

# Midrash and Prophetic Patterns

By Gerry Watts

I have been teaching for a number of years that biblical prophecy is to be approached with the following in mind: **there are prophetic patterns or cycles that repeat themselves leading to an ultimate fulfillment.** The past fulfillment helps us to understand the future fulfillment. Also, the many layers of figurative meaning throughout Scripture must only illustrate doctrine, and not be the basis for it. For me, this principle of interpretation has now been confirmed through researching the Jewish hermeneutical method of Midrash.

Simply put, Midrash uses the grammatical-historical ('literal') approach to interpreting the Scriptures, but it also allows for allegorical ('figurative') interpretation as well. It takes the various texts of Scripture that deal with similar themes or topics, and those that have a common thread, and it interprets them in light of each other using allegory and typology, but this is used to illuminate clear doctrine rather than as a foundation for doctrine.

This can allow for multiple meanings in many layers of truth, but there is always a primary or foundational truth that the other layers are built on. This is especially the case in relation to prophecy. It is not just a matter of prediction, but also of a pattern or cycle that repeats itself in history, which leads to the focal point in God's plan, the ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah and his kingdom.

It is a fact that in the writing of the New Testament Midrash is used by the Holy Spirit as a means of interpreting the Old Testament. Midrashic principles and interpretation were used during the time of Jesus and the apostles. The school of Rabbi Hillel was the foremost in using this method, and this is where the apostle Paul was trained under Rabbi Gamaliel, the grandson of Hillel. This was the method the Pharisees used to interpret Scripture.

Now although Jesus often condemned the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, it was not usually for their interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures or their foundational doctrines. Rather, He was primarily condemning their self-righteous spirit, along with their man-made rabbinic traditions that actually nullified the true Word and Law of God, raising the traditions above God's Word. Be that as it may, Jesus' teaching, as well as Paul's, is far closer to Pharisaic teaching, more than any other Jewish sect or school.

What follows here are some brief examples that reveal the midrashic principle of interpretation in Biblical prophecy, showing that prophecy is to be viewed as repeating patterns or cycles that are leading to an ultimate fulfillment. These examples will confirm that Jesus, as well as Paul, John and the other apostles, interpreted scripture this way, that is, this is the Divine principle for interpreting and

understanding Scripture as used by the Holy Spirit. It is an aid to spiritually understanding the Scriptures.

The first example shall be quite detailed because this is an extremely important prophetic pattern that is so often misunderstood by many Christians - that of Elijah and the Two Witnesses. This will also shed light on the other examples, which shall be much shorter. These things are considered in much more detail in the prophetic studies in this section. This article will serve as an introduction to these spiritual principles and patterns.

### The Coming of Elijah and the Two Witnesses

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

(Malachi 4:5-6 NIV)

"The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, **Elijah has already come**, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist."

(Matthew 17:10-13 NIV)

We can see clearly here that Jesus agreed with the rabbinic interpretation of the coming of Elijah before the judgment of the Day of the Lord, just as the prophet Malachi had stated. Now the term 'Day of the Lord' (or Day of Yahweh) in the OT is referring to a particular era of God's judgment and wrath that is poured out on a particular nation or city, especially Israel or Jerusalem. There have been many Days of the Lord, but there is the ultimate Day of the Lord still yet to come, which the NT calls the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the ultimate judgment day for all nations.

The prophecy in Malachi is primarily referring to the Day of Vengeance for Israel and Jerusalem due to their rejection of the Messiah (the striking of the land with a curse), which occurred in 70 AD. This was the official end of the Old Covenant era and natural Israel's place as the chosen nation, which occurred within 40 years of Jesus' beginning His ministry. Therefore, the Temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed as prophesied.

Jesus had previously prophesied that this destruction would come upon that generation in the First Century, in fulfillment of **all** that is written concerning natural Israel (Matthew 23:34-36; Luke 21:20-24). He also said that **all** the Prophets and the Law were prophesying until John the Baptist, who was the special messenger who introduced the Messiah and His kingdom.

"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and

the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear."

(Matthew 11:12-15 NIV)

As we learned above, Elijah was to appear before the great Day of the Lord to cause the nation to repent, yet Jesus also said that Elijah had already come! John the Baptist was this Elijah. Here is what the spirit messenger (or angel) Gabriel said to Zechariah, John's father.

"Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, **in the spirit and power of Elijah**, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

(Luke 1:16-17 NIV)

This shows that the prophecy does not need the literal prophet Elijah of the past to fulfill it - nor does it require that this Elijah should perform any miracles even, as John never performed any miraculous sign! It is figurative of a particular role and spirit - the role and spirit of a forerunner or messenger of the Messiah. The nation of Israel as a whole rejected this 'Elijah' as well as Jesus Himself, and therefore the land was cursed, as Malachi predicted, and Israel was sent into captivity by the Romans. This captivity can only truly end when individual Jews accept and see that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah - the Man Who is the Branch of David. Then they will say, "Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord" (Matthew 23:39).

Yet it is also possible to interpret Jesus' reply in Matthew 17:11 to mean that another Elijah is still coming *before* the Day of His Return, which is the ultimate Day of the Lord for the whole world, known as the Second Advent. The ministry of *this* Elijah will bring about or complete the Restoration of all things. This is being fulfilled in the Ecclesia (or Church) of God, the spiritual Body of Christ, especially as the end of this present age draws near. It is an Elijah/John the Baptist ministry.

## **The Two Witnesses**

The vision of Revelation (which is actually the Unveiling of Jesus Christ and His kingdom) contains about 7 or 8 smaller visions, if you will, that are mini-parables and allegories, and they reveal various things about God's plan in this present age and beyond, using spiritual signs and symbols.<sup>1</sup> Here is one such example.

Revelation 11 gives us the vision of the Two Witnesses or Prophets. Although this is one of the more difficult chapters in Revelation, I'm going to attempt to explore its hidden depths here a little. Two is the number of testimony and witness. If you take careful note of the description of their powers, you will find that they resemble two other OT prophets - namely, **Elijah** and **Moses**.

If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

(Revelation 11:5-6 NIV)

This is referring to the Law and the Prophets being fulfilled in Christ and His Body Ecclesia - Elijah represents the Prophets, and Moses represents the Law. Christ is described as 'a prophet like Moses' (Acts 3:22-24; Hebrews 3:3-6) because He is the ultimate Prophet and Servant of God Who is leading His people out of the slavery of sin and darkness to the promised land of the kingdom of Light, the land of their inheritance. He is also the One Who is giving (and will be giving) God's Law to the people, the One Who is Leader and Judge of His people. Yet whereas Moses represents the Old Covenant, Jesus represents the New Covenant. The Overcomers in Christ are said to be singing the song of **Moses** and the **Lamb** in Revelation 15:2-4.

The Apostles of the First Century actually performed similar miraculous signs as did Moses and Elijah to confirm to the people that they were officially deputised or commissioned of God to be His prophets. These Two Witnesses (or martyrs, for that is the meaning of *witnesses* in the Greek) are symbolising the true servants of God in the Body of Christ, His prophets who speak out His Word, many of whom have been murdered because of their faith. Ultimately, these are the ones who partake of the First Resurrection, when 'the breath of life will enter them' and they will 'ascend to heaven in a cloud.'

They are also referred to as 'the Two Olive Trees and the Two Lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth' (Revelation 11:4). This is a reference to Zechariah 4:14. In Zechariah 4, the two anointed ones were referring to Joshua the high priest, and Zerubbabel the governor. They were the primary leaders of Israel during the first stage of the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian Captivity. It could also have symbolised Haggai and Zechariah, who were the two primary prophets at that same time. This vision originally had to do with the rebuilding of the second temple in Jerusalem, restoring the ultimate Lampstand, the 7-branched Menorah, to Israel, which would be supplied by the olive oil of God's Spirit.

In New Covenant terms, though, this is symbolising the building of the spiritual temple of God, the Ecclesia, in the Messiah. The vision of the Two Witnesses/Prophets is picturing the Elijah/Moses ministry of the Body of Christ in this Church Era.

It is not a coincidence that it was Moses and Elijah who appeared in the vision of the transfiguration of Christ upon the mountain, witnessed by Peter, James and John, and it was immediately after this event that the disciples asked Jesus about Elijah coming first (Matthew 17:1-13). All of these things are connected and are loaded with spiritual meaning.

### **Three and a Half Years**

It is also not a coincidence (as nothing is in Scripture) that the length of Jesus' ministry is related to an event in Elijah's time.

During the time of the prophet Elijah's ministry, there was an awesome sign that was given to Israel and the surrounding area to show the power, as well as the judgment, of God to the people. Through Elijah's prophecy and prayer, God withheld

rain from the land for **three and a half years**, causing a great famine throughout that area (1 Kings 17:1; 18:1). Both Jesus and James confirm this.

"I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in **Elijah's** time, when the sky was shut for **three and a half years** and there was a severe famine throughout the land."

(Luke 4:25 NIV)

"**Elijah** was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for **three and a half years**. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

(James 5:17-18 NIV)

It was also prophesied by Amos that there would be a famine for hearing the Word of God before the coming of the Messiah (Amos 8:11-12). This was fulfilled during the early centuries that led up to the time of Christ's first coming, when there wasn't any official prophet of God sent to the people (known as the 'intertestamental period'). Yet there has been a greater spiritual famine of hearing the Word of Truth during the Church Era. More on this in a moment.

Now even though it is not clearly stated, it can be calculated that the length of Jesus' earthly ministry was **three and a half years**. He officially began His ministry at His baptism when He was about 30 years of age (Luke 3:21-23). This would've occurred during the Harvest/Tabernacles season about September/October 29 AD. He then died and rose again **three and a half years** later during the Passover/Firstfruits season of 33 AD.<sup>2</sup>

This three and a half year period is being alluded to in the amazing prophecy of the 70 Weeks in Daniel 9:27. Jesus' ministry began the final half of the 70th Week (half of seven is three and a half). His death, burial, resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost fulfilled the 70 Weeks (or Sevens) of 490 years (see the upcoming study on the 70 Weeks of Daniel in this section).

Consequently, since the coming of the Spirit to begin building the spiritual Temple of God, that is, the Ecclesia (or Church) of Christ, we have entered a figurative three and a half year period (1,260 days or 42 lunar months) that mirrors Christ's ministry, as well as the ministry of Elijah.

This brings us full circle to the Two Witnesses of Revelation 11.

And I will be endowing **My two witnesses and they will be prophesying a thousand two hundred sixty days**, clothed in sackcloth."

(Revelation 11:3 CV)

We are also told that these Two Prophets are killed by the Beast (representing the Roman Empire and the world system in general) and their corpses are linked to that great city of secret Babylon and earthly Jerusalem, the same ones who murdered Jesus. There is even mention of **three and a half days** of death before the Prophets

are resurrected to life in front of all mankind, which also links in with Jesus' death and resurrection on the third day. As it is with the Head, so it is with the Body.

And their corpses will be at the square of the great city which, spiritually, is being called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord, also, was crucified. And those out of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations are observing their corpses **three days and a half**, and they are not letting their corpses be placed into a tomb. And those dwelling on the earth are rejoicing over them and are making merry, and will be sending approach presents to one another, **seeing that these two prophets torment those dwelling on the earth**.

And **after the three days and a half** the spirit of life out of God entered into them, and they stand on their feet. And great fear falls on those beholding them. And they hear a loud voice out of heaven saying to them, "Ascend here!" And they ascended into heaven in a cloud, and their enemies behold them.

(Revelation 11:8-12 CV)

Another way of viewing Revelation 11, in accordance with the Historicist interpretation, is that the Two Witnesses symbolise the Old Testament and the New Testament. The OT is represented by Moses, and the NT (due to John the Baptist fulfilling the role) is represented by Elijah. The Scriptures officially finished their testimony when the NT was officially canonised in the fourth century AD. Shortly after this, the Antichrist Beast of the Holy Roman Empire arose to dominate the world for a period of 1260 years (a day-for-a-year) causing the truth of the Bible and its adherents (the Two Witnesses) to be killed or silenced, while at the same time prophesying in sackcloth. Yet at the end of this period, the Bible was publicly resurrected and the judgments of God were vindicated on His enemies.

It was during this same period (stated as 42 months) that the true Church, the Holy City of New Jerusalem, was trampled by the nations, having the appearance of desolation due to the religious and secular power of the Empire of Christendom. Nevertheless, through the fires of the Protestant Reformation, the Testimony of God gradually arose with new power.

As you can see, this subject (or theme) of the coming of Elijah is more involved than first meets the eye, but the thing that needs to be emphasised here is this: the prophecy doesn't just have one fulfillment, it has a number of fulfillments, both historically and spiritually, according to the prophetic pattern. <sup>3</sup>

### The Apostasy

"Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for (that day will not come) until the rebellion (the apostasy CV) occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction...For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed..."

(2 Thessalonians 2:3, 7-8 NIV)

Paul is saying very clearly here that before the Day of the Lord comes there will be the Apostasy, that is, a great falling away from the truth, and the revealing of the

man of lawlessness. This is in accordance with Daniel's prophecy of the 'little Horn' kingdom in Daniel 7 who is said to oppress and overpower the saints of God for a symbolic period of **time, times and half a time** (that is, three and a half day/years). It also expands on Jesus' warnings about many false prophets and false messiahs rising up.

Paul also says that the secret power of lawlessness was already working when he wrote this in the first century, and yet it also continues to the present. The Apostasy, which is a departure or falling away from the truth, coupled with religious and political rebellion, was not only fulfilled in first century events relating to the Jewish nation and the Roman Empire, but it also had a fulfillment in the rise of the Holy Roman Empire of Christendom, as well as in the religion of Islam. Both 'religious empires' claimed to be successors to the prophets and apostles of the Bible, and they both claimed divine power and right to rule the world with violent force as religious empires. And all of this was done in the name of God, and where Christendom was concerned, in the name of Christ Jesus as well.

Yet the aftermath of this Apostasy is still with us, and it will remain until the ultimate Day of the Lord, the Return of Christ. <sup>4</sup>

### [The Antichrist](#)

"Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour...This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

(1 John 2:18; 4:3 NIV)

In a similar way to Paul, John is also saying that the ultimate Antichrist (replacement Christ) is still coming, yet he has already come, numerous times (many antichrists). The spirit of the false messiah is coming, yet he says it is already here!

Now this Antichrist is probably one and the same as 'the man of lawlessness,' spoken of by Paul. It is intimately linked to the apostasy of firstly Judaism, and then Christianity. This 'man' would sit in the temple of God proclaiming himself to be God, demonstrating his power by lifting himself up over every god or object of worship. In one sense, this had a fulfillment in the Roman Caesars of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, particularly Nero and Vespasian, while in another, this was fulfilled in the office of the Pope, who proclaimed himself to be the vicar of Christ upon the earth, lifting himself up over every other authority, and in reality, lifting himself up over God, because this was active rebellion against the truth of the New Testament. He changed various laws and statutes to suit himself or the Church, and scripturally speaking, he was a man of sin or lawlessness. For those who wish to research the history of the Church, these things will become self-evident. (See also *The True Revival versus the Apostasy*).

Nevertheless, there have been many antichrists in the world, and there always will be until the true Christ returns.

## The Abomination of Desolation

"It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host; it took away the daily sacrifice from him, and the place of his sanctuary was brought low. Because of rebellion, the host of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground. Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?" He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated..."

"...His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation.

(Daniel 8:11-14; 11:31 NIV)

These two segments in Daniel were fulfilled in the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes during the 2nd century BC. It involved idolatrous images and sacrifices being set up in the temple in Jerusalem, and all manner of unclean acts and murderous practices. (See *The Vision of the Ram and the He-goat*).

Then almost two centuries later, Jesus also prophesied that this 'abomination that causes desolation' would occur in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the 1st century AD. This was fulfilled in the Jewish/Roman war of 66-70 AD when the Jewish zealots used the Temple as a base for their murderous, unclean acts, even against their own people. (See *The Prophecies of Jesus' Olivet Discourse*).

"So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."

(Matthew 24:15-16 NIV)

Yet in another sense, the actions of certain leaders of Christendom are also an 'abomination that causes desolation' in relation to the spiritual Temple of God - His people, and God's judgment has, and will, fall upon those who desecrate His Temple.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

(1 Corinthians 3:16-17 NIV)

## The Sign of the Maiden with Child

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin (Hebrew *maiden*) will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

(Isaiah 7:14 NIV)

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." "

(Matthew 1:22-23 NIV)

There is a lot of controversy over this prophecy. In the original Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 the word *almah* is used instead of the usual word for virgin - *bethulah*. The word *almah* means essentially 'a maiden or young girl,' but not necessarily a virgin, whereas *bethulah* means essentially 'a virgin.' Now it is evident from a casual reading of Isaiah chapters 7-8 that the sign of the son 'Emmanuel' was fulfilled in Isaiah's son Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (figuratively called Emmanuel by Yahweh). The prophetess who conceived him was Isaiah's wife, who was evidently a young woman, hence a maiden (see 8:1-10, 18). But she was not a virgin, for they already had a son, Shear-Jashub (7:3). So actually this goes to prove the accuracy of God's word rather than undermine it.

Then in the NT, Matthew, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uses the Greek word for 'virgin' when quoting the above text in relation to Jesus' birth, no doubt using the Septuagint version (Greek translation of the OT) rather than the Masoretic text. Nevertheless, this does not alter the original prophecy - because a 'maiden' could also be a virgin, and in Mary's case, she was a virgin, so the word for virgin is used. The Sign of Emmanuel (meaning **God with us**) had its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah in a very physical manner, although his name was not literally called Immanuel. This was the ultimate meaning of the sign, as Jesus was the embodiment of 'God with us.'

It could also be said that the spiritual Body of Christ, His people, are those who are spiritually born anew as sons of a virgin, who, with Christ, will become the full expression of Immanuel in the earth.

This is classic midrash. Other examples are given in *The Last Days and Prophecy Fulfilled*.

## Summary

All the above examples have had at least one fulfillment in the past, and yet most of them can also have another fulfillment in the unfolding future. Some are being fulfilled in the present also, either historically or spiritually. Yet take note that they all have more than one fulfillment.

The name Yahweh literally incorporates all three tenses of PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE.

He is the Lord God Almighty who WAS, IS and IS TO COME.

Jesus is the same YESTERDAY, TODAY and FOR THE AGES.

Prophecy relates to all three - **past, present and future** - for the spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus, Who **was, is and is coming**, the Almighty (Rev. 19:10; 1:8). He is the Great I AM - Who encompasses all time.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> There are three major views of interpreting Revelation that I accept. Firstly, there is the Historical Preterist view that interprets Revelation as largely being a prophecy of the divorce of Israel, the end of the Old Covenant age, and the days of vengeance upon Jerusalem and all Israel, along with the revealing of Christ and his New Covenant people and kingdom.

Secondly, there is the Idealist/Poetic view that focuses on the spiritual principles contained in the vision rather than on the fulfilment of specific historical events. And thirdly, there is the Historicist view that sees the book of Revelation as prophesying key events that occur throughout this present age. I no longer accept the Futurist/Dispensational view that pushes virtually all of Revelation into the distant future.

In the above article, I primarily use the Idealist view to focus on the spiritual patterns, while touching on the Preterist and Historicist views as well. I believe that there is truth in all three views on differing levels, although I approach these views in the order just given. For further details, see my *Introduction to Prophetic Studies*.

<sup>2</sup> For further details on biblical chronology, see *The Books of the Bible and How They Relate to One Another*.

<sup>3</sup> I need to clarify here that I believe that the Historical Preterist view of Revelation 11 is the *primary* interpretation for this text, which recognises that many elements of the prophecy were fulfilled in actual historical events in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, particularly in relation to the Roman/Jewish War of 67-70 AD. Nevertheless, as stated above, I also accept other levels of fulfilment and meaning within the Revelation texts.

<sup>4</sup> For further details on these things, see the studies on the book of Daniel in this section.