

**A ROYAL FELLOWSHIP OF DEATH:
THE PROPER APPLICATION OF CONTINGENCY & AN APOLOGETIC FOR PROPHETIC PRECISION**

Layton Talbert

Like any other literary genre, prophecy functions according to certain rules. Unlike any other, however, we did not invent the genre nor make the rules that govern it. God originated the prophetic genre, so his use of prophecy sets the patterns and establishes the rules. In developing and codifying a prophetic hermeneutic, then, it's necessary to observe those patterns and understand those rules in order to avoid coming to erroneous conclusions about prophecy and, more importantly, about God.

A foray through the books of Kings furnishes a valuable primer to the issue of prophecy. The books of Kings are thickly populated with prophets.¹ The narrative includes eleven named prophets, six unnamed prophets, and several groups of prophets (1 Kgs 18:4, 22:6; 2 Kgs 4:38). The ministries of Elijah and Elisha dominate nearly one-third of Kings and span the entire structural center of the books (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 8). In addition, even though most of them are not mentioned by name in Kings, every writing prophet in the OT (except for the last three)—from Isaiah to Zephaniah—ministered at some point during the timeframe recorded in the books of Kings. The monarchy was the golden age of OT prophecy. It is the prophets who “rule” in Kings, not the monarchs. The king's word may or may not come to pass but the words of a true prophet were inviolable, because they were the words of God (Isa 44:24–26a).

As such, the books of Kings condition God's people for what to expect when it comes to prophecy and fulfillment. The chart in the appendix reveals that the correlation between prophecy and fulfillment is consistently literal and precise, even though the time lapses range from a few hours to a few centuries.² That pattern is duplicated repeatedly in the prophecy of the OT, and is essential for validating the trustworthiness of God's words. This paper attempts to define the properties and boundaries of just one important principle in the outworking of prophecy, with a view to identifying and distinguishing correct and incorrect applications of that principle in interpreting prophecy.

¹ The same is not true of Chronicles, which also covers the same historical period of the monarchy. References to *prophets*, *prophecy*, and *prophesying* occur 89 times in Kings, but only 40 times in Chronicles. The books of Kings mention Elijah and Elisha 124 times (by name); Chronicles mentions only Elijah, and him only twice. Kings emphasizes the role played by prophets in the history of the monarchy in a way Chronicles does not.

² Contra Robert Chisholm's assertion: “Analysis of prophetic fulfillment in Kings shows that a prophecy could be understood as fulfilled, even if some details were not realized exactly.” The only example he cites is 1 Kgs 21:19 and 22:38 (which will be explored in detail as one of two major case studies in the final section of this article). For further corroboration, however, he footnotes “[D. Brent] Sandy's insightful and enlightening study of fulfilled prophecy in Samuel-Kings, in *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 136–51.” Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53/3 (September 2010), 575. For more on Sandy's methodology, see fn 31.

1. CONCEPT OF CONTINGENCY

Contingency refers to conditionality; whether or not a prophecy comes to pass depends on whether or not certain conditions are met. The contingency factor speaks to the issue of prophetic certainty. Not all prophecies are necessarily unconditional, ironclad assertions of what will be.

The *locus classicus* for the principle of contingency is found in Jeremiah. God sent the prophet on a field trip to watch a potter at work (18:1–4). The lesson in this live parable was not merely the potter’s power to make what he wanted, but his right to *remake* as he saw fit.³ Jeremiah’s attention “concentrates on the moment when the human potter was seen to alter his design.”⁴ That is the image on which God pins his point:

At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it. (Jer. 18:7-10)⁵

God explains that at least some of his prophecies may not materialize because they are contingent, conditioned on a human response. In any given prophecy, that conditionality may be explicit or implicit.

1.1. Explicit Contingency

Some prophecies have built-in, *explicit* conditions, usually signaled by an “if . . . then” construction. The most obvious example on the covenantal level is the Mosaic Covenant (Ex 19:5–6; cf. 19:8, 24:3).⁶ Another example is God’s prophetic promises to Solomon, in a personalized conditional application of the unconditional Davidic Covenant.

⁴ As for you, **if you** will walk before Me as your father David walked, in integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you *and* will keep My statutes and My ordinances, **then I** will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, just as I promised to your father David, saying, ‘You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.’ **But if you** or your sons indeed turn away from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, **then I** will cut off Israel

³ For an extended discussion of Jeremiah 18 as a divine illustration of how God “fashions” the hearts of all people simultaneously (Ps 33:15), hardening some (like Pharaoh) and not others, see Layton Talbert, “An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh’s Heart” in *JBTW* 4.1 (Fall 2024), 72–76.

⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987), 76. Jeremiah fastens on one incident, when what the potter was working on “was marred in the hand of the potter, so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make” (Jer 18:4).

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations represent the NASB 1995 translation.

⁶ The conditional language “if you will . . . then you shall be” introducing the covenant is only expanded in the subsequent giving of the Law, which ties both blessing and judgment to Israel’s conformity (cf. Lev 26; Dt 28). The New Covenant turns that Old Covenant language on its head in 1 Pet 2:9–10 with the formula, “But you are . . . that you should.” The Old Covenant conditions Israel’s treasured status and holy identity on their obedience; the New Covenant declares believers’ treasured status and holy identity in Christ as the basis for their obedience and glorification of God.

from the land which I have given them, and the house which I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight. So Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins; everyone who passes by will be astonished and hiss and say, **'Why has the LORD** done thus to this land and to this house?' And they will say, **'Because they** forsook the LORD their God, who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and adopted other gods and worshiped them and served them, therefore the LORD has brought all this adversity on them.'" (1 Kgs 9:4–10)

Because in his old age Solomon forsook the Lord (as did many of his “sons,” 9:6), the temple would be destroyed (9:7), Israel would be deported from the land (9:6), and Solomon would forfeit the extension of the Davidic covenant through his line (9:5)—which seems to be the reason Jesus’ physical lineage comes through Nathan (Luke 3:31; cf. 1 Chr 3:5), not Solomon.⁷

Through the prophet, God urged Zedekiah to surrender to the king of Babylon, assuring him that *if* he did (there’s the operative word of condition) he and his family would live and Jerusalem would not be burned (Jer 38:17). On the other hand, *if* he would not surrender, the doom of both king and city was settled (38:18). Jeremiah begged Zedekiah to heed God’s prophetic pronouncement (38:20) and further detailed what would happen if he didn’t (38:21–23). The most stunning statement comes at the end: “*if* you refuse to surrender . . . this city will be burned with fire” (38:21, 23). On the human level, King Zedekiah was directly and personally responsible for the death of his family and the burning of Jerusalem, because of his refusal to trust and obey God’s astonishingly gracious promise to him even in the context of divine judgment on Jerusalem and Judah. Jeremiah 39 describes the fulfillment of the negative conditions due to Zedekiah’s disobedience. In view of 38:17–18, what is described in 39:6–8 needn’t have happened.

Perhaps hovering somewhere between explicit and implicit contingency are prophecies divinely postscripted with the word “perhaps” (Jer 26:2–3; 36:2–3; cf. Ezek 12:3; Zeph 2:1–3).⁸ The very fact of prophetic contingency implies a degree of “openness” in connection with human response to the promises and warnings of God.⁹ God certainly knows the outcome, but that does not negate the genuineness of the proffered conditions nor the freedom of human response. Identifying explicit conditionality involves no great mystery; the mystery of conditionality attaches to the dynamics between divine determination and human responsibility.¹⁰

⁷ Robert H. Stein, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Nashville: B & H, 1992), 142.

⁸ Cf. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53/3 (September 2010), 567–68.

⁹ I use the word “openness” cautiously because of its association with Open Theism, the theological and practical defects of which are numerous and serious.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the intersection between these two concepts, see Layton Talbert, *Not by Chance: Learning to Trust a Sovereign God* (Greenville: BJU Press, 2001), Appendix E, “Salvation: Divine Determination or Human Responsibility?”

1.2. Implicit Contingency

Some prophecies have built-in, *implicit* conditions. The verbal parallels between Jeremiah 18:7–8 and Jonah 3 suggest the experience of Nineveh as the *exemplum classicum* of the principle of contingency spelled out in Jeremiah 18.

Jeremiah 18:7–8	Jonah 3:8–10
<p>⁷ At one moment I might speak [דָּבַר] concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy [אַבֵּד] it; ⁸ if that nation against which I have spoken [דָּבַר] turns [שׁוּב] from its evil [רָעָה], I will relent [נָחַם] concerning the calamity [רָעָה] I planned to bring [עָשָׂה] on it.</p>	<p>⁸ "... and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn [שׁוּב] from his wicked [רָעָה] way and from the violence which is in his hands. ⁹ "Who knows, God may turn [שׁוּב] and relent [נָחַם] and withdraw [שׁוּב] His burning anger so that we will not perish [אַבֵּד]." ¹⁰ When God saw their deeds, that they turned [שׁוּב] from their wicked [רָעָה] way, then God relented [נָחַם] concerning the calamity [רָעָה] which He had declared [דָּבַר] He would bring [עָשָׂה] upon them. And He did not do [עָשָׂה] it.</p>

Jonah's prophecy of Nineveh's destruction within forty days never materialized because they repented—even though it seems God never promised that if they repented then he would relent. The pronouncement is unqualified: "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon 3:4). It sounds final, definite, hopeless. On the other hand, if God intended to destroy them, why give them forty days? For that matter, why *warn* them at all? The Ninevites apparently thought of this, too. They humbled themselves and repented and changed their ways, in hopes that God might relent (3:5–9). And he did, for that very reason (3:10).

Astonishingly, what immediately follows in the context of the contingency model laid out in Jeremiah 18—in the first direct application of that contingency paradigm—is Judah's jaded disregard for the grace of conditionality. God commissioned Jeremiah to warn the people of coming judgment, implying that if they would repent he would relent (18:11). But they replied, "That is hopeless! So we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one obey the dictates of his evil heart" (18:12 NKJV). The principle of implied conditionality, or contingency, is illustrated elsewhere in Jeremiah as well (26:2–3, 12–13, 18–19; 42:10). A conditional prophecy—whether explicitly or implicitly—may, however, transmute into an unconditional prophecy (see 3.2.2. below).

2. RATIONALE FOR CONTINGENCY

Why does God do this? One reason for conditionality—particularly in prophecies of judgment—is that God wants people to change more than he wants to judge them. Much prophecy is not purely

predictive, but hortatory.¹¹ God often uses prophetic statements as a shot across the bow, not a mere threat of what *could* happen but the warning of what *will* happen if the objects of the prophecy do not change. In these cases, prophecy is intended to elicit a response of repentance, a change in behavior and posture towards God. Listen to one of God's more graphic prophecies:

Behold, the day of the LORD is coming,
Cruel, with fury and burning anger,
To make the land a desolation;
And He will exterminate its sinners from it. . . .
Anyone who is found will be thrust through,
And anyone who is captured will fall by the sword.
Their little ones also will be dashed to pieces
Before their eyes;
Their houses will be plundered
And their wives ravished.
Behold, I am going to stir up the Medes against them,
Who will not value silver or take pleasure in gold.
And their bows will mow down the young men,
They will not even have compassion on the fruit of the womb,
Nor will their eye pity children. (Isa. 13:9-18)

We understand the potentially persuasive power of threat, particularly when it doesn't merely confront the will but also engages the imagination and emotion with vivid imagery. A striking parallel to Isaiah 13 appears in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, when the English king suspends his assault on the French city of Harfleur, calls on them to surrender:

If not, why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.
What say you? will you yield, and this avoid,
Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroy'd? (*Henry V*, 3:3:1-43)

It works. The city surrenders. The decimation is canceled. And Henry V sends the Duke of Exeter to take charge of the city with the words: "Use mercy to them all."

¹¹ Chisholm, 562-63. He writes that often, if not usually, predictive prophecy "announces God's intentions conditionally and is intended to activate a positive response to the expository-hortatory discourse it typically accompanies. In this case, the prophecy's predictive element is designed to prevent (in the case of a judgment announcement) or facilitate (in the case of a salvation announcement) its fulfillment."

One more illustration of the power and goal of threat hits closer to home. On July 26, 1945 the Potsdam Declaration called on Japan to concede “unconditional surrender . . . without delay . . . or risk prompt and utter destruction.” Interpreting it as a sign of American weakness—an empty threat calculated to intimidate Japan into surrendering in order to avoid a costly invasion—the Japanese government ignored the message.

For ten days Japan’s only reply was silence. On August 6, 1945 the world’s first atomic weapon was unleashed on Hiroshima. A second appeal from President Truman followed:

It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth.

Once again, only silence. Three days later, on August 9, a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. In less than twenty-four hours Japan surrendered.¹²

Devastating as human weaponry has become, it is a drop in a bucket compared to divine destruction. In the atomic bomb, it was said, humans had discovered and harnessed “the power of the universe”; but it is God who *created* the power of the universe. The Bible maintains a tension between the profound patience of a God who graciously builds conditions into his warnings, and the terrifyingly righteous wrath of God when his grace and warnings are met with silence or, worse, defiance. He is both Warrior and Savior, but he is also God and King.

3. CRITERIA FOR CONTINGENCY

A biblical theological approach to contingency results in a narrowly defined component of prophecy. The key passage that explains this principle (Jer 18) also lays down the major criteria for prophetic contingency. Other Scripture supplies one additional criterion.

3.1. Criterion for the loss of pronounced or intended blessing

In the case of intended blessing (Jer 18:9–10), there appears to be only one condition on which God would reverse his positive purposes: doing “what is evil in my sight and not listening to me” (HCSB). The Lord had pledged the privilege of priesthood to the descendants of Levi and Aaron in perpetuity (Exod 29:9; Num 25:13). God reminded Eli of this (1 Sam 2:27–28). But Eli honored his wicked sons above God (1 Sam 2:29).

Therefore the LORD God of Israel declares, “I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk before Me forever”; but now the LORD declares, “Far be it from Me—for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed.” (1 Sam. 2:30)

¹² David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 442–59.

The juxtaposition between “I did indeed say . . . but now the LORD declares” is jarring. But it illustrates the factor of conditionality. God did not renege on the Levitical covenant itself, but he did cut Eli’s line out of it.¹³

Saul’s loss of the chance for a perpetual dynasty (1 Sam 13:13–14) comes as even more of a shock, perhaps to him as much as to us. God never mentioned that this potential blessing was waiting in the wings. The fact that nothing is known of this intended honor (until its loss was announced) suggests the possibility that we, too, may forfeit unknown blessings intended by God.

3.2. Criteria for averting pronounced judgment

In the case of pronounced judgment, one of two conditions may prompt God to avert his negative intentions: (1) the repentance of those to be judged, or (2) the intercession of others on behalf of those to be judged. The first is directly mentioned in the potter passage (Jer 18:7–8) and has already been illustrated in the preaching of Jeremiah and Jonah (see also Joel 2:12–14). Sometimes, however, God is even willing to mitigate judgment by degrees, depending on how people respond to his prophetic warnings.

3.2.1. The repentance of those to be judged

In a remarkable example of implicit conditionality, God announced that he would cut off all of Ahab’s posterity (1 Kgs 21:21). Though the message did not elicit Ahab’s repentance, he does seem to have believed it and sorrowed over it: “he tore his clothes . . . and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning” (21:27). In response to Ahab’s humbling himself, God determined to delay the judgment on his progeny until after Ahab’s death (21:29).

Micah 3:12 is another example of implicit conditionality. Following a blistering censure of Judah’s political leaders (Mic 3:1), prophets (3:5), and priests (3:11), Micah prophesied what sounded like an imminent threat: because of them, Jerusalem would be plowed under like a piece of farmland (3:12). But Jerusalem bustled on for another century. We might almost suppose it was merely a vague, chronologically indeterminate warning, were it not for the explanation in Jeremiah: the imminent threat was averted by repentance (26:18–19). In that sense, Micah’s prophetic warning did not fail but succeeded.¹⁴

¹³ This same context in 1 Samuel 2 offers another window into understanding contingency. Immediately before Eli’s rebuke from the man of God (beginning in 2:27), the text states that Eli’s sons “would not heed the voice of their father, because the Lord desired to put them to death” (2:25, my translation). The biblical explanation of the disconcerting juxtaposition between those two statements (human responsibility vs. divine determination) is that God chose not to intervene with the grace of repentance, but rather to punish them for their own freely chosen evil. Within the context of contingency expressed in Jer 18:7–10, therefore, the responsibility for choosing either “to turn from evil” (Jer 18:8) or “to do evil” (Jer 18:10) rests entirely with the humans involved, but the *inclination* “to turn from evil” ultimately comes from God. This will factor into God’s final determination to judge Israel.

¹⁴ “The success of prophetic threats ironically results in avoidance of the judgment they threaten.” Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 278.

3.2.2. The intercession of others on behalf of those to be judged

The second criterion (intercession) needs a bit more explanation, because God never directly says that intercession may divert judgment. It can, however, be inferred and demonstrated from a number of passages. The earliest example is Abraham's intercession for Sodom because Lot lived there (Gen 18:20–33). The city was not spared, but only because it lacked the requisite number of righteous inhabitants. In keeping with the spirit of Abraham's intercession, however, the Lord delivered not only "righteous Lot" but also his unrighteous family before destroying the city.

When Israel exposed her idolatrous heart in the golden calf debacle, God threatened to wipe out the "stiff-necked" newborn nation, telling Moses, "I will make of you a great nation" (Ex 32:9–10). That was a prophetic promise, an expression of divine intention. And yet it did not happen, because Moses interceded (32:11–14). Some may say it was only a bluff, a test for Moses, and that Moses' intercession didn't *really* change anything because God never *really* intended to follow through—but, again, that's not the Bible's explanation: "So he said he would have destroyed them—if Moses his chosen one had not stood before him in the breach to turn his wrath away from destroying them" (Ps 106:23 HCSB).

Later, when they were poised to enter the land God had promised to them, Israel balked in unbelief. God reiterated the same intention to destroy them and start over with Moses. Again Moses interceded for them (Num 14:11–19)—this time with only partial success. The nation survived but the offending, unbelieving generation died in the wilderness (14:20–24). Before Israel was even in the land, then, an important principle surfaces: God may respond to such intercession, but he is not obligated to. Indeed, the time came in Israel's history when he positively forbade it.

God laid down the law for Israel from the beginning, prophesying exactly what would happen to her if and when she wandered from her covenant privileges (Lev 26; Deut 28–29). And from the beginning she showed her uncircumcised heart over and over—through three centuries under judges and four to five more centuries under kings—before God finally executed the judgment he had warned of. The only explanation for Israel's existence through all those centuries, despite her roller-coaster addiction to idolatry and her habitual worldliness, is the intercessory prayer of prophets like Elijah (1 Kgs 18) and Amos (Amos 7:1–6), priests like Samuel (1 Sam 12:23), and kings like Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19). One day there were no more intercessors to be found (Ezek 22:30)¹⁵ and the nation slid so far so fast for so long that God positively forbade anyone to intercede for them any more (Jer 11:14; 14:11; 15:1).¹⁶ What he had been warning for the past

¹⁵ Some question whether this passage is referring to an intercessor. See, e.g., Daniel L. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:728. But the reference to one who would "stand in the gap before me on behalf of the land" seems clearly to refer to an intercessor in light of similar language in other passages (Ps 106:23; Jer 15:1, 18:20).

¹⁶ The juxtaposition between these passages in Ezekiel and Jeremiah is a curious one, because they were contemporaries. On the one hand, God laments that there was no intercessor (Ezek 22:30–31); on the other, he

seven to eight centuries was about to happen; the contingency had expired. The conditions God offers in grace he may withdraw in justice.

One passage is particularly instructive in this regard. Jeremiah's famous temple sermon begins with an earnest and extended appeal, "as generous as it is searching, reopening the door of mercy which had been so often slammed back in God's face."¹⁷

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. . . . For **if** you truly amend your ways and your deeds, **if** you truly execute justice one with another, **if** you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, **and if** you do not go after other gods to your own harm, **then** I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. (Jer. 7:3-7 ESV)

But this express statement of conditionality is followed by a damning description of their determined sin (7:8–12) and, as a consequence, God's determined declaration that the game is up: "And now, because you have done all these things . . . therefore . . . I will cast you out of my sight (Jer. 7:13-15 ESV). We might be able to chalk this up as one more typical example of the open-ended contingency of a judgment prophecy, were it not for what comes in the next verse: Therefore, do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you. (Jer 7:16)

The divine prohibition to Jeremiah pounds the final nail into Judah's coffin so loudly that it drowns out the condition with which the message opened. The condition is there—explicit, genuine, and yet impotent. And for the first (and only?) time God removes the only other means by which judgment could be averted—the prophet's intercessory prayer. God forbade Jeremiah to pray *not*, as Pratt suggests, "precisely because prayer usually had the potential to affect outcomes"¹⁸—as though Jeremiah's prayer would necessarily have *compelled* God to relent yet again. Jeremiah 15:1 puts the kibosh on that notion; not even the combined prayers of Moses *and* Samuel could persuade God otherwise. The "No" option is always on the table when our prayers impinge on

forbids Jeremiah to be one (Jer 11:14; 14:11; 15:1). Some think that "if an intercessor like Moses had emerged, the Lord would have relented from his announced intention and would not have poured his anger out on the people (v. 31)" (Chisholm, 566). But God asserts exactly the opposite; *even if* a Samuel or a Moses had "emerged" God would *not* have "relented from his announced intention" (Jer 15:1). A feasible solution seems to be the historical construction I have suggested above, that at some point the intercessors disappeared and the nation deteriorated to a point of no return. The most likely timeframe for that to have happened, in my opinion, is the 55-year reign of Manasseh. Not only is that period depicted as the tipping point for Judah even well after his reign ended (2 Kgs 23:26–27, 24:3–4; Jer 15:4), but there is no definitive evidence for any prophets who ministered during his reign even though known prophets spanned the reign of every other king. The reference to prophets in 2 Kings 21:10–15 seems to refer to the later prophets who explained the Babylonian disaster as the result of Judah's debauchery under Manasseh. Though 2 Chronicles 23:10 says that "the Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen," it does not specify the means.

¹⁷ Kidner, 49.

¹⁸ Richard L. Pratt Jr., "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions" in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 187.

God's will. God, not prayer, is omnipotent. Intercession at this point would have had zero impact on the determination of God. Such intercession would have been praying for something in direct violation to the expressed determination of God—indeed, *praying itself* would have been in direct violation of the divine will at this point.¹⁹ In other words, *even a prophecy that is technically explicitly conditional can be effectively unconditional*.²⁰ That means we'll have to give some thought to how Scripture itself fences this concept of conditionality.

4. QUALIFICATIONS FOR CONTINGENCY

Are all prophecies inherently contingent? Just how much can contingency explain? And how does contingency fit with propositional assertions that God neither lies nor repents? Scripture restricts the application of contingency in a number of ways.

4.1. Contingency does not necessarily mean that the pronounced judgment is cancelled; often it is merely delayed.

“One must not think that once disaster has been averted prophecies of judgment were no longer relevant.”²¹ Israel and Judah received repeated prophetic warnings that, though delayed, were eventually carried out. The Ninevites who repented at the preaching of Jonah were followed by a generation that was destroyed by God (see Nahum). God's pronouncement of judgment on Ahab's posterity was delayed until after his death, not cancelled (1 Kgs 21:21, 27–29).

This was also the case with Micah's prophecy mentioned earlier. Under Hezekiah, Micah prophesied that “Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins” (Mic 3:12). A century later, the elders of Jerusalem actually quote Micah's prophecy (Jer 26:19) and explain that the reason it had not happened was because “Hezekiah king of Judah and all the people of Judah” responded to Micah's warning by fearing God and seeking his favor (Jer 26:19). The Judah of Jeremiah's day, however, rejected the warnings of both Jeremiah and Micah, bringing the prophesied judgments on their own heads.

4.2. Contingency cannot be automatically applied to all prophecies.

Some have argued that Jeremiah 18 implies that *all* prophecies are inherently conditional—at least those that are not *explicitly* unconditional. “This is a statement of first-class importance for our understanding of all prophecy,” says Kidner. “However stark the prediction (except where God has expressly declared it irreversible), it is always open to revision . . .”²² Walter Kaiser asserts,

¹⁹ God expressly forbids Jeremiah from interceding for the nation at least two times (7:16; 11:14) and possibly three (14:11); but cf. also 15:1.

²⁰ So, why express the conditionality at all? Jeremiah's message almost certainly made an impact on many individuals within the nation. Individual repentance would put one right with God in the midst of a wicked generation; but it would not necessarily exempt one from becoming “collateral damage” amid God's national judgment. Only national repentance could avert national judgment, and that was not going to happen. And only prophetic intercession could delay national judgment, but that was no longer going to happen either.

²¹ Chisholm, 567.

²² Kidner, 76–77; Cf. Pratt, Jr., 189–90.

“In Scripture at large there is always a suppressed or an expressed ‘unless,’ or even a conditional ‘if’ embedded,” apart from a few covenantal exceptions.²³ This overlooks the diverse nature of prophecy and whitewashes the biblical data with too broad a brush.

4.2.1. First, in some prophecies conditionality is irrelevant because they predict unilateral divine actions irrespective of human actions (e.g., Isa 11:1–9; 55:3–5). Most examples that come to mind hinge, as Kaiser suggests (fn 20), on major covenants like the Noahic (Gen 9), Abrahamic (Gen 12, et al.), Davidic, (2 Sam 7), and New (Jer 31 et al.). Others, however, are anticipatory but pre-covenantal—a divine determination to set the stage for such a covenant (e.g., 1 Sam 2:35; 13:14; 15:28). Still others are divine determinations of eschatological judgment (e.g., Ezek 30; Joel 2, 3) or grace in the face of present disobedience—a sovereign overruling of Jeremiah 18:9–10 (e.g., Isa 1:24–27). It is an oversimplification to regard all, or virtually all, prophecy as hortatory in intent. Scripture reveals an array of purposes behind God’s use of prophecy. Certainly one of those purposes is to effect a change in people. But that is only one, and it is shortsighted to make that the sum and substance of the function or goal of all prophecy.

4.2.2. Second, as everyone acknowledges, some prophecies are expressly irrevocable. God communicates this in different ways. Sometimes it is divinely affirmed as irreversible (“I will not relent,” Amos 2:1, 4, 6 HCSB). Sometimes it is accompanied by a binding divine oath, like the timeless existence of Israel (Jer 31:35–37) or the perpetuity of both the Davidic and Levitical lines (Jer 33:19–22). Sometimes it is solemnized by a divine appeal to God’s immutable character (Heb 6:13–18), the Melchizedekan priesthood of Christ (Ps 110:4), or the total yet temporary decimation of the land (Jer 4:27–28).

4.2.3. Third, just as some prophecies are implicitly conditional, some prophecies are also implicitly unconditional. If it is implicit, how would we know? God has ways of asserting unambiguously that what he is saying will certainly come to pass. Several examples may be cited.

4.2.3.1. Sometimes a prophecy is implicitly unconditional because God simply stakes the prophecy’s certainty on who he is, without ever making the prophecy expressly unconditional.

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, and he **who** formed you from the womb: I am the Lord, **who** makes all things, **who** stretches out the heavens all alone, **who** spreads abroad the earth by Myself; who frustrates the signs of the babblers, and drives diviners mad; **who** turns wise men backward, and makes their knowledge foolishness; **who** confirms the word of his servant, and performs the counsel of his messengers; **who says to Jerusalem**, You shall be inhabited, to the

²³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. with Tiberius Rata, *Walking the Ancient Paths: A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2019), 232. Cf. also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Preaching and Teaching the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 111–12; Alan S. Bandy and Benjamin L. Merkle, *Understanding Prophecy: A Biblical-Theological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2015), 79–84. The only examples of unconditional prophecy cited by Bandy and Merkle are the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants. To these, Kaiser adds the Noahic Covenant, the prophecy of the new earth, and predictions “attached to [God’s] promised salvation in the protoevangelium of Gen 3:15.”

cities of Judah, You shall be built, and I will raise up her waste places; who says to the deep, Be dry! and I will dry up your rivers; **who says of Cyrus**, he is my shepherd, and he shall perform all my pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, You shall be built, and to the temple, Your foundation shall be laid. (Isa 44:24–28 NKJV)

God stakes the certainty of these predictions on his very being and identity. There is no express assertion of unconditionality; but if these prophecies of the rebuilding of Jerusalem or the human instrumentality of a future king named Cyrus are contingent and therefore uncertain, then God is not who he claims to be. At the very core of this oracle, he claims to be the God who always “confirms” and “performs” what his prophets say, making such prophecies absolute and unconditional, “reliable and trustworthy.”²⁴

4.2.3.2. Sometimes contingent prophecies are effectively unconditional because the condition is certain to be met. A classic example is the proto-New Covenant passage of Deuteronomy 30:1–10. God speaks of Israel’s experience of both the blessings and the curses of the covenant, their exile to foreign nations, and their return to the land as a done deal (30:1, 3). Of course, all this is conditioned on their repentance and return to the Lord (30:2); but that is as certain as the rest.

The grammatical pattern suggests a lack of any true conditionality here. When the exile came to pass, so would these acts of repentance and restoration. The reason is that the Lord, who promised Israel to make them his people forever, would bring about a spirit of repentance and obedience among them.²⁵

Another example where the condition is as certain as the rest of the prophecy (indeed, the condition is *part* of the prophecy) is the seventy-year prophecy of Jeremiah 29:10–14. On the one hand, Judah’s return after the specified probation period was conditioned on their seeking God with all their heart; on the other, God makes it clear in the passage that’s exactly what *would* happen. And Daniel 9 demonstrates that’s exactly what *did* happen; his response to his discovery of the passage reflects several verbal parallels with Jeremiah 29.

	Jer 29	Dan 9
שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה	when seventy years have been completed (29:10)	namely, seventy years (9:2)
מָלֵא	when seventy years have been completed at Babylon (29:10)	for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem (9:2)
בָּקַשׁ	you will seek Me (29:13)	I gave my attention to seek Him (9:3)
פָּלַל	then you will ... pray to Me (29:12)	I prayed to the Lord my God (9:4)
שָׁמַע	and I will listen to you (29:12)	So now, our God, listen to the prayer of your servant ... incline Your ear and hear ... O Lord, hear (9:17, 18, 19)

²⁴ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40-66* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 248–49.

²⁵ Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: B & H, 1994), 387. As 30:5–10 signify and Merrill goes on to clarify, the return from the Babylonian exile was only the first stage of a progressive fulfillment, and a microcosm of a universal future fulfillment.

The response Daniel personified and epitomized was as prophesied and certain as the return itself. Daniel's freely chosen response was just as much the result of the in-working grace of God as any righteous choice you or I ever make. The Spirit of God was at work to accomplish what the omniscience of God purposed and predicted—and not for the last time (cf. Zech 12:10).

4.2.3.3. Sometimes a prophecy is implicitly unconditional because the object of the prophecy is beyond conditions. The interpretation of Isaiah 14 is complex and contested. Some take it to be a prophetic picture of the destiny and ultimate destruction of Satan; others (like me) take it as a prophetic depiction of the future Antichrist as the personification (if not incarnation) of Satanic ambition. Whichever is correct, no hope is held out for repentance even though there is no express statement of unconditionality. The same would apply to the prophecies relating to both Antichrist and Satan in Revelation 13 and 19–20.

4.2.3.4. Sometimes a prophecy is implicitly unconditional because it predicts the broad, universal, long-range outworking of God's kingdom purposes. Contingency tends to be a characteristic of relatively short-term prophecies aimed at a specific person or group. The course of nations predicted in Daniel 2, the domination and downfall of Antichrist described in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13, or the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments in Revelation 6–18 are not hanging in the balance of contingency. None of these include any explicit assertion of unconditionality, yet they clearly are.

4.2.3.5. Sometimes a prophecy may be implicitly unconditional if it repeats or expands explicitly unconditional prophecies without restating its unconditionality. Just because every statement of a complex of prophecies does not restate its unconditionality does not mean these can be carved up and treated in isolation from each other. The most pervasive example of this would be the New Covenant. For the purpose of this discussion it is enough to note that though its classic statement in Jeremiah 31 includes an oath signifying its certainty, many other passages expand on its details under other terms (covenant of peace, everlasting covenant) without including express statements of its unconditionality.²⁶

Some of these examples may fit into more than one category, but all represent different reasons why many prophecies are unconditional without being explicitly stated as unconditional.

4.3. Contingency does not apply to incidental details of prophecies that do not meet the criteria for contingency.

Scripture defines contingency within very specific and narrow parameters. There is no biblical warrant for lifting the concept of contingency out of its biblical boundaries and applying it arbitrarily to explain other prophetic phenomena. Contingency cannot legitimately be used to defend apparent differences between prediction and fulfillment that fall outside the criteria for

²⁶ For a more thorough treatment of the complex of New Covenant passages, see Layton Talbert, "Interpreting the New Covenant in Light of Its Multiplexity, Multitextuality, and Ethnospecificity" in *JBTW* 3.1 (Fall 2022): 72–104.

contingency. When the concept of contingency is broadened beyond its biblical boundaries and applied to aspects of prophecy that fall outside its scriptural constraints, problems are created rather than resolved.

5. MISAPPLICATIONS OF CONTINGENCY: TWO CASE STUDIES

So far in this article I have cited Robert Chisholm's 2010 *JETS* essay fairly frequently and approvingly; that has not been accidental. His work on contingency is quite helpful. When the article pivots to application, however, Chisholm's explanations become (in my opinion) hermeneutically questionable and theologically problematic.

Having established the fact that prophecies can be contingent, we will now examine three especially problematic passages, each of which appears to contain unfulfilled prophecy. In each case, we suggest that alleged "failed" prophecy can be explained adequately, if one assumes that the principle of contingency is at work.²⁷

Chisholm addresses three examples, one of which is Huldah's prophecy of Josiah's death "in peace." Reasserting his contingency explanation a few years later in a different essay, he includes the seemingly failed Ahab prophecy (1 Kgs 21:19; 22:38).²⁸ The rest of this paper will address these two passages as case studies of Chisholm's application of contingency.

5.1. Case Study 1: God's Pronouncement of Ahab's Death (1 Kgs 21, 22)

God informed Ahab, "In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs will lick up your blood, even yours" (1 Kgs 21:19). Most interpreters assume that Naboth both lived and (at the instigation of Jezebel) died in Jezreel. The fulfillment, however, specifies that the canine component occurred "in Samaria . . . according to the word of the Lord" (22:38). Wray Beal notes matter-of-factly,

The difficulty in the fulfillment is of course that the blood is lapped up in Samaria (the location is noted three times, vv. 37–38), when the prophetic word indicates Jezreel, the place of Naboth's death (21:19). The narrative is unconcerned about the discrepancy (and one cannot imagine no editor saw it). Rather than attempting to relocate the death of Naboth to Samaria (as is common in commentaries), or translating the original prophecy to read "Instead of dogs licking up Naboth's blood, they will lick up yours" (so Provan), this discrepancy reveals the living nature of the prophetic word. The central thrust of the prophecy is realized and the variation of circumstances is inconsequential. . . .²⁹

The last sentence echoes Chisholm's posture, but he additionally appeals to the principle of contingency for explanation.

²⁷ Chisholm, 568.

²⁸ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Israel According to the Prophets" in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 53–68.

²⁹ Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 286.

To understand how the fulfillment of prophecy works, we must move beyond the purely descriptive level of prophetic language, and consider its primary intention. When a prophecy is fulfilled essentially, the main point of the prophecy (its primary intention) is realized with a degree of literality, but some of the accompanying details may not materialize. . . . God makes room for human freedom, which gives the prophecy a degree of contingency, or conditionality.³⁰

Chisholm insists that “the inexact nature of the fulfillment” in no way undermines the accuracy of the prophecy, since “God’s sovereignty and justice won out in the end.” After all, the prophecy’s bottom line was accomplished: Ahab’s death. He explains this prophetic “lack of precision” as an accommodation to human freedom.

God makes room for human freedom and resulting contingencies in the outworking of his plan. God did not prevent the king’s men from taking Ahab to Samaria. . . . God had dogs stationed in Samaria as well and the prophecy was fulfilled in its essence. In this case, the inexact nature of the fulfillment actually highlights God’s sovereignty over the affair. . . . God makes room for human freedom in the outworking of even irrevocable prophecy. This means that some of the details of the prophecy may not be fulfilled exactly, yet the prophecy is realized in its essence. . . . There appears to be some room for flexibility in the outworking of incidental details, but only within the prescribed framework of essential fulfillment.³¹

5.1.1. Problems with the Contingency Explanation

The problem with Chisholm’s explanation is twofold (at least). (1) His use of this incident as an example of the concept of prophetic contingency is an illegitimate extension of that principle. As the foregoing discussion (and Chisholm’s own analysis) demonstrates, prophetic contingency pertains to the certainty of prophetic fulfillment, not whether bits and pieces of a prophecy may or may not come to pass. (2) It is impossible to dichotomize between a prophetic “lack of precision” and a divine “lack of precision.” God so closely identifies his words with the words of his true prophet that he commits himself to fulfilling whatever the prophet says: Yahweh “confirms the word of his servant, and performs the counsel of his messengers” (Isa 44:26 NKJ). A legitimate prophet’s “lack of precision,” then, is *by definition* God’s “lack of precision.” The conflict this creates with God’s omniscience, integrity, and discretion—*unnecessarily* including details he

³⁰ Chisholm, “Israel According to the Prophets,” 59.

³¹ Ibid., 60. Chisholm (60, fn 6) credits his “methodological approach” to D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002). Sandy’s distinction between transparency and translucence in dealing with prophecy can often be quite helpful. Much of his pedagogical methodology, however, relies merely on raising and multiplying questions—sometimes badly framed, occasionally misleading, and often unanswerable: “Were the pronouncements of judgment on Ahab and his family fulfilled? Yes, but we would have had a difficult time figuring out how in advance. . . . [W]hy was Ahab’s blood not licked by the dogs whereas [sic?] Naboth’s was? Why were the judgments against Ahab imposed instead [?] on Joram?” (Sandy, 144). Many of the “questions” he raises are matters of mere curiosity that are entirely irrelevant to the accuracy of the prophecy (Sandy, 138, 140). Our curiosity about the outworking of details not included in the fulfillment description does not negate a precise fulfillment of those details, whether those details work out as or when we would have imagined them or not.

knows will *not* come to pass—is inescapable.³² These two major weaknesses with Chisholm’s solution invite three elaborative observations.

First, if Chisholm’s explanation of the fulfillment is correct, we’re not dealing with minor imprecision but outright error. The cities of Jezreel and Samaria were 25 miles apart—fairly close. But is fairly close good enough when it comes to the prediction of an omniscient God?

Second, the interpretation makes room for human freedom, but at the expense of divine freedom. If an omniscient God freely chooses to include incidental details in a prophecy, by what logic or right may we dismiss those details as negotiable and disposable? Details are the icing on the prophetic cake—the glory of a God who distinguishes himself from all false deities as the one who both knows and controls the future (Isa 41:21-24; 44:6-7; 45:20-21).³³ He could have foretold either the location or the dogs, but he need not have included both (or either); yet he chose to. God does not need to include prophetic details, but when he does they are infallible; no word from his mouth ever comes back empty (Isa 55:11). That includes “in the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth.” If God chooses to include prophetic details that turn out to be erroneous, the result is not an essentially accurate fulfillment, but an allegedly omniscient God who overcommits himself and is, in the end, simply mistaken—and therefore not entirely reliable. The stakes are far higher than “essentialist” interpretations allow. Chisholm insists, however, that this view of prophetic fulfillment in no way impinges on the attributes or reliability of God.

By making room for human response, God does not compromise his omniscience (defined in the classical sense), sovereignty, and immutability. God fully knows what will transpire because he has decreed the future. But this decree, by God’s sovereign decision, accommodates the choices and actions of creatures to whom he imparts a degree of freedom.³⁴

However reassuring Chisholm intends this caveat to be, to assert that God sovereignly decides to permit humans the freedom to contradict his omniscience is nonsensical and illogical. God’s sovereignty cannot *contradict* his other attributes without undermining the character of God and the reliability of his words. If God is omniscient, then he knew not only whether but also *where* the dogs would lick up Naboth’s blood. Why, then, would he give what he *knew* to be false

³² I’ve chosen my words intentionally. If God is **omniscient** in the classical sense (as Chisholm defends) then he knows the details of future events; that he knows that certain details will *not* come to pass yet includes them anyway compromises his **integrity**; and the fact that including such details is entirely *unnecessary* (why not just, *as dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood?*) implies that God is inexplicably **indiscrete**.

³³ God declares his uniqueness not in mere generalities; the context of these passages in which God asserts the absolute uniqueness of his prophetic ability is riddled with specific details regarding the origin, actions, and even the name of the man whom God would raise up a century later as a key instrument in the post-captivity restoration of his people. What is more fraught with human choice than five generations of marriages leading to the birth of a son—let alone the parental choice involved in *naming* that child—who would execute God’s purposes for Israel? God prophetically identified this personage by name as Cyrus (44:28; 45:1). The parents were free to name their child whatever they wanted—Cleetus, Clovis, Dyrus, or Tyrus. But Yahweh knew exactly what they would freely choose to name him when the time came; nor could the prophecy have been considered fulfilled had they done so.

³⁴ Chisholm, “When Prophecy Appears to Fail,” 564.

information? Why would God knowingly mis-predict the location when he could have either given the ultimate “correct” location by virtue of his omniscience, or omitted any specific reference to location at all and actually left that detail entirely open to human freedom?

Third, the “essential fulfillment” argument undercuts one of the major theological themes that dominates the books of Kings: the reliability of God’s words. The sacred writer repeatedly insists on an infallible alignment between “the word of the Lord” (32 times in Kings) pronounced by the prophet, and what then transpired “according to the word of the Lord” (17 times in Kings). The Ahab narrative includes one of the heavier concentrations of this theme, including his interactions with Elijah and Micaiah (1 Kgs 21-22). Indeed, the idea “that God’s prophetic word is certainly fulfilled . . . could, arguably, be understood as the central assertion of the whole narrative.”³⁵ Chisholm’s application of “essential fulfillment” in this case undermines both a macro-theme in Kings and a micro-theme in this section of Kings.

5.1.2. Alternatives to the Contingency Explanation

So how does one resolve the dilemma? The apparent discrepancy between prophecy and fulfillment is widely ignored in many commentaries.³⁶ Nevertheless, a feasible solution requires neither Wray Beal’s airy-fairy reliance on “the living nature of the prophetic word” nor Chisholm’s injudicious and theologically thorny appeal to prophetic contingency. Benjamin Foreman critiques six approaches to this prophetic conundrum (including Chisholm’s), and then offers a seventh.³⁷ Of those, two (besides Chisholm) are worth noting, followed by my own proposal(s).³⁸

³⁵ P. J. Williams, “Lying Spirits Sent by God? The Case of Micaiah’s Prophecy” in *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture*, ed. Paul Helm and Carl R. Trueman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 65.

³⁶ E.g., Patterson seems oblivious to any potential discrepancy. R. D. Patterson, “1, 2 Kings,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 4:160, 166. Likewise, House seems either unaware of any apparent discrepancy between 21:19 and 22:38, or unwilling to address it, or to assume the solution is so obvious there is no need to address it. Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings* (Nashville: B & H, 1995). Dale Ralph Davis zeroes in on the expression “in the place” and suggests: “If . . . the pool of Samaria was outside that city, we could understand the ‘place’ of 21:19 as indicating not a precise but a generic location. That is, the dogs would also lick Ahab’s blood outside of [a] town (not necessarily Jezreel).” *1 Kings* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: 2007), 326. For a similar view, see C. C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2012), note on 1 Kgs 21:19.

³⁷ Benjamin Foreman, “The Blood of Ahab: Reevaluating Ahab’s Death and Elijah’s Prophecy,” in *JETS* 58/2 (2015): 249–64. Foreman initially mis-categorizes Chisholm’s view. He notes Chisholm’s *JETS* article on contingency (and correctly acknowledges that Chisholm does not talk there about the Ahab prophecy), but lumps Chisholm under the view that the Ahab prophecy was modified; he then later notes (correctly) that Chisholm actually seems to align with the view that the prophecy was fulfilled generally, not specifically.

³⁸ One not worth noting nevertheless deserves mention because it is surprisingly common despite its absurdity—viz., that specific details of the original prophecy were “suspended” because of Ahab’s sorrow. The geographical detail of *where* Ahab’s blood would be licked up “was not fulfilled because of his repentance (vv. 27–29), but was partially fulfilled in the licking up of Ahab’s blood by dogs at the pool in Samaria.” *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), note on 1 Kgs 21:19. *The NIV Study Bible* likewise views 1 Kgs 22:38 as a partial fulfillment linked to “Ahab’s subsequent repentance.” *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), note on 1 Kgs 21:19. Cf. R. D. Patterson and H. J. Austel, “1 and 2 Kings,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 3:796. John Woodhouse, *1 Kings* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 744. The explanation is remarkably arbitrary and nonsensical to have garnered any credibility, since “1 Kgs 21:27–29 has nothing to do with

5.1.2.1. Mistranslation of 1 Kings 21:19

Provan argues that the prophecy has simply been mistranslated, and should be read, “Instead of dogs licking up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood”—making the location a non-issue.³⁹ If Provan accurately renders the intended reading here, the tension between 21:19 and 22:38 dissolves. Provan’s rendering, however, does not seem to be supported by any other translation.⁴⁰ Moreover, Foreman subjects it to a fairly rigorous examination and dismisses it as grammatically, exegetically, and logically untenable.

5.1.2.2. Mislocation of Naboth’s Death

Foreman’s own solution argues that whereas most readers assume that Naboth was killed in Jezreel (where his coveted property was located), Naboth was actually tried and executed in Samaria.⁴¹ His argumentation is not without merit, and he may be right. Most importantly, he pointedly asserts that “the death of Ahab was fulfilled exactly as [Elijah] prophesied”—dogs, location, and all. But there remains a much simpler explanation.

5.1.2.3. Erroneous Assumption Regarding “Samaria”

All the information needed to unravel the alleged tangle between 21:19 and 22:38 can be found in 21:1, along with a rudimentary knowledge of Bible geography. “Samaria” was not only the name of a city but also the name of the region Ahab ruled (cf. 1 Kgs 13:32; 18:2; 21:1; 2 Kgs 1:3; 17:24, 26). The Lord told Elijah to go meet Ahab, “who is *in Samaria . . . in the vineyard of Naboth*” (21:18).⁴² We know from 21:1 that Naboth’s vineyard is not in the *city* of Samaria but in the city of Jezreel,

Ahab’s death in the first place” (Foreman, 254). Why should a temporary delay of divine judgment on Ahab’s house have any impact on the previously prophesied location of the poetic justice of Ahab’s postmortem desecration? But as Spurgeon once remarked, commentaries, like sheep, often follow one another and all go astray.

³⁹ Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 160. Provan grounds his reading on the Hebrew term מָקוֹם which “in the construct state can simply mean ‘in place of, instead of’ (e.g., Isa. 33:21; Ezek. 6:13; Eccl. 3:16; and esp. Hos. 1:10 for the precise construction here: אֶשֶׁר בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר followed by a verb).” Besides Wray Beal, Oswalt also gives weight to Provan’s reading. John N. Oswalt, *1 Kings*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2025), 447.

⁴⁰ Foreman notes the ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, RSV, but cites JPS, TNK, and NET as “notable exceptions.” All three of these “exceptions,” however, also follow the traditional reading, or make it even stronger (“in the spot,” NET; “in the very place,” TNK). In addition, ASV, CJB, HCSB, DBY, GNV, (N)KJV, and VUL also follow the traditional translation.

⁴¹ Foreman, 261–64. Though Foreman presents this as “a new proposal” which “scholars have failed to seriously consider,” Wray Beal (one year earlier) described this view as “common in commentaries.” Wray Beal, 286.

⁴² Oswalt echoes other suggestions for 21:18, including “[who ruled] in Samaria” or “who [resides] in Samaria.” Oswalt, 447. Foreman observes in a footnote that some translate 21:18a as “Ahab, king of Israel, who *lives* in Samaria”—supplying the verb “live.” His comment is confusing, however; on the one hand he seems to take issue with the translation, but then essentially relies on it, concluding that “YHWH’s point in v. 18 . . . is to tell Elijah where he can find Ahab: he is travelling from Samaria towards Naboth’s vineyard in Jezreel”—even speculating that perhaps Ahab is surprised because Elijah meets him along the road on his way to Jezreel. Foreman, 262. If one simply takes the text as it stands, however, Ahab is in Samaria and Jezreel *simultaneously* because Jezreel is in Samaria. It is not, as they say, rocket science. In the interest of full disclosure, I have not come across any published author who takes this view, but neither have I come across any published author who considers the possibility and rebuts it.

which is located in the *region* of Samaria. A straightforward reading of 21:18, then, suggests that Ahab was simultaneously in Jezreel (the city) *and* in Samaria (the region). Since the “Samaria” in the prophecy (21:18–19) is arguably the *region* of Samaria (*not* the *city* of Samaria), then the “Samaria” in the fulfillment (22:38) may equally be understood as the region, not the city, of Samaria.⁴³ Additional archaeological and geographical observations seem to corroborate this understanding.

According to John Woodhead, Ahab had a palace in the city of Jezreel, which archaeological excavations indicate was “Ahab’s chariot center.”⁴⁴ The reference to “the pool of Samaria” in 22:38 may be read more generically as “a pool in Samaria” (cf. NKJV, NIV).⁴⁵ Jezreel’s spring was a substantial fountain (1 Sam 29:1) forming “a limpid pool forty or fifty feet in diameter” which flowed out by “a stream sufficient to turn a mill.”⁴⁶ Moreover, Jezreel was closer to Ramoth-Gilead (the scene of the battle) than the city of Samaria; the most natural place for the soldiers to bring Ahab’s bloodied chariot after the battle, therefore, would have been his palace at Jezreel “in Samaria” (22:37–38). Finally, Ramoth-Gilead—a trade-route city under dispute between Ahab and the king of Aram (22:3)—lay across the Jordan, outside the region of Samaria; so the most natural way to describe their return with the dead king would be in terms of coming back to the region of “Samaria” (22:37), even though the specific city to which they returned was Jezreel. All these details accommodate the understanding that the chariot was cleaned (with canine assistance) at the very place where Ahab condoned, and personally profited from, the murder of Naboth—at Jezreel “in Samaria.”

A feasible alternative to this solution would be to regard 22:37 (“So the king died and was brought to Samaria. And they buried the king in Samaria,” NKJV) as a summary statement of the final disposition of Ahab’s *body*, delivered for interment in the city of Samaria. In that case, 22:38 (“Then *someone* washed⁴⁷ the chariot at a pool in Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood . . . according to the word of the LORD which He had spoken,” NKJV) would be an almost parenthetical

⁴³ Foreman traces a similar view back to Josephus (see *Antiquities*, 8:15:6), but the arguments and assumptions behind it differ. Astonishingly, however, few if any have considered the significance of 21:1 and the dual use of Samaria in resolving the apparent discrepancy. Consequently, Foreman’s conclusion that this view “can only be sustained if 1 Kgs 22:38 is significantly emended” and therefore “must be abandoned” is remarkably short-sighted.

⁴⁴ J. Woodhead, “Jezreel” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd edition, ed. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 587. Woodhead was personally involved in extensive archaeological excavations of Jezreel.

⁴⁵ Andrew Goodwill offers the alternative argument that “pool of Samaria” is “a genitive of name and does not necessarily indicate location”—at least in the specific sense of the *city* of Samaria, though being in Jezreel it would still be in the *region* of Samaria. “The Contribution of a Literary Analysis of 1 Kings 16:29–2 Kings 8:15 to the Law Theme in the Book of Kings,” PhD Thesis (Greenville: BJU Seminary, 2018), 133. Archer believes that the chariot was cleaned in “a pool outside Jezreel,” and tentatively suggests the existence of a second pool in the vicinity of Jezreel called the “Samaria Pool.” But the explanation fails to address the references to Samaria in 22:37. Gleason L. Archer Jr., *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 202.

⁴⁶ David Robinson and Eli Smith, *Biblical Researches in Ancient Palestine and the Adjacent Regions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 rpr), 2:323.

⁴⁷ The verb is 3MS, presumably referring to the unnamed underling charged with the gruesome task. I have yet to come across either of these solutions in the literature.

statement of the disposition of Ahab's *chariot*, later taken to Jezreel and washed out at a pool of Samaria (in Jezreel). Either scenario assumes that, at least in 22:38, "Samaria" refers not to the city but to the region.

5.1.3. Conclusion

To return to Chisholm's contingency explanation, if prophesied locations are negotiable and left open to human freedom, one might just as easily suggest that if Joseph and Mary had decided to lodge in Bethany instead of Bethlehem (they were both "little," after all), it would have had no significant impact on the accuracy of Micah 5:2 (the prophecy predicting that Messiah would emerge from Bethlehem). One cannot sever the prophecy from its setting. In the very place and *moment* of Ahab's gross abuse of power (1 Kgs 21:1-16) God sent Elijah with a specific and unnecessarily detailed prophecy dripping with irony: 'right here, where dogs licked up Naboth's blood because of you, dogs will lick up your blood because of me' (1 Kgs 21:17-19). Unsurprisingly, God got it exactly right, details and all. There is no need to stretch the principle of contingency, however imaginatively, beyond its biblical definition and criteria. The words of Jehu are as applicable here as they are in their own context:

Know, then, that ***not a word*** that the LORD has spoken against the house of Ahab shall fail. The LORD has done what he announced through his servant Elijah (2 Kgs 10:10 NIV, emphasis added).⁴⁸

5.2. Case Study 2: God's Promise Regarding Josiah's Death (2 Kgs 22, 23)

God announced that he would bring unprecedented desolation upon Judah because of their rebellion (2 Kgs 22:16-17, 19), but promised the godly, young King Josiah, "You shall be gathered to your grave in peace" (22:20). How, then, does one explain Josiah's death in battle at the hand of Pharaoh-Necho of Egypt (23:29-30)? According to Chisholm,

dying a bloody death on a battlefield can hardly be viewed as dying "in peace." (FN: In the Chronicler's version of Josiah's death, the king cries out, "I am seriously wounded." This is incongruous with dying "in peace," for dying "in peace" is the antithesis of dying by the sword, as Jer 34:4-5 makes clear.) However, if we view the prophecy as implicitly conditional to begin with and make room for human freedom in the equation, we can conclude that Josiah's decision to become embroiled in international politics compromised God's intention for him to die in peace.⁴⁹

5.2.1. Problems with the Contingency Explanation

Two points merit attention. First, when God promised Josiah "you will be gathered to your grave in peace," he explained exactly what he meant in the very next phrase: "and your eyes shall not see all the calamity which I will bring on this place" (2 Kgs 22:20). God is free to define the terms of his own prophecy; we are not at liberty to impose our assumptions and preconceptions on God's

⁴⁸ The NIV nicely captures here the sense of the value and precision of every one of God's words.

⁴⁹ Chisholm, "Israel According to Prophecy," 61.

language based on what “in peace” sounds like to us. Chisholm’s appeal to Jer 34:4–5 as proof that dying by the sword is the antithesis to dying “in peace” is specious.⁵⁰ One could just as easily argue that Gen 15:15 proves that dying young is the antithesis to dying “in peace” (“you shall go to your fathers *in peace*; you will be buried *at a good old age*”). Neither Jer 34 nor Gen 15 furnishes a universal definition of what it means to die “in peace.” Every passage is governed by its own context, and God spells out exactly what he means by his promise to Josiah: Judah was irrevocably doomed to disaster, but Josiah would die before that chaos commenced. And he did. Within just four years of Josiah’s battlefield death, the Babylonian calamity commenced.⁵¹ In short, if Josiah had died a natural death, the prophecy—as defined by God—would *not* have been fulfilled.

Chisholm argues in two different directions simultaneously. On the one hand, he denies that Josiah went to his grave in peace; but on the other hand, he asserts that the prophecy was still *essentially* fulfilled: “Even so, the promise was fulfilled in its essence for Josiah still went to his grave without having to see Jerusalem’s downfall, which was the main point made by Huldah.”⁵² But that was not the *main* point made by Huldah; it was the *whole* point. If 22:20b has *anything* to do with the accuracy of the prophecy’s fulfillment, it has *everything* to do with it. In the end, the rest of Chisholm’s explanation is entirely unnecessary—except for one thing.

That raises the second point that merits attention here. When Pharaoh Necho II set out to aid the flagging Assyrians in their last stand against the Babylonians at Carchemish, Josiah—for unexplained reasons⁵³—set out to intercept him (2 Chr 35:20). Chisholm faults “Josiah’s decision to become embroiled in international politics.” But that’s what kings do! International politics is a king’s stock in trade, especially when his nation (like Judah) sits at the intersection between major international powers.

If that decision alone was the reason for Josiah’s “untimely” demise (he was only 39)—and, according to Chisholm, his loss of God’s *intended* blessing of a peaceful death—that leads to a larger question and problem for Chisholm’s contingency explanation. God’s explanation of prophetic contingency in Jeremiah 18 indicates that a divine pronouncement of intended blessing may be forfeited by disobedience. The Chronicler includes a curious detail that might suggest a *possibility* of Josiah’s disobedience. When Josiah challenged the passage of Pharaoh Necho’s army, the Egyptian king dispatched messengers to call on Josiah to stand down:

⁵⁰ Jer 34:4–5 reads, “‘Yet hear the word of the LORD, O Zedekiah king of Judah! Thus says the LORD concerning you, ‘You will not die by the sword. You will die in peace’”

⁵¹ Josiah died in 609 BC. Babylon’s humiliation of Judah began in 605 with a first wave of captives, followed by another in 597, and culminating in the razing of Jerusalem in 586.

⁵² Chisholm, “Israel According to Prophecy,” 61.

⁵³ Unexplained in Scripture, at least. Rainey and Notley note that “the attempt by Josiah, king of Judah, to stop the Egyptian advance makes perfect sense. He and the neighboring states had seen clearly that if the Egyptians should succeed in their plans, the Levant would be changing masters, from the Assyrians to the Egyptians. They had no desire for that to happen.” Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 259.

"What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war. And **God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you.**" (2 Chr. 35:21 ESV)

We might be surprised, even suspicious, to hear God's words coming from the Egyptian king. Perhaps Josiah was suspicious as well.⁵⁴ But it's not so easy to get around the Chronicler's own explanation in verse 22. Josiah refused to yield, disguised himself, and went into battle because he "did not listen to the words of Neco *from the mouth of God*" (2 Chr 35:22 ESV). Nothing in the text suggests that Necho's words were false or disingenuous. And if Necho was speaking the truth, it would seem to imply that Josiah's action was disobedience to a word from God that *might* have forfeited his dying "in peace"—as more traditionally understood, and in keeping with a biblical application of prophetic contingency. Second Chronicles 35:21–22 opens the door to that possibility, and it is the only piece of evidence that can salvage a contingency interpretation; but if Chisholm thinks that is the explanation, he never says so. In any case, God providentially employed Josiah's actions to facilitate his premature death in keeping with the prophecy.

Some commentators find this verse [22:20] troubling because they take it that "be gathered to your grave in peace" can only be understood to be a prediction that Josiah will die in a peaceful manner, something that was, in fact, not to be the case (23:29). . . . But the phrase, which only occurs here and in 2 Chronicles 34:28 need not be understood in this way. In fact, the statement that indicates a king died a normal death is "he slept with his fathers." That one does not occur here. I suggest the point of Huldah's words is to say that Josiah will not die in some conflagration when all Jerusalem's and Judah's sins are being visited upon them. He will die before that happens while his country is still in a state of peace. "Your eyes will not see all the calamity" Yahweh is going to bring. That is the point, and not the manner of his death, about which Huldah does not intend to say anything.⁵⁵

If one ignores on the front end that 2 Kings 22:20a (dying "in peace") is explained by 22:20b ("your eyes will not see all the calamity I will bring")—as Chisholm does—then one cannot patch up the failure of v. 20a on the back end by appealing to v. 20b as the real "essence" of the prophecy. One might argue that v. 20a was forfeited because of Josiah's disobedience to the word of the Lord (2 Chr 35:21–22), and v. 20b was providentially fulfilled through that disobedience. But that's not how Chisholm argues.

⁵⁴ "This idea that, [sic] the word of God could be delivered through an unbeliever, is a very remarkable development." John N. Oswalt, *2 Kings*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2025), 433.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 412; cf. 433. Cf. House, 385, 392.

CONCLUSION

One cannot make one's own rules for interpreting prophecy.⁵⁶ The purpose of this paper has been to address the larger issue of prophetic contingency with a view to challenging the application of contingency to encompass human freedom to alter prophetic details previously specified by God. If such details are negotiable, their inclusion in a prophecy is not only unnecessary and inexplicable but misleading, undermining the character and attributes of God.

Such explanations not only raise serious questions about God's omniscience and the reliability of his words, but fail to meet the criteria that God himself outlines for the principle of contingency. The mitigation of details that have nothing to do with the subject's repentance (or with intercession) is an invalid application of the principle of prophetic contingency. If there is no repentance or intercession, the prophecy of judgment stands as stated; if there is no lapse into evil and disobedience, the prophecy of blessing stands as stated. The same applies apart from categories of judgment or blessing; prophecies of future actions—divine or human, angelic or canine—stand as stated.

I would emend Chisholm's prophetic principle this way: "when prophecy appears to fail, check your hermeneutic"—*and the textual details*. Many interpreters warn against pressing the details of a prophecy, lest it crumble like a fragile ancient archaeological artifact. In my experience, however, the harder one presses the details of prophecy from an omniscient and trustworthy God, the firmer one finds them to be. God does not need us to cover for his overstatements or misspeaks; he wants us to trust his character, and just pay more attention to his words in the text.

⁵⁶ On this principle I agree with Chisholm, who kindly responded to my query via personal email (06/24/15) and referred me to his *JETS* article for more detail. Chisholm wrote: "I think you misunderstand the contingent nature of biblical prophecy and have imposed your own preconceptions on the text. You've pre-decided how prophecy must work and then impose that on the text, rather than allowing the text itself to inform your categories. That inevitably leads to faulty exegesis." I have labored in this paper to stake down a thorough and biblical theologically informed hermeneutic of prophetic contingency. The reader will have to decide whether I have succeeded. It seems to me that it is Chisholm's interpretation that suggests certain preconceptions colored by a less-than-attentive reading of the details of certain prophecies, a less-than-exhaustive quest for the interpretive possibilities of those details, and a less-than-robust expectation regarding certain divine attributes, rather than allowing the text to inform his categories and his application of prophetic contingency.

APPENDIX

Fulfillment of ‘The Word of the Lord’ in 1, 2 Kings*

Shaded entries do not expressly include *the word of the Lord* fulfillment formula, though they do include some form of *the word of the Lord* pronouncement formula.

#	Historical Fulfillment	Content	Original Statement	Time Lapse
1	1K 2:27	Eli’s descendants removed from priesthood	1S 2:31-35	50 yrs
2	1K 5:12	God gives Solomon wisdom	1K 3:12	-
3	1K 8:20, 24	Solomon reigns and builds the temple	1C 22:6-10	yrs
4	1K 12:15	Jeroboam receives the kingdom of Israel	1K 11:31-37	-
5	1K 13:4-5	Bethel altar splits, spilling its ashes	1K 13:3	-
6	1K 13:26	Man of God dies for eating/drinking in Bethel	1K 13:9, 17	-
7	1K 14:18	Jeroboam’s son dies and is mourned	1K 14:12-13	-
8	1K 15:28-29	Jeroboam’s descendants cut off	1K 14:7-11, 14	yrs
9	1K 16:12	Baasha’s descendants cut off	1K 16:1-7	yrs
10	1K 16:34	Hiel lost his children in building Bethel	Josh. 6:26	600 yrs
11	1K 17:5-6	Elijah sustained by ravens at Cherith Brook	1K 17:2-4	-
12	1K 17:10 ff.	Elijah sustained by widow at Zarephath	1K 17:8-9	-
13	1K 17:16	Widow’s food miraculously sustained	1K 17:14-15	-
14	1K 18:45	God sends rain	1K 18:1	-
15	1K 20:20-21	Ahab defeats Syrians	1K 20:13-14	-
16	1K 20:29-30	Ahab defeats Syrians again	1K 20:28	7 days
17	1K 20:36	Man killed by lion for not striking prophet	1K 20:35	hrs?
18	1K 22:37	Ahab forfeits life for disobedience	1K 20:42	-
19	1K 22:29-37	Ahab killed in battle	1K 22:19-28	-
20	1K 22:38	Dogs lick up Ahab’s blood	1K 21:19	-
21	2K 9:36	Dogs eat Jezebel in Jezreel	1K 21:23; 2K 9:10	~15 yrs
22	2K 9:25-26	Judgment/loss of kingdom on Ahab’s sons	1K 21:28-29	yrs
23	2K 1:17	Ahaziah dies from injury	2K 1:4, 6, 16	-
24	2K 2:22	Bad water cleansed	2K 2:21	-
25	2K 3:20	God provides water for armies	2K 3:16-17	1 day
26	2K 4:17	Shunammite woman has a son	2K 4:16-17	1 yr
27	2K 4:44	God multiplies bread for Elisha’s followers	2K 4:43	-
28	2K 5:14	Naaman washes and is cleansed of leprosy	2K 5:10	-
29	2K 5:27	Gehazi becomes leprous	2K 5:27	-
30	2K 6:18	Syrians struck with blindness per Elisha’s word	2K 6:18	-
31	2K 7:16	Miraculous provision in siege-famine	2K 7:1	1 day
32	2K 7:17-20	King’s officer dies because of unbelief	2K 7:2	1 day
33	2K 9:13ff.	Jehu becomes king of Israel	2K 9:1-12	-
34	2K 10:10-11	Ahab’s seed exterminated by Jehu	1K 17:21-24, 29	yrs
35	2K 14:25	Jeroboam II restores Israel’s territory	2K 14:25	-
36	2K 15:12	Jehu’s dynasty lasts exactly four generations	2K 10:30	100 yrs
37	2K 19:35-37	God delivers Jerusalem from Sennacherib	2K 19:21-34	-
38	2K 20:4-6	Hezekiah given 15 more years to live	2K 20:4-6	15 yrs
39	2K 23:15-16	Josiah burns priests’ bones on Bethel altar	1K 13:1-2	~300 yrs
40	2K 23:28-30	Josiah dies “in peace”	2K 22:18-20	13 yrs
41	2K 24:2	Babylon overruns Judah	2K 23:27 et al.	yrs
42	2K 25:11-21	Babylon carries away Jerusalem’s wealth/people	2K 20:16-17	yrs
43	2K 25:1ff.	Babylon overruns Judah	2K 21:12-15	yrs
44	2K 25:1ff.	Babylon overruns Judah	2K 22:15-17	yrs

* The chart is reproduced from Layton Talbert, *The Trustworthiness of Gods Words: Why Every Word from God Matters* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2022), Appendix 4.