Introduction

The belief that Jesus fulfilled scripture is part of the DNA, as it were, of Christianity. That belief goes back as far as anything historians can trace in early Christianity. Paul, whose letters are the earliest available writings about Jesus, wrote that Christ died for sins "according to the scriptures," and was raised on the third day "according to the scriptures." In expressing these beliefs Paul insisted that he was merely repeating what he had been told by those who were believers before him (1 Cor 15:3–4). The belief that Jesus fulfilled scripture was crucial to the earliest groups of Jesus followers—either Jews or non-Jews who knew that they had joined a Jewish movement—because it was a means to assure themselves of their religious legitimacy. It enabled them to relate what was new (Jesus) to what was old (the scriptures of Israel). Making that connection was essential in a time and culture that regarded old sacred writings with reverence and anything new in religion with suspicion.

From the beginnings of Christianity, then, the belief that Jesus fulfilled prophecy[1] functioned as an attempt to *prove* something of great importance. It is appropriate, therefore, to describe the way early Christians expressed their belief in the fulfillment of prophecy as an *argument*, which I will call in this book the "argument from prophecy." The argumentative quality of that belief has endured in Christian discourse, and is fully on display in contemporary Christianity.

For a representative contemporary example of the argument from prophecy, I turn not to some scholarly writing on the topic, but to a short and simple selection from an Internet blog aimed at a mass Christian audience. Its author, Rick Warren, wrote the hugely popular *The Purpose Driven Life*,[2]

1. I use "fulfill scripture" and "fulfill prophecy" more or less interchangeably. As we will see, Jews and Christians regarded numerous passages from the books of the prophets and from other books of scripture as predictions of the future.

2. Zondervan, 2002. According to the book's website (http://purposedriven.com/

and is pastor of Saddleback Community Church, a non-denominational evangelical megachurch in Orange County, California. Warren's immense following and his celebrity status among evangelical Christians make it a safe bet that his public beliefs are widely shared by American evangelicals. Here is the essence of one of Warren's devotional postings from 2013.

Biblical Prophesies [*sic*]: What Are the Odds?

> One of the reasons I can know that the Bible is true and trustworthy is that it has thousands and thousands of prophecies that have come true and will come true in history. Every one of the Bible's prophecies have [*sic*] either come true exactly as God predicted or will come true sometime in the future.
>
> The Bible contains more than 300 prophecies about Jesus alone—all written a thousand years before he was born . . . What are the odds that I could make 300 predictions about you and every one of them would come true? It's so astronomical, you couldn't write the number down. It takes more faith to believe that the Bible's prophecies were a coincidence than to believe that God planned them.
>
> During Bible times, nobody wanted to be a prophet. The law in Israel was that a prophet of God had to be correct 100 percent of the time. If you were wrong just once, then you were considered a false prophet and would have been put to death. A prophet better be right!
>
> And the Bible prophecies were right—every one of them. You can trust the Bible because what the Bible predicts comes true.[3]

This short piece is an ideal snapshot of popular Christian notions of biblical prophecy and so is worth our close attention. The piece is structured as an argument, that is, as a series of statements that lead to a conclusion (the Bible is true), which is set out strategically at the top of the excerpt and in the last sentence. As the title of the piece indicates, the argument is based on mathematics: "What are the odds?" But one need not be good at math to follow the argument, for it relies not on calculations, but rather on intuitions about impressive numbers ("more than 300 . . . astronomical . . . correct 100% of the time").

What the argument is designed to prove is interesting in that it is somewhat unexpected. One might expect the claim that Jesus fulfilled hundreds of prophecies to point to the conclusion that Jesus was the messiah

books/pdlbook/#purpose), over 32 million copies have been sold.

3. Warren, "Biblical Prophesies [*sic*]."

foretold by the prophets. Instead, the conclusion of Warren's argument has to do with the Bible, not Jesus. The argument comes down to this: Jesus fulfilled prophecy; therefore, the Bible is true.

A bit of critical thinking can spot the fundamental error in this argument's reasoning. What is the *evidence* that Jesus fulfilled prophecy? Answer: the Bible says he did. So, the argument actually amounts to something like this: I know the Bible is true because Jesus fulfilled prophecy; and I know that Jesus fulfilled prophecy because the Bible says so, and what the Bible says is true. In other words: I believe the Bible is true because I believe the Bible is true.

My aim in this analysis is not primarily to demonstrate that this argument is logically empty but to explore its effect on its intended audience. Who would be persuaded by this argument? Only those who already have faith in the Bible. This insight, simple though it might be, is the key to a major thesis of my book: arguments based on the fulfillment of prophecy are rationally persuasive only to believers. More specifically, arguments that Jesus fulfilled prophecy work only for those who already believe in him. To assert that Jesus fulfilled prophecy is, in effect, to *profess* one's Christian faith; it is not, as it might seem at first, to offer evidence for one's faith. The claim that Jesus fulfilled prophecy is, therefore, not part of a proper argument; it is a profession of faith formatted *as if* it were an argument. Its function is to reaffirm beliefs that are already in place.

What This Book Is About

This book is about how and why Jews and Christians in Antiquity expressed their convictions that the biblical prophets had predicted realities that had been fulfilled either in their recent past or in the time of the origin of their particular religious movement. More specifically, this book is about the argument from prophecy: its origin and development, history, methods, functions, presuppositions, implications, and problems. To explain that list briefly, this book studies:

- the origin and development of the belief that the biblical prophets predicted events that were to occur in the distant future;
- the various concrete ways in which belief in the fulfillment of prophecy was expressed over the centuries;
- the specific methods and techniques that interpreters of biblical prophecy used in their attempts to demonstrate the fulfillment of prophecy in their own time or in the recent past;

- how the argument from prophecy functioned within the religious thought of the writers who presented it and in the thought of the audiences for whom they wrote, and within the literary contexts of their writings;
- what the argument from prophecy presupposes, and what it implies, about prophets, prophecy, and the interpreters of prophecy;
- the problems that the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible creates for the argument from prophecy in contemporary Christianity.

Outline of the Book

This book unfolds in four parts, in historical order.

Part 1 (chapters 1–6): Prophecy, Prediction, and Fulfillment in Israel

As its title indicates, this book is interested primarily in early Christian beliefs that Jesus fulfilled prophecy. But our study cannot begin with early Christian beliefs, because those beliefs were rooted in more ancient Jewish ones. Part 1 explores the development of Jewish concepts of the nature of prophecy and how it might be fulfilled, from Old Testament times through the first century CE. The first chapter examines the ancient Israelite understandings of what prophets were and of how their pronouncements concerned the future, and the vexing problem of how to tell the difference between true and false prophets. Chapters 2 and 3 investigate some false predictions made by biblical prophets, some subsequent efforts to cope with problems that such predictions created, and what those complications reveal about the nuances in Israelite notions of prophecy. Chapter 4 turns to ancient Greece and its understanding of prophecy as cryptic predictions with unforeseeable fulfillments. Starting from the third century BCE, Greek concepts exerted powerful influence on how Jews, and later Christians, understood the prophetic scriptures. Chapter 5 studies the fascinating claims in the Dead Sea Scrolls that biblical prophecies had been fulfilled in the recent history of an idiosyncratic sect of dissident Jews. Chapter 6, which covers the second century BCE through the first century CE, samples two ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible, one into Greek (the Septuagint) and one into Aramaic (a targum), and the works of the Jewish historian Josephus in order to track the development of Jewish beliefs and literary practices relating to the fulfillment of prophecy—beliefs and practices that

formed the ground from which grew early Christian approaches to the fulfillment of prophecy.

Part 2 (chapters 7–13): The Fulfillment of Prophecy in the New Testament

This is the heart of the book. Within the New Testament (NT), the belief that Jesus fulfilled prophecy is expressed most overtly and extensively in the gospels, primarily in the Gospels of Matthew and John. Chapters 8 through 11 scrutinize each of the NT gospels, analyzing every generic statement that Jesus fulfilled prophecy and every individual passage that quotes an Old Testament (OT) scripture and matches it with some event in the gospel narrative. These analyses have various historical-critical objectives, three of which are the most important to our topic: (1) to compare the wording of the scriptures as quoted in the gospels to their wordings in the OT, (2) to compare the meanings the quoted scriptures have in their own literary and historical contexts to the meanings they acquire in their new contexts in the gospels, (3) to discern how the text of a given prophecy might have influenced the composition of the gospel passage that shows its fulfillment.

I will argue that these detailed literary analyses enable us to understand the interpretive methods by which the gospel authors, especially the authors we call Matthew and John, shape their evidence and hone their arguments that Jesus fulfilled prophecy. It is in these ways that the gospel writers *help* Jesus fulfill prophecy.

The chapters on the gospels also investigate how the argument from prophecy functions within the gospels to legitimate the Jesus movement and to delegitimate Jews who do not follow Jesus. These chapters trace the specific contours of the anti-Jewish edge on the argument from prophecy, especially in Matthew and John, where the anti-Jewish polemic is protracted and acerbic. The chapters on Matthew and John also assess the plausibility and fairness of their unsubtle arguments that Jews have no excuse for not believing in Jesus because he had so clearly fulfilled prophecy.

In addition to examining the four gospels, part 2 treats the literary expression of the fulfillment of prophecy in the rest of the NT by analyzing representative and interesting examples from the Acts of the Apostles (in chapter 9), from the writings of Paul (in chapter 12), and from the Letter to the Hebrews (in chapter 13).

Part 3 (chapters 14–16): The Argument from Prophecy in Patristic Thought

Patristic authors, also known as the church fathers, were Christian theologians from roughly the second through the sixth century. Building on the NT proclamation of the fulfillment of prophecy, these authors developed the argument from prophecy into a pillar of early Christian theology that functioned as a foundation for how Christians thought about the OT and the relationship of Christians to Jews. Part 3 deals primarily with two giants in the field of early Christian scriptural interpretation: the second-century Justin Martyr (chapter 14) and the fourth- and fifth-century Augustine (chapter 16). Chapter 15, "Between Justin and Augustine," briefly analyzes the work of Eusebius of Caesarea (fourth century) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (fifth century), and samples a few representative excerpts from other authors.

Justin and Augustine each buttressed the argument from prophecy with hundreds of examples of how Jesus or the church fulfilled specific scriptures. Both Justin and Augustine embedded the fulfillment of prophecy within overtly anti-Jewish apologetics. Justin linked the argument from prophecy directly to the belief that Christians have replaced Jews as God's chosen people. Augustine constructed an elaborate argument to show that because the argument from prophecy was so obviously compelling, Jewish unbelief in Jesus must have been willful, and thus sinful, which is why Jews deserved the divine punishment under which they survived as dispersed exiles.

Part 4 (chapters 17–18): Modern Reckoning with the Argument from Prophecy

With part 4 the book jumps directly from Augustine to the modern period. The opening paragraph of part 4 explains the rationale for this historical gap in the book's outline. Chapter 17, "Modern Christian Thought on the Fulfillment of Prophecy," analyzes a representative sample of modern Christian engagements with the argument from prophecy, a sample that includes modern apologetic uses of the argument, as well as uneasy assessments of it from the perspective of the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible. The chapter gives special attention to the methodological and theological difficulties the argument from prophecy raises for Christian scholars who embrace historical criticism.

Chapter 18 teases out exegetical, historical, and logical problems that historical criticism exposes in the modern use of the argument from prophecy. I will argue that attempts by modern historical-critical scholars to harmonize the NT presentation of the fulfillment of prophecy with historical criticism have failed. I will make the case that the argument from prophecy fails as a rational argument because it depends on faulty presuppositions, breaks basic rules of logic, and is undermined by a fundamental error in its reasoning. The chapter also raises doubts about the ethical status of the argument from prophecy within contemporary Christianity, given the argument's inherent and disturbing anti-Jewish polemic. The book closes by urging Christians to retire the argument from prophecy.

There are two appended chapters. The first, "Muhammad in the Bible?", examines an unusual facet of modern belief in the fulfillment of prophecy: arguments by contemporary Muslims that the prophet Muhammad fulfilled biblical prophecies. Non-Muslims will find those arguments utterly implausible, and rightly so. However, those arguments employ some of the very same interpretive practices by which NT authors argued that Jesus fulfilled prophecy. A second appended chapter, "Adam and Edom," analyzes a fascinating (mis)use of a prophecy from Amos in the Acts of the Apostles. The version of the prophecy quoted in Acts has the opposite meaning from the prophecy found in the Hebrew text of Amos. Ironically, however, Amos' original prophecy proved false, while its transformed version in Acts has come true.

Past and Present

The basic function of scripture in any religion is to speak to the present. In Judaism and Christianity, believers look to biblical writings for guidance, wisdom, inspiration, and insight for their lives. Believers want to know what the Bible *means* to them, in the real-life context of their own circumstances. The academic historical-critical study of the Bible, insofar as its methods are purely academic, embodies a quite different agenda. It is interested in such topics as how, when, why, and by whom the biblical texts were composed; what they *meant* to their original authors and audiences; and what those texts can teach us about the lives and times of the people about and for whom they were written. The knowledge thus attained is *historical* knowledge, valued—as knowledge in the humanities should be—for its own sake, regardless of how people might (or might not) choose to find meaning in that knowledge for their own lives.

In the study of biblical prophecy, the historical-critical approach to the Bible understands the words of the prophets as acts of communication between prophets and their contemporaries. The prophets interpreted their own times in the light of what they believed were God's acts in their past, God's will for their present, and God's plans for their (almost always) short-term future. When a prophet's message included predictions, they were meant to orient those in the prophet's present to the will of God as it was about to be fulfilled in the near future. Even eschatological prophecies (predictions concerning the End of history) were intended to influence the present hopes and behavior of the prophets' contemporary audiences. However, later audiences, hoping to hear the word of God in the words of the prophets, inevitably understood their pronouncements in relation to their own (i.e., the later audience's) time or the time of the origin of its particular religious community. Thus, for example, the Jewish sect responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls related biblical prophecy to the recent history of its community, and Christians related OT prophecy to their own time or to the time of Jesus.

The purpose of bringing old prophecies to bear on the present was to validate the audience's self-understanding as a community that embodied God's plan for history as it had unfolded up until then. In that way, later audiences appropriated the divine authority of past prophecy for their own self-validation. The means by which they worked that magic was a framework of interpretation in which the ancient prophets were reimagined as visionaries who predicted "us," even though they did not understand what they had foreseen. The early followers of Jesus cultivated an identity as the new people of God, the heirs of God's promises to Israel. A crucial process by which they rationalized their self-understanding was a set of ingenious interpretations that transformed often cryptic scriptural prophecies into (what they believed were) recognizable predictions about Jesus and their church.

That way of understanding the OT prophets and of appropriating their words came naturally in the NT period. The interpretive presuppositions and techniques used in the NT were not invented by early Christians; they were well established within Jewish hermeneutics.[4] The early Christians learned how to interpret scripture from their Jewish tradition. Of course, the overwhelming majority of Jews, who did not embrace Jesus, rejected the specific Christian interpretations of scripture—or would have rejected them if they had been aware of them—but they almost certainly would have

4. *Hermeneutics* refers to the disciplined effort to interpret what texts mean for contemporary audiences.

found the interpretive methods used by followers of Jesus unsurprising, perhaps even familiar. And a century or two later, after Christians began to regard the writings that came to be called the New Testament as authoritative scriptures on a par with those from Judaism, the NT interpretations of OT prophecy were themselves endowed with divine authority. Christians therefore reflexively considered those interpretations to be not only true, but obviously and unquestionably true. From the Christian perspective, the old prophecies meant what the inspired authors of the NT said they meant. Christians believed that the word of God in the NT thus revealed the true meaning of the word of God in the OT.

That theological understanding of the Bible and its interpretation retained a monopoly in Christian thought throughout nearly all of Christian history—until the historical-critical study of the Bible began to develop in the wake of the Enlightenment. To those who study the Bible with the modern historical-critical assumptions that the words of the prophets meant what the prophets intended them to mean, the NT interpretations of some of those prophecies can seem far from obvious and quite questionable. Anyone with a decent study Bible can compare the wordings of prophecies as quoted in the NT with their wordings in the OT, or can compare their meanings in the NT with what they seem to mean in their original OT contexts. In many cases, those simple procedures are sufficient to turn NT interpretations of prophecy from obvious into puzzling.[5]

The insistence on, and even interest in, what the prophets originally meant in communicating with their contemporaries is a distinctly modern concern.[6] That concern is the explicit goal of the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible (or historical criticism for short), which is a set of interpretive methods designed to determine what biblical texts mean on their own terms and in their own historical, literary, linguistic, social, religious, and political contexts. Historical criticism proceeds without reference to beliefs that biblical authors were inspired by God. It neither affirms nor denies that biblical passages convey divine revelation. Rather, its concern is with what the scriptural texts meant to those who composed them and those who received them. It is from the perspective of that concern that the various NT passages that feature fulfillments of prophecy raise interesting and serious questions, precisely because those NT passages give OT texts new meanings that they do not—and in many cases cannot—have in their own contexts.

5. It was curiosity about those puzzling interpretations that started me on the path toward writing this book.

6. There are some premodern exceptions, but they are very few. See the discussion about Theodore of Mopsuestia, pp. 274–78.

Here I want to be especially clear, because it is easy to misunderstand what that last point implies. The historical-critical assessment that the NT attributes meanings to prophecies that are foreign to their original meanings in the OT could be taken to imply that historical criticism is right and the NT is wrong when it comes to discerning the meanings of prophecies. But that would be a misunderstanding. It is not that historical criticism interprets the prophets correctly and that interpretations derived from the NT are wrong. Rather, those who practice historical criticism interpret prophecies differently than did the NT authors because historical critics ask fundamentally different questions about those prophecies than NT authors asked. The answers we get are always conditioned by the questions we ask. Historical criticism asks, what did this prophetic pronouncement mean in Hebrew, in the specific literary unit in which we find it in the edited text, and in the context of this or that political crisis or social situation in, say, eighth-century-BCE Israel? The NT writers, by contrast, asked questions like these: What light does this divine pronouncement throw on our story about Jesus? How does it help us understand our place in the unfolding of God's will for us, God's people? Historical criticism does not claim to be the *only* legitimate approach to biblical interpretation. Nor does it assert that the only valid meanings of a text are those intended by its author and/or received by its original audience. However, most modern readers who are serious about understanding what they read want to discern what an author meant by what he or she wrote. That kind of aim comes naturally, and seems unavoidable, to the modern mind, and historical criticism is the best means we have for achieving that goal as best we can.

Some Central Theses of This Book

The primary focus of this book is on the Christian belief that Jesus fulfilled prophecy, as that belief was expressed in Christian writings from the first five centuries, especially in the NT. This book examines in detail how those writings claim that Jesus fulfilled specific scriptures. In the process of that examination, I will argue that, in many cases

- the connection between a prophecy and its alleged fulfillment is less than clear, and often seems far-fetched;
- the quotation of a prophecy by the Christian author does not always match the prophecy as it appears in the OT;

- even when the quotation is accurate, the meaning of a prophecy in its OT context is seldom the same as, and usually very different from, the meaning it acquires in its new Christian context.

Awareness of these complications draws our attention to how Christian writers "helped" Jesus fulfill prophecy, which they did in two ways: (1) by manipulating, sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly, the OT scriptures so that the scriptures could correspond to their fulfillments presented in the stories about Jesus, and (2) by manipulating, sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly, the stories about Jesus so that they could fit the predictions from the OT.

Scrutinizing how Christian texts present the fulfillment of prophecy also suggests an explanation of *how* Christians identified the numerous scriptural passages that they claimed were fulfilled by Jesus. I will argue that the process of pairing prophecies to, for example, events in the life of Jesus, was, in most cases, a *retrospective* process. That is, Christians worked backwards from events in the story of Jesus to the prophecies those events were believed to fulfill. I will argue that it is *not* the case that there was a more or less standard list of prophecies that the messiah was supposed to fulfill, that Jesus came along and fulfilled them, and that his followers came to believe that Jesus was the messiah *because* he had fulfilled those prophecies. Rather, the process usually worked the other way around: Jesus' followers, believing that he was the messiah, used the story of his life to guide their search for the prophecies he had, in their view, fulfilled.

That explanation leads to another, similar thesis: that the belief that Jesus fulfilled prophecy was prior to, and the basis for, discovering the specific prophecies that he had fulfilled. But that raises the question of how Jesus' followers came to believe that he had fulfilled prophecies *before* they had identified individual prophecies that they could match to events in his life. I will argue that the belief that Jesus fulfilled prophecy emerged as a virtually intuitive inference from the belief that Jesus was the messiah. The reasoning must have gone like this: Jesus was the messiah; the messiah was foretold by the prophets; therefore, Jesus must have fulfilled prophecy.

The belief that Jesus fulfilled prophecy had its origin in, and grew naturally from, the belief that he was the messiah. That account of the origin of the belief that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy coheres perfectly with the results of the analysis of Rick Warren's Internet devotional quoted earlier in this introduction—with the finding that claims that Jesus fulfilled prophecy are expressions of faith in Jesus, not rationally persuasive reasons for why one should believe in him.

That understanding of the function of prophecy fulfillment raises the question of the rational effectiveness of the argument from prophecy. The analysis of Warren's simplified argument from prophecy showed that because the argument employs circular reasoning, its very structure is illogical. The argument is persuasive only for those who already believe in the Bible—that is, for those who don't need to be persuaded. But what about more sophisticated versions of the argument that present evidence in the form of specific prophecies matched to particular events and circumstances in the life of Jesus? We find that kind of presentation of the fulfillment of prophecy in the gospels, especially in Matthew and John, and in the writings of patristic theologians. It is a major task of this book to analyze and assess in detail those presentations of scriptural evidence. The results of those analyses will consistently confirm that those who did not already believe in Jesus and who harbored a modicum of skepticism would be extremely unlikely to embrace faith in Jesus as a result of Christian arguments that Jesus had fulfilled a series of specific prophecies.

The thesis that identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy was (and is) a profession of Christian faith rather than its basis can sharpen our appreciation for how the argument from prophecy actually functions. If it didn't work well in recruiting outsiders to faith in Jesus, what did the argument from prophecy accomplish for early Christians? I will make the case that the argument from prophecy, as we see it deployed in the NT, especially in Matthew and John where it is developed most extensively, enabled followers of Jesus to achieve two complementary goals: (1) to justify their belief in Jesus by the strongest means available at the time, that is, by appealing to the unimpeachable authority of the scriptures of Israel; and (2) to convince themselves that Jews who did not embrace belief in Jesus were wrong not to do so, since their own scriptures predicted him.

That latter prong in the argument from prophecy reveals an anti-Jewish polemic that is built into the argument from its very beginning. It is another major task of this book to understand and reckon with the ethical implications of that polemic, which should disturb contemporary Christians. That anti-Jewish edge is abundantly evident in patristic writings, especially those by Justin Martyr (second century) and Augustine (fourth/fifth century),[7] who devoted prodigious intellectual energy to the argument from prophecy. For both of them the relationship of Christianity to Judaism was a vexing problem, and the argument from prophecy played a central role in how each of them tried to solve it. Justin's writings give evidence that second-century Jews were resisting the Christian argument on the grounds that Christians

7. See the detailed studies in chapters 14 and 16.

were misinterpreting the Jewish scriptures. Justin, in response, goes to great lengths to argue that Jews misunderstand their own scriptures. His project can be described in part as a Christian attempt to lay claim to Israel's past by appropriating its scriptures. In effect, Justin argued that those scriptures belonged to Christians and no longer to Jews. Augustine, more than two centuries later, could be more calmly confident than Justin was about the superiority of Christianity, for by Augustine's time that religion had permeated the Roman Empire. To Augustine the argument from prophecy seemed so self-evidently compelling that it became a serious question for him why there were any non-Christian Jews left. Why hadn't they all seen the light, given the overwhelming evidence from their own scriptures? Augustine's fascinating (and to me, surprising) answer to that question centers on the argument from prophecy: Jewish disbelief is a part of a complex divine strategy for bolstering the credibility of the argument from prophecy in the eyes of pagans.

The primary thesis in part 4 of this book is that the historical-critical study of the Bible has undermined the rational credibility and ethical acceptability of the argument from prophecy. When the argument from prophecy is measured by the standards of historical criticism and the canons of logic, it collapses as a rational argument. The argument is also plagued by its inherent anti-Judaism, which makes it ethically dubious, to say the least. Those considerations lead to my final thesis: the argument from prophecy needs to be retired.