

## The Veracity of Prophecy and Christ's Knowledge

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### Abstract

It is widely assumed by scholars that Christ was in error on such matters as an expectation that the final judgement and its accompanying events would occur within the timeframe of a generation. While accepting that Christ did indeed prophesy his return within this timeframe, a recent co-authored work *When the Son of Man Didn't Come* aims to defend the veracity of his prophecy by drawing on the same historical-critical method that has given rise to doubts about it. The authors propose a distinction between Mosaic and Jeremianic prophecy, arguing that Christ's was of the latter kind, which was present in the Ancient Near East, the Old and New Testaments, and other Jewish and Christian authors. Their argument, however, is at risk of reducing the truthfulness of a prophecy to its success. Hence this article explores a further distinction between two kinds of prophecy made in Thomas Aquinas's account of the truthfulness of prophecy, mapping it onto the Mosaic-Jeremianic distinction, and arguing that, in view of this linking of Aquinas's understanding of prophecy to the argument of the book, the book certainly adds to the set of proposed theological explanations of how Christ's prophecy of his return was true.

### Keywords

Jesus Christ, prophecy, Second Coming, Parousia, eschatology

In a recent book I responded to various objections commonly put against the thesis that Christ enjoyed the perfection of the beatific vision during his earthly lifetime. Among these is an argument from defect in Christ's knowledge, which can take the form of the earthly Christ being sometimes in error.<sup>1</sup> To this form of the argument

<sup>1</sup> Simon Francis Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 129-33.

I gave relatively little attention, since it is only rarely put in this way. The reason for this is that those theologians who take time to oppose Christ's beatific vision often have reasons other than his beatific knowledge for supposing his immunity from error, while holding varied positions on how his reputed errors in the Gospels are to be explained. It is, however, widely assumed by scholars that Christ was definitely in error on such matters as an expectation that the final judgement and its accompanying events would occur within the timeframe of a generation (Mt. 10:23; 16:27-28; 24:34; 26:64; Mk 8:38-9:1; 13:30-37; 14:62; Lk 9:26-27; 21:32; 22:69),<sup>2</sup> despite his denial of knowledge of the more precise timing of their day and hour (Mt. 24:36; Mk 13:32).<sup>3</sup>

As I have already indicated, there are arguments that are put against Christ having been mistaken on this and other matters. With regard to the case in hand, it is sometimes said that Christ's prophetic discourse in Matthew 24 and parallels was in fact entirely concerned with events close at hand such as the destruction of the Temple and Fall of Jerusalem,<sup>4</sup> and sometimes that there is a point in Jesus' discourse in which he passed from speaking about events near at hand to others, such as the Second Coming, which lay further off in the future (Mt. 24:36; Mk 13:32; Lk 21:34),<sup>5</sup> and hence that he was not in any error about the latter's timeframe. Most recently a multi-authored project by the Oxford Postdoctoral Colloquium on Eschatology has suggested that while Christ did after all prophesy his return within a generation, his prophecy should not be judged erroneous, despite the fact that this 'Parousia' did not take place in that timeframe.<sup>6</sup> While the authors' provocative conclusion is grounded in an historical-critical approach, the latter is woven together with typology, canonicity, 'ecclesial Christocentric Trinitarianism', liturgy,

<sup>2</sup> This common view has been recently represented by Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 1–171; *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (London: SPCK, 2010), pp. 31–220; and Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 125–62, 83–219.

<sup>3</sup> On the related question of ignorance and the perfection of Christ's knowledge, see Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father?*, pp. 133–58.

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and Questions and the Question of God, vol. 2; London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 339–67.

<sup>5</sup> W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 474; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 541–43.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher M. Hayes in collaboration with Brandon Gallagher, Julia S. Konstantinovskiy, Richard J. Ounsworth OP, and C. A. Strine, *When the Son of Man Didn't Come: A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), pp. 259–60.

ecumenism, and ethics within a wider synthesis,<sup>7</sup> which draws on the theological perspectives of Sergei Bulgakov, Hans Urs von Balthasar and others, including that of Thomas Aquinas to a lesser degree. In this article I wish to ask how the book's historical-critical conclusions might be combined with what Aquinas has to say about the veracity of prophecy in general.<sup>8</sup>

Each chapter of *When the Son of Man Didn't Come* has one or more 'lead authors' who have taken a representative role in shaping the material on the others' behalf.<sup>9</sup> The 'lead author' of Chapter One, Christopher M. Hays, affirms the view that Christ's prophecy, like some other Jewish apocalyptic texts from the Second Temple period such as 1 Enoch 1:3-9 and the Testament of Moses 10:1, 3-5,<sup>10</sup> uses language of a cosmic kind to refer to events of genuinely cosmic, global significance rather than just of a more limited localised socio-political significance. Hence he reports that the authors agree as critical scholars that 'good exegesis and responsible history' dictate that Christ possessed 'a prophetic and immediate eschatological expectation' as central to his message.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Christ did not merely expect the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in the near future, but also his own return in judgement. However, the authors' appreciation as Christian theologians of the dogmatic problems involved in this position, given the non-occurrence of the eschaton, leads them to state honestly that error about his central message would undermine the Church's beliefs about Jesus and its hope: 'If Jesus was wrong about that, does that not eviscerate the Christian construal of Jesus as Messiah, teacher, and God? Does error here not undermine the plausibility of our future hopes?'<sup>12</sup> However, though they accept the non-fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy, or at least that it was not *entirely* fulfilled, the authors do not thereby conclude that it was erroneous. Rather, it is their basic thesis that '*that the delay of the Parousia is entirely consonant with the way ancient prophecy works and with the operations of the God that Christians worship*'.<sup>13</sup> The authors take the view that consideration of this thesis will lead to the conclusion that the non-consummation of the eschaton that Jesus prophesied is not really problematic after all.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to Aquinas on prophecy, see Serge-Thomas Bonino, 'Charisms, Forms, and States of Life' (Ila Ilae, qq. 171-189) in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington DC: Georgetown, 2002), pp. 340-52 (341-46).

<sup>9</sup> On the authorship of the book, see pp. 250-2.

<sup>10</sup> On these and other texts see also Edward Adams, *The Stars Will Fall From Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World* (Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 347; London and New York: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 52-100.

<sup>11</sup> *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

Before going on to the main part of their argument, we should note that, for the authors, it is not simply a matter of biblical prophecies being either completely fulfilled or not fulfilled at all. Rather some may be 'partially' fulfilled, and so give hope to God's people and move them to repentance. One example from the Old Testament is the prophecy of Israel's restoration after the exile which, though not completely fulfilled in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, was partially fulfilled through a return to the land and the rebuilding of the Temple. On this view of fulfilment, Jesus' prophecy of the coming of the Son of Man is partially fulfilled through foretastes of its ultimate fulfilment by the eschaton in the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost, and the divine indwelling in members of the Church. This is largely treated in Chapter 4, where Richard Joseph Ounsworth OP joins Hays as joint lead author, and plays its part in the wider theological synthesis regarding divine providence which the authors attempt.<sup>14</sup> However, in their employment of 'partial fulfilments', they are by no means supposing that this notion can do *all* the work required to vindicate the veracity of Jesus' prophecy itself. Rather they see partial fulfilment as mutually balanced by a further element within a double strategy of defending this veracity, namely, the *conditional* character of much prophecy, and it is with that principal element of the book's argument that I am chiefly concerned here.

The authors tackle the problem of veracity, which has arisen for modern Christian theology from the results of the historical-critical method, by applying that same method once again to recover a sense of the conditionality of prophecy.<sup>15</sup> In order to interpret the problem of Jesus' non-return anew, they lay the foundation of their interpretation in Chapter Two, of which the lead author is again Hays, by way of an historical-critical investigation of the workings of Jewish prophecy, based on their shared theological conviction that divine revelation takes place within history with all its particularities of time and place. Their investigation of Jewish prophecy places Jesus' prophecy as a 'series of prophetic non-fulfillments, partial-fulfillments, and deferrals'.<sup>16</sup> The authors focus first on Jeremiah's explicit prophecy that the exile in Babylon would last seventy years (Jer. 25:8-14; 29:10-14). They critically examine various historic explanations for the fact that the prophecy was not being exactly fulfilled, as found in Zechariah, Ezra and Nehemiah, and Daniel, during a constantly changing political context. While at one stage the restoration appeared to be ahead of schedule with the rise of Cyrus of Persia (Isa. 44:28-45:1; 2 Chron. 36:20-21; Ezra 1:1), in

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-77.

<sup>15</sup> For reflections on the method employed in the project, see *ibid.*, pp. 241-52.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

the end it became clear that it was going to take longer than seventy years to achieve – deferral as well as partial fulfilment.<sup>17</sup> In Daniel 9 we find the question posed as to why Jeremiah's prophecy was not (completely) fulfilled, with the answer delivered by the angel Gabriel that exile was to last seventy sets of seven years, although this too 'succumbed to history and disappointed hopes; Daniel's seventy weeks of years, stretched well beyond the mathematical and chronological tearing point, lay limp atop the wreckage of prophetic history.'<sup>18</sup> Such refashioning of prophecy was scarcely unique to this text, however, with the same general approach found in the Habakkuk Peshar (which is among the Dead Sea Scrolls) and 4 Ezra (the apocryphal work also known as 2 Esdras). For the writers of these texts, any deferral of fulfilment of prophecy was no reason to discount it, but rather 'such unexpected turns were part and parcel of the mystery of God'.<sup>19</sup>

The same pattern is, moreover, found among Christians too. While Paul's exhortations in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 and Romans 13:11-12; 16:20 involved the assumption that Christ 'will return within the lifetimes of at least some of his contemporaries', other authors find themselves having to challenge those made sceptical by the non-occurrence of the eschaton.<sup>20</sup> For example: 'But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.' (2 Pet. 3:3-4, 8–10) 2 Peter explains that the end will come, but has been delayed for a specific purpose, namely, to give people time to repent.<sup>21</sup>

Chapter Three, of which the lead author is C. A. Strine, offers an interpretation for this Judaeo-Christian way of explaining the delay of the fulfilment of prophecy, which retains confidence that it will in fact be eventually fulfilled. This 'minority hermeneutic' he contrasts with the 'majority hermeneutic' of prophecy based on Deuteronomy 18:22, which comes immediately after Moses' recalling of God's promise that he would raise up a prophet like Moses: 'If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken.'<sup>22</sup> By this Mosaic or Deuteronomic criterion, Jesus' prophecy would appear to be false, given that it was his return within a generation that was prophesied. In contrast to this majority hermeneutic, the authors revive their minority hermeneutic, which they argue was widespread in the Old and New Testaments and their Jewish and ancient Near Eastern contexts.

This hermeneutic is found at its most explicit in the Bible in Jeremiah, where 'some predictive prophecy is *not* meant to come true'.<sup>23</sup> In conscious contrast to the Mosaic and Deuteronomic principle, with its requirement that a false prophet be put to death, Jeremiah 18:1-11 explains that God reserves the right to 'change course', even after the prophet who speaks on his behalf has predicted either blessing or a curse. Just as a potter can refashion clay, so God can act likewise: 'Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. *And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.* (Jer. 18:1-10)'<sup>24</sup> This principle is later illustrated in Jeremiah's prediction of the destruction of the Temple and against the city of Jerusalem (26:4-6), where there was then a call to put Jeremiah to death. In this context, and in contrast to the Deuteronomic principle, a prophet whose prediction does not come to pass turns out to be the real prophet. Jeremiah prophesies destruction, but exhorts the people who have called for his death to amend their ways in the hope that God will repent (vv. 12-13). Some of the elders recall the case of Micah of Moresheth who prophesied against Jerusalem, where the reaction of the king was not to put him to death but to entreat God's favour, with the outcome that God repented of the evil he had previously pronounced through the prophet (vv. 17-19).<sup>25</sup>

Strine goes on to argue that this Jeremianic view of prophecy, which was broader than a matter of predictions straightforwardly fulfilled, mirrors the character of prophecy more widely in the Ancient Near East. Citing the work of Matthijs de Jong, he takes the warning of people of the disasters planned by the gods, with the express purpose of averting these disasters, as among features shared by

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-44.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Strine's italics.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 43-4.

Ancient Near Eastern prophecy in general.<sup>26</sup> Referring to the work of Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, Strine speaks of 'evidence for the conditionality of prophetic predictions'. For example the *Shamash Hymn* describes Shamash 'both as a god who sends people an omen that cannot be changed (ll. 127–29, 151–2) and also as one moved to mercy by the supplication of those same people (ll. 163–4)'. Tiemeyer also contends that the *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer (Ludlul bel nemeqi)* 'supports the idea that there is a connection between future predicted omens and the attempt to revoke it [*sic*] by rituals and prayer'.<sup>27</sup> For Strine, such prophecy is better compared not to the work of a fortune teller, but to a parent concerned to warn against the consequences of crossing a road without due care or to extol the benefits of healthy eating. Whether or not the prophecy is fulfilled depends on the condition of how it is received, meaning that the very point of making the prophecy is to influence behaviour. Given how widespread was this Jeremianic approach to prophecy in the Ancient Near East, Strine raises the possibility that today's minority hermeneutic among scholars was not always in the minority, but rather that today's majority Deuteronomic principle was the anomaly of ancient times.<sup>28</sup>

Strine supports the prevalence of the belief in Israel that prophecy had this wider Jeremianic function with reference to the plot of the Book of Jonah. God commands Jonah to prophesy against Nineveh (1:2). Jonah, however, does not initially deliver this message but flees, precisely because he knows that God is merciful and 'repents of evil' (4:2). And this is in fact the outcome: the king commands that people should turn from evil and violence, and God does not do the evil he said he would do (3:9-10). Strine points out that Jonah takes it to be the case that some predicted events will not come to pass, on account of divine mercy. That Nineveh be destroyed was conditional on behaviour that the Ninevites in fact discontinued.<sup>29</sup> To the witness of Jonah, Strine adds Joel as 'equally demonstrative in its insistence about the conditionality of prophetic prediction'.<sup>30</sup> In both its prophetic depictions of judgement on the day of the Lord (1:2-4; 2:1-11), the book specifies that, rather than accept this fate, the people are called to lament their previous conduct and amend their behaviour so that God might cancel the decree of punishment (1:8-15; 2:11b-14).

To demonstrate that the understanding of prophecy as (sometimes) conditional retained a broad influence in the Second Temple and post-biblical eras, Strine brings forward evidence from the texts

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

<sup>27</sup> As cited in *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.



as diverse in genre and content as the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Sanhedrin* and the *Sibylline Oracles*. The former attests both that the end of the ages depends on repentance and good works, and that it might be hastened or brought forward by the right kind of human behaviour.<sup>31</sup> The latter, having set out various imperial periods of history culminating in the end of the ages, declares God's coming judgement in anger, while calling on its audience to change their behaviour so that God will stop his wrath.<sup>32</sup> The relevance of all this for interpreting Jesus' prophecy would be easily questioned if there were no sign of it in early Christian writings. Strine, however, shows that, not only is the minority hermeneutic found in later Jewish texts, but it appears in early Christian texts too. For example, by portraying Jesus as a prophet like Jeremiah, especially in regard to the Temple, the Synoptic Gospel writers betray their knowledge of the Jeremianic mode of prophecy.<sup>33</sup>

Having made the argument that prophecy of a Jeremianic, conditional kind was found widely in Judaeo-Christian tradition, the authors are perfectly placed to argue that Jesus' prophecy was Jeremianic and conditional too. As lead author of Chapter 5, Hays places the historical Jesus firmly in the context of Jeremianic conditional prophecy, arguing that Jesus' prophecy was also conditional, as was Jeremiah's. According to Hays, Jesus' declaration that he would return within a promised timeframe was a prophecy, and prophecies are sometimes conditional.<sup>34</sup> He recognises that the conditionality of the prophecy is not made explicit in this case, but presents evidence from Jesus' teaching that it was made in a Jeremianic mode.<sup>35</sup> For example, flexibility in timing is implied by the petition in the Prayer Jesus gave his disciples, namely, that God's Kingdom would come (Matt. 6:10; cf. Lk. 11:2). Jesus had of course previously made it clear the Kingdom was already arriving, so the prayer can hardly imply that the Kingdom had not 'come' in any way at all. What is implied in the petition was flexibility as to the coming of its final consummation. It is this flexibility that makes sense of Christians praying this petition of the Lord's Prayer. That Christians did indeed understand themselves to be hastening the Lord's return through praying this prayer is attested in the third century by Cyprian.<sup>36</sup> Here Cyprian was employing the notion already found in the New Testament (2 Pet. 3:12) that the day of the kingdom may be 'hastened'. Likewise, Strine had already referred in a previous chapter to

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 84, citing *De Mortalitate*, 18.



Tertullian's complaint prior to Cyprian that there were Christians who were praying that the end be delayed when they should have been praying that it be hastened, attesting to belief in the flexibility of its timing.<sup>37</sup>

Returning to Jesus himself, Hays presents further evidence for this flexibility in Jesus' teaching that the end will come after the Gospel has been preached to all nations. This, he says, suggests a link (in Jeremianic fashion) between the timing of the end and human acts and obedience. Jesus' prophesying would thus involve the assumption that the eventual outcome would depend on how people responded to his teaching, and this explains why instructions by Jesus concerning behaviour and mission come after his prophecies concerning the timeframe of the end.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, according to Hays, it follows from this that, given that people did not respond properly, as attested in the letters to the churches in chapters 2–3 of the Apocalypse, it would become 'not only understandable but necessary that the end not occur within the prophesied time-frame'.<sup>39</sup> Finally, given a link between flight from Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man in his prophetic discourse, Jesus' exhortation to pray regarding the timing of the flight again suggests that the dates of the last things were flexible overall (Mk 13:14-20).<sup>40</sup>

On this basis the authors take themselves to be justified in interpreting Jesus' prophetic prediction of the end as Jeremianic rather than Mosaic in character, though one where repentance is understood to hasten rather than deflect the prophesied outcome. Such a Jeremianic character is corroborated in the New Testament by such texts as 2 Peter 3:12, Romans 2:3-4, Revelation 6–7, 9, and Acts 3:19-21.<sup>41</sup> Their doctrine that God has delayed the end in order to give time for repentance is in perfect continuity with the Old Testament and Jewish tradition (e.g., Wis. 11:23), and '*affirms the conditional character of the timing in which the Parousia was prophesied to occur*'.<sup>42</sup> Thus the recipients of 2 Peter are exhorted to holiness, 'waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.'(v.12)<sup>43</sup> This outlook also informed early Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Cyprian, such that Hays can conclude that the minority hermeneutic is not something the authors have invented, but something they have retrieved.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-99.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-2.

By thus arguing that Jesus' prophecy of the end was Jeremianic rather than Mosaic, the authors consider themselves able to defend its veracity, or at least to reject its falsehood. Were it Mosaic, it would be clearly false in terms of complete fulfilment, but if it is Jeremianic, things begin to look different. Hays writes, 'Jesus' prophecy about the time of the end was not "wrong", because the veracity of his prophecy did not depend simply upon whether or not the end came.'<sup>45</sup> He explains: 'His prophecy about the timing of the end assumed that the people would respond rightly to his instructions about how to act in light of God's impending judgment.'<sup>46</sup> What Hays does not explain is why Jesus would have made this assumption about repentance, and so it remains unclear how acknowledgement of it can throw light on the prophecy's positive veracity. A related problem is that the authors seem to some extent to run together the 'veracity' of a prophecy with its 'success'. A prophecy which is meant to exhort its hearers to repentance may be said to be successful if repentance eventually follows. Strine envisages a Jeremianic prophecy of destruction being successful precisely because it is effective in evoking repentance and so does *not* 'come true'.<sup>47</sup> In what way then is that prophecy truthful? Or in what sense is a prophecy truthful that 'assumes' repentance within a certain timeframe, as Hays supposes of Jesus' prophecy, but sufficient repentance proves delayed? One might suppose that someone could claim that a proper understanding of Jeremianic prophecy means that it should be judged in terms of success or failure rather than in terms of truth and falsehood, and fend off attacks on the veracity of Christ's prophecy in this way. This is not, however, what the authors claim. They seem to want to say that the prophecy was correct, and that its truth is connected with its conditional character. In what follows I shall enquire from a theological point of view what it would mean for Christ's prophecy, construed along such lines, to be true rather than false, asking too what is required for veracity in regard to Christ's 'assumption' about people's positive response to his preaching. To do so I shall draw on what Aquinas has to say about the veracity of prophecy in general. Aquinas is a happy source for such a discussion because, as we shall see, he makes a distinction in terms of the working of prophecy in relation to the divine mind that can be mapped neatly onto the authors' own distinction between the Mosaic and the Jeremianic.

During his enquiry into the essence of prophecy in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas asks: 'Can those things which are known or proclaimed prophetically be false?'<sup>48</sup> Of course Aquinas knows the

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-4.

<sup>48</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 2-2.171.6.

traditional answer, and cites Cassidorus's *Exposition of the Psalms* as saying that prophecy is an inspiration or divine revelation which proclaims events with 'unchanging truth', drawing the conclusion that if prophecy were subject to falsehood, its truth could not be unchanging.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, Aquinas is aware of arguments based on the authority of Scripture that could be mounted against this view. In the second objection of the article, he quotes some texts we have already encountered above, namely, Jeremiah 18:7-8 and Jonah 3:10. For Aquinas the former proclaims the principle that if a nation against whom a prophecy of destruction has been made turns from its evil ways, God can 'repent' of the evil he intended; and the latter gives an example of this very thing in the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah. Before these Aquinas gives an example not found in *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, namely, when the sick King Hezekiah was at the point of death, and Isaiah prophesied the word of the Lord that he would die and not recover, telling the king that he must therefore set his house in order. But after Hezekiah had prayed and wept, the word of the Lord came again to Isaiah, instructing him to tell the king that as a result fifteen years would be added to his life (Isa. 38:1-6; 2 Kgs 20:1-6). In this case the original prophecy was not fulfilled, suggesting (along with the other Scriptural texts) that what is known by prophecy can be false.<sup>50</sup> Truth, after all, according to Aquinas, involves conformity of intellect and reality,<sup>51</sup> and in these Scriptural cases prophetic knowledge and the actual outcomes did not conform. Aquinas seeks his solution initially not in any straightforward conformity between prophecy and outcome but in a more nuanced conformity of prophetic knowledge to reality by way of an exploration of the relationship of prophetic knowledge to divine knowledge.

While the authors of *When the Son of Man Didn't Come* certainly recognise the *genuineness* of prophetic inspiration as Christian theologians, they make little of it in their argument.<sup>52</sup> That prophecy is a matter of revelation, a word of the Lord, is in contrast crucial to what Aquinas has to say about the veracity of prophetic knowledge and proclamation. For Aquinas, while prophecy has several elements, including proclamation, it is in the first place *knowledge*, including of future contingents.<sup>53</sup> More specifically, it is a knowledge of things impressed by divine revelation onto the intellect of the prophet through the mode of teaching. Aquinas thus finds an analogy for prophecy in teacher and pupil, where the knowledge that exists first in the

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., sed contra.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., obj. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1.16.1.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, p. 243.

<sup>53</sup> *Summa*, 2-2.171.1.

teacher is reproduced in the mind of the pupil, such that the pupil's knowledge is a likeness or 'similitude' of the teacher's knowledge. This Aquinas compares again to natural generation among creatures where a likeness of the form of the generator is reproduced in what is generated. It is the likeness of prophetic knowledge to divine knowledge that gives Aquinas the opportunity to argue for the veracity of prophetic knowledge, since the truth of knowledge must be the same in them both, just as the same knowledge cannot be true in the teacher and not true in the pupil.<sup>54</sup>

For Aquinas, the knowledge a prophet receives from God as Teacher is then a special example of the dependence of all human knowledge on the divine. All created knowledge is in fact a participation in, an imitation of, divine knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Since, on Aquinas's account, the transcendent God is entirely simple and creatures are complex,<sup>56</sup> the same can be said for the knowledge found – analogically – in each. God's knowledge is absolutely identical with himself, including the intellectual light under which he knows, the single means by which he knows, the act of knowledge by which he knows, and the Word begotten by the Father in the act of knowledge – all are identical with the divine essence.<sup>57</sup> In the case of complex human creatures, by contrast, there is a real distinction between the created light under which they know, the multiple means by which they know, their many acts of knowledge, and the words, mental and otherwise, which are produced in their acts of knowledge. The light under which they know by nature in the natural light of human reason, and their multiple means of knowledge are the many intelligible *species* impressed on the intellect through processes of abstraction from sense data via the imagination – first *species* are presented to the senses, then to the imagination, and finally to the intellect. We are concerned here in particular both with *species* as the means by which things known are received or represented in the mind, and with the intellectual light by which judgement is made concerning the things represented.<sup>58</sup>

What happens for Aquinas in the supernatural gift of prophecy, as we have already noted, is that the prophet is *taught* by God. In the merely *human* act of teaching, where one human being teaches another, the teacher presents intellectual content to the pupil through the use of linguistic signs, with the result that the same intelligible *species* appears in the mind of the pupil as already existed in the

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 2-2.171.6.

<sup>55</sup> *Lectura super Ioannem*, 1.1.

<sup>56</sup> *Summa*, 1.3.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 1.14.2, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 2-2.173.2.

mind of the teacher.<sup>59</sup> What the human teacher cannot do of course is to supply the pupil with that interior intellectual light by which judgement is made. In every instance of prophecy, however, God *does* supply interior light, graciously conferring on the prophet's mind a higher intellectual light by which he can judge matters in a way that surpasses the limitations of human reason, a prophetic light which cannot be dispensed from any genuine act of prophecy. In addition to the infusion of this prophetic light, there must also be present some representation of what is known, and this representation can be received into the mind in various ways, including through the natural processes of the senses, as well as by way of a supernatural infusion of *species* by God into the imagination or intellect. It is in respect of this infusion of *species* that we see a closer resemblance between prophecy and human teaching.<sup>60</sup> Thus by way of the infusion of both intellectual light and different kinds of *species*, the gift of prophecy enables the prophet through being taught by God to participate in a higher way in the knowledge of God.

The upshot is that, given that prophetic knowledge is a similitude of divine knowledge impressed on the prophetic mind in the mode of teaching, as the knowledge of the pupil is a similitude of the knowledge of the teacher, the truth of prophetic knowledge and proclamation must be the same as the truth of divine knowledge. In all this we see Aquinas tracing back the truth of prophetic knowledge to the truth of divine knowledge. Earlier in the *Summa* he had concluded that there was truth in God and that God was Truth itself, the highest and first Truth. Given that truth is found in the intellect insofar as it apprehends something as it is, and also in things insofar as they are conformable to an intellect, this is found in the highest degree in God, since his being and intellect are perfectly conformed and indeed are one and the same by divine simplicity: God's own being and essence and understanding are absolutely identical.<sup>61</sup> Thus there is truth in the divine intellect through a simple act of intellect by which God knows and judges all things.<sup>62</sup> According to Aquinas, this truth of the divine intellect is immutable, on account of the fact that God cannot undergo an alteration of opinions and nothing can escape his knowledge.<sup>63</sup> That God's knowledge is invariable is shown by the fact that his essence and being are identical with his knowledge

<sup>59</sup> For Aquinas on the act of teaching, see Wolfgang Schmidl, *Homo discens: Studien zur Pädagogischen Anthropologie bei Thomas von Aquin* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1987), pp. 15-90; Vivian Boland, *St Thomas Aquinas* (Continuum Library of Educational Thought, vol. 1; London and New York: Continuum, 2007), pp. 41-58.

<sup>60</sup> *Summa*, 2-2.173.2.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.16.5.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* ad 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.16.8.

by way of divine simplicity, and God himself is unchanging in every respect;<sup>64</sup> that God is omniscient, as Scripture teaches (Heb 4:13), is shown by the fact that all else that is or might be is caused by divine power and so in knowing himself God knows by means of his own essence all that is in his power to do.<sup>65</sup> In contrast to this immutability of truth in the divine intellect, truth in the human intellect is said to be mutable insofar as the intellect can change from truth to falsehood. But if the prophet's knowledge is a similitude of the divine knowledge, given through divine teaching, then prophetic knowledge shares in its truth and is not subject to falsehood.<sup>66</sup> What Aquinas needs to do is show how the Scriptural texts of his second objection are compatible with this conclusion.

As we have seen, Aquinas is following a general pattern of argument that understands prophetic knowledge in the light of the divine knowledge of the prophet's Teacher. He does this also in his solutions to the other two objections put in favour of falsehood in prophetic knowledge, arguments that are meant to catch what has been referred to above as Mosaic prophecy, where prophecy and outcome should straightforwardly conform. The first objection notes that prophecy relates to future contingents, and goes on to observe that this means that they can fail to come to pass, or else they would be necessary rather than contingent. But if they can fail to come to pass, prophecy concerning them can be false.<sup>67</sup> The third objection states that if prophecy were never subject to error, we must concede that, if an event has been prophesied, it will come to pass. Now given that it is necessarily true, being a past event, that the prophecy has been made, and since necessary conclusions follow logically from necessary premises, the event itself must be necessary and so prophecy would no longer relate to contingents. Given, however, that prophecy does indeed relate to contingents, it cannot after all be true that prophecy is never subject to error.<sup>68</sup>

In his answers to both these objections, Aquinas traces the question back to divine knowledge, in this case of future contingents. Aquinas takes the view that, since God knows all things, this must include what are future contingents for us. Contingents, he holds, may be considered in two ways, either as actual, that is, as present, or in their causes, that is, as future (a distinction he elsewhere treats as the principal distinction to be made among kinds of prophecy and to which traditional distinctions of different kinds of prophecy must

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.9.1; 14.4, 15.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.14.5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-2.171.6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, obj. 1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, obj. 3.

be subordinated<sup>69</sup>). In the case of the former kind, that is, present knowledge of a contingent outcome, Aquinas provides the example of someone seeing Socrates sitting down, which is an instance of certain knowledge through the sense of sight, where what was previously undetermined (whether or not Socrates would sit) is now determined (he sits), but the certainty of the act of present knowledge does not remove the contingency of the act itself, which could have been otherwise. Prior to the act of sitting, where the contingent was still future to the observer, it could at best have been conjectured from some cause that Socrates would sit. God, however, since he is unchanging, has his knowledge measured by eternity and not by time (which in contrast measures change), and so he knows all things as present to himself, including contingents, even if they are future to those who are in time.<sup>70</sup> This provides Aquinas with a reply to the first objection to prophetic knowledge of future contingents: Given that prophecy is a similitude of divine knowledge impressed onto the prophet's mind, the prophet as such will have certain knowledge of the outcome as it known in its presentness to God, even though the event remains future in time to the prophet himself. Thus prophetic knowledge, just like divine knowledge, does not exclude contingency from the outcome known.<sup>71</sup> And with regard to the third objection, Aquinas agrees that if the prophecy has happened, the event must necessarily come to pass, but says that this is not the case if we take it as future to ourselves, but only if we take it in its presentness to God, prophetic knowledge being an imprint of that divine knowledge.<sup>72</sup> In each case, Aquinas considers himself to have avoided having to embrace the conclusion that prophecy can be false.

Aquinas follows the same path of tracing prophetic knowledge back to divine knowledge when replying to the crucial second objection.<sup>73</sup> As we said above, contingents can also be known in their futurity by way of conjecture from their causes, where they are known as undetermined as yet to one particular effect. An example of such 'conjectural knowledge' would be a medical prognosis: a doctor knows the causes of death present in his patient, from which he can conjecture that the patient will die in the future within a certain timespan. Of course this is not certain knowledge of the future on the part of the doctor: the matter is still undetermined such that a different outcome is technically possible (we may suppose through the timely arrival of a new drug or a miracle cure). Now, given that God knows all things, it cannot be denied that God knows things in their causes as well

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-2.174.1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.14.13.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-2.171.6 ad 1.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 2.



as in themselves. Indeed, when Aquinas treated God's knowledge of contingents, he argued that God has knowledge of contingents both as yet undetermined in their causes and as determined in themselves.<sup>74</sup> So, in the example of the doctor and patient, God would know this contingent both in its causes and in itself, knowing *both* that certain symptoms are leading to the patient's as yet undetermined death *and* the determinate outcome of the patient's death in itself. This would mean that it would be open to God not only to reveal to a prophet the death of the patient as a determinate outcome in itself, but also to reveal it by way of its causes where it is as such undetermined and a different outcome may actually result. The latter can of course take place even where God has decided that a different outcome will come about. It is open to God not only to reveal to a prophet an outcome such as a miracle cure, but also simply to reveal that certain symptoms were pointing to death. Aquinas supposes that while both kinds of knowledge exist eternally in the simplicity of the infinite divine mind, an individual instance of prophecy as a finite impression made by God on the prophetic mind does not match up to the whole of God's power, and hence does not encompass both kinds knowledge at once: impressions made by agents do not always match the agent's power.

Sometimes then prophets may have revealed to them God's knowledge of some contingent as it is determined in itself in its presentness. At other times, however, he may imprint on their minds a similitude of his knowledge by way of causes, and this is what we have in the cases of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jonah. What is reproduced here from divine knowledge is not knowledge of outcomes but knowledge of the order of causes to effects, where events can still unfold in a different way from what is prophesied on the basis of causes. In the example of Isaiah and Hezekiah, God knows by way of causes that Hezekiah's illness is leading to his death (such as not to exclude the possibility of another outcome) and this God initially impresses (by way of infused *species*) on Isaiah's mind. As Aquinas explains it, Isaiah informs Hezekiah that the 'disposition of your body is ordered to death.'<sup>75</sup> Likewise with Jonah: God knows by way of causes that Nineveh's sins call for its destruction, a knowledge which does not exclude the possibility of a different outcome, and he infuses knowledge of this kind into Jonah's mind. It is because of the nature of this knowledge, which is not of outcomes but of the order of causes and effects, that Aquinas argues that these prophecies are not subject to error. What is known and proclaimed by them is not the outcome as such, but that certain causes, either natural or human, are disposed

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 1.14.13.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 2-2.171.6 ad 2.

to certain effects (while another outcome remains possible), and this knowledge and proclamation is true: Isaiah's illness was indeed causing him to die, and the sins of the Ninevites in Jonah were indeed calling out for destruction, whatever the eventual outcomes. Prophetic knowledge by causes conforms to reality and is no more subject to error than is divine knowledge by causes. Finally, Aquinas notes that the change that may follow in Hezekiah's body or Ninevite behaviour does not undermine the immutability of God (a doctrine to which the authors of *When the Son of Man Didn't Come* are also committed<sup>76</sup>), since God's 'repentance' is spoken of metaphorically. For Aquinas, while God may issue different decrees for different times, not unlike one who changes his mind, they are individually part of a single, unchanging divine plan, which through divine omniscience takes account of all creaturely responses to prophetic exhortation.

I suggest that Aquinas's distinction between different kinds of knowledge of contingents can be mapped onto the distinction made by the authors of *When the Son of Man Didn't Come* between Mosaic and Jeremianic prophecy. In the former case it is the revelation to the prophet of an outcome as known by God in its presentness that enables a prophet to make a Mosaic prophecy that is unconditional: some named outcome just will take place. In the latter case it is the revelation of the order of causes to effects, as in Aquinas's account, that makes the prophet able to make a Jeremianic prophecy with a conditional character, as suggested by historical criticism. We may thus say that the conditional character of the prophecy is made possible precisely because the prophetic knowledge is by way of causes. The prophet can thus proclaim that something will happen on the condition that certain causes remain in place and other causes do not intervene in favour of a different outcome. Through participation in divine knowledge by causes that the sins of a people call out for destruction, a prophet can proclaim that destruction will come, so long as the people remain in their sins. All that remains for us to do is ask how this can apply to Christ's prophecy of his imminent return, where what is at stake is not so much the outcome itself as its timeframe.

Aquinas seems to have treated Christ's prophecy simply as Mosaic prophecy whereby he knew the relevant outcome in itself through infused *species* in his human mind, with no hint that he interpreted it instead as knowledge through causes or in any way conditional. For example, following patristic authorities he takes the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 10:23 as able to be referred to the outcome of the resurrection,<sup>77</sup> and the Kingdom of God in 16:28 to the

<sup>76</sup> *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, p. 261.

<sup>77</sup> *Lectura super Matthaeum*, 8.2.

Church.<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere I have suggested that, while Aquinas followed a problematic patristic exegesis on the question of the Son not knowing the day or the hour (Mk 13:32), his theology of different kinds of knowledge in Christ's human mind opens up the possibility of a more convincing speculative exegesis of the passage in question.<sup>79</sup> I suggest here that we ask here whether Aquinas's distinction between different kinds of prophetic knowledge can help articulate a speculative exegesis different from his own, which takes into account the historical-critical theory of Jeremianic prophecy. In so doing we can ask whether Aquinas's account of prophetic knowledge can support the veracity of a Jeremianic prophecy made by Christ concerning the timespan of his return within a generation.

On this view, distinct from both his divine knowledge and his human mind's perfect participation in divine knowledge by way of the beatific vision, whereby Christ on Aquinas's account knew the exact timing of the last day, though inexpressibly, together with a knowledge through causes,<sup>80</sup> Christ would also have possessed a prophetic knowledge by way of causes, represented in his mind through expressible *species*. As a sharing in divine knowledge, these *species* would either be infused into his human mind (Aquinas attributes to Christ's human mind an infused knowledge distinct from beatific and acquired knowledge<sup>81</sup>) or could have been drawn from his beatific vision in a manner Aquinas thinks available to all the blessed (as I suggest elsewhere<sup>82</sup>). What would be required for the veracity of the prophecy would be more than a mere 'assumption' that people would repent. What is required is that there were indeed around the time of the prophecy 'causes' of the particular timespan of his return in question, known by the divine knowledge by way of causes and hence by prophetic knowledge too. Christ would effectively have been saying by way of prophecy, impressed on his human mind by divine knowledge, that certain conditions were disposing for an early Parousia, without this timeframe being determined: 'The current presence of these conditions is leading to the coming of the Son of Man before the current generation passes away.'

But what could these 'causes' have been? Since, as the authors of the *When the Son of Man Didn't Come* concede, the conditionality of his prophecy was not made explicit by Jesus, neither can we expect these causes as such to be made explicit in his teaching, given the

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 16.3.

<sup>79</sup> Gainé, *Did the Saviour See the Father?*, pp. 156-8.

<sup>80</sup> *Summa*, 3.9.1-2; 3.10.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 3.9.3; 3.11. For Christ's infused knowledge see my 'Is there still a place for Christ's infused knowledge in Catholic theology and exegesis?', *Nova et Vetera* (forthcoming).

<sup>82</sup> Gainé, *Did the Saviour See the Father?*, pp. 99-100.

link we have made between knowledge by causes and Jeremianic conditionality. Instead the causes will need to be identified from the fact that it was their subsequent absence that meant the deferral of Christ's return. As we saw above, the authors argue that Christ's return was delayed because the conditions of sufficient repentance and the preaching of the Gospel were not being fulfilled. If such was the divine rationale for deferral, we can infer that the presence of the preaching of the Kingdom during Jesus' ministry and some significant response to it would have counted as disposing for an early Parousia, and, had they been continued beyond Jesus' ministry for the timespan of that generation, would have witnessed that result. What would be required for the veracity of Christ's prophecy would be conformity between the presence of these causes in the world and Christ's human mind.

That there were indeed both proclamation of the Kingdom by Jesus and his disciples during his ministry, and significant positive response to it, is clear from the Gospels. The close link between miracles, healings and proclamation in Jesus' ministry may suggest that all these activities of Jesus' ministry could have played a relevant 'causal' role (e.g., Mt. 11:3-4). What we must suppose on this view is that by way of prophecy Jesus judged all this activity and people's response to it to call for an imminent Parousia. There is some intimation of confirmation of this by way of a prophetic vision enjoyed by Jesus, according to Luke's Gospel, while the seventy-two were preaching the Kingdom. When they return, announcing that even the demons were subject to them in his name, he replies, 'I saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven.' (10:18) What all this suggests is that Christ as prophet knew that the causes of an early Parousia were in place, while at the same time knowing (since his knowledge was by causes) that this timeframe was as yet undetermined, and that the absence of the continuation of these causes would mean its delay. But, if that is the case, the conformity of his prophetic knowledge by way of causes with the actual presence of these causes during his ministry would guarantee the veracity of his prophecy. And, if that is the case, the authors of *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, through their historical-critical distinction between Mosaic and Jeremianic prophecy, certainly when linked to Aquinas's distinction between two kinds of prophetic knowledge, will have added to the set of proposed theological explanations of how Christ's prophecy of his return, despite the doubts of much biblical scholarship, was true.

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