Courier says fulfillment of Obadiah's prediction spanned the centuries between 586 BC to 129 BC - a period of approximately 450 years. (Plus, a yet future fulfillment of course.) Let us examine some other prophecies to see how time is considered.

In Numbers 24:17-18 the prophet reluctantly gave a Messianic prediction. He said "I see him but not now; I behold him but not near...." Verse 18 speaks of the conquering of the Edomites. This prophecy takes us from 1400 BC to Jesus. God made Balaam call it "not now," "Not near." (If the reference to the conquering of Edom is not Messianic but

refers to the same period as Jackson proposes for Obadiah it was still "not near"! The point is God called 1400 years a long time; he said it was not near; but Jackson would have us believe that in Obadiah God calls 450 years "near." Is there a magic line of delineation between 1400 years and 450 years; one is long the other near?

In Daniel 10-12 is a vision which stretches from the time of Cyrus, 536 BC, to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, 12:6-7; about 600 years. Twice Daniel is told "the appointed time is long" and "the vision refers to many days yet to come," (10:1,14.) Please note, it is a prophecy; it is from God to man, about what will transpire in man's world; it encompasses about 600 years; and God called it a LONG TIME!

Here is a period of time only about 150 years less than that which Jackson claims for Obadiah's prophecy; yet it is called a LONG TIME! Now why would God call 600 years a long time but call 450 years NEAR?

Daniel 8 is also instructive as to how God communicates in time words. The vision, circa 530 BC., extends to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and his death in about 165-164 BC., about 365 years. How did God designate this period of time? In verse 26 God told Daniel "...seal up the vision for it refers to many days in the future." The observant reader will immediately notice that period of time under consideration is almost EIGHTY YEARS SHORTER THAN THE TIME JACKSON SAYS IT TOOK TO FULFILL OBADIAH! Yet God called it a long time! Reader does God call 440 years "near" but call 365 years a long time? Is God the author of such confusion? Does our God talk out of both sides of his mouth to purposely cloud the prophetic time issue and confuse mankind? If so there can be absolutely no time argument of any kind made from any prophetic passage! If one can demonstrate that God is purposely ambiguous and relative, that "near" means a long time and a "long time" really means near, then any and all amillennial arguments in regard to the imminence of the kingdom in Matthew 3:2, (a text Jackson appeals to in his writings against millenniums); Mk. 1:15; et. al, are completely invalid. We are forced to wonder, since our brother believes time is PROTRACTED when "NEAR" is used, does he believe terms of delay, a "long time," etc., should be CONTRACTED and speak of short periods of time?

Man Stretches, God Responds

Significantly, scripture records an example of man's interpreting prophetic time statements in the very way our brother has done, and God's response to this.

In Ezekiel 7 God's prophet said "the end has come," "the time has come," "Now will I shortly pour out my fury upon thee...," "the day draweth near." Surely these words carried the import of imminent judgment coming upon the nation of Israel. (Or would our friend make a multiply application here also? Would he see an application in Ezekiel's day, one in 70 AD perhaps, and another at the end of time?) But what was Israel's response?

Chapter 11:2-3 says those who heard the message of impending judgment responded by saying "It is not near; let us build houses...." Now according to our brother these men were perfectly legitimate in their thinking. They must have believed "prophetic chronological relativity is a reality," (Jackson, Courier, Sept. 1989) "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years," or, they evidently believed in "the elasticity of prophetic chronology" (ibid.). What was Jehovah's response to this interpretive method? Read Ezekiel 12:21-28. For space considerations we will not give all of it here. PLEASE READ IT YOURSELF.

In verse 22 God asks about Israel's proverb that said "Every vision fails, the days are prolonged." Israel had become firm believers in the ambiguity and elasticity of prophetic time statements. But God was not pleased.

In verse 23 God said "I will make this proverb to cease"! God would not tolerate man's distorting his words and message. He repeated his message "The days are at hand...." In verse 25 God promised "In your days, O rebellious house, will I speak the word, and perform it...."

Reader, could there be any clearer principle, any more powerful example of how God speaks and thinks? Jehovah said something was at hand, the people rationalized and elasticized his emphatic statements, and God responded. God said WHEN HE SAYS SOMETHING IS AT HAND IT IS AT HAND! GOD DOES NOT PLAY WORD GAMES AND DOES NOT ALLOW MAN TO PLAY GAMES WITH HIS WORDS!

Summary

Our examination of Jackson's ARTICLE HAS focused primarily on his arguments from Obadiah because he obviously considers it an important text. We have shown that in fact he has seriously misinterpreted the evidence.

We have seen that our brother has attempted to obviate the obvious chronological significance of Obadiah's prophecy by an appeal to "sound scholarship" which in reality is anything but sound.

We have seen that if the Courier admits to any contemporary fulfillment of the prophet's words then Jackson's argument about the elasticity and relativity of prophetic time statements is patently false. We have in fact demonstrated from history, and more importantly from scripture, Malachi 1:2ff, that Obadiah's words were fulfilled - quickly!

We have shown that brother Jackson is now advocating the very hermeneutic which he vehemently condemns on the part of the millennialists; that of elasticizing and relegating time statements into meaning-less-ness and inserting vast gaps of time into texts which obviously indicate imminence.

We have demonstrated from the Bible, from prophetic scripture, that God calls periods of time involving centuries a "long time"; that God communicates to mankind in man's words. God does not speak in vague, ambiguous, and completely relative terms.

We have shown God's response to man's attempt to change the meaning of his words. When God spoke in terms of imminence and man elasticized the meaning to signify a long time, God condemned him. God said "at hand" means "at hand"!

It seems that our friend has adopted a strange hermeneutic indeed. He seems to be saying that when we understand how VAGUE and OBSCURE Bible time statements really are, then everything will become CRYSTAL CLEAR! Personally, we think that is S-T-R-E-T-C-H-I-N-G things a bit too much.

Our review of brother Jackson's article will continue later. Brother Jack Scott will also be examining some of what has been written.

One final note, brother Jackson says "The Max King doctrine is false and it must be opposed by every faithful Christian everywhere." The reader needs to know that this writer has challenged brother Jackson to a public debate thus giving him the opportunity to oppose what he maintains is false doctrine. My friend's response was "I think any number of brethren (myself included) would be interested in seeing a public discussion materialize between Max King, the king of the preterist movement, and a respected brother on the other side of the issue. On the other hand, I seriously doubt if anyone that I know of would be enthusiastic about meeting any of King's students." One comment only: since brother Jackson has mentioned this writer no less than three times in his current polemic it certainly appears that he considers our arguments of some weight. We herein express again our willingness to meet brother Jackson in public or written debate on the issue of realized eschatology.

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