

## **BEFORE AND AFTER AN EVENT.**

### **The prophet's problem**

Before an event happens we may or may not know that it is going to happen.

Our degree of certainty will depend on  
the nature of the event  
the evidence we have for the probability of its taking place.

It will also depend upon the attitude of the subject, since certainty is a psychological phenomenon. The simple minded certain, the hard empiricist not.

Our attitude will most certainly be determined by our past experience. The range of our experience will measure how extensive is the range of our testimony and thus of our expectations, and the reliability of our predictions.

After an event has happened we may or may not be able to know that it has happened. What is clear is that we can only know that an event has happened when it has happened. But an event may have happened and we are not able to know that it has happened, or what it was that happened. We may not know that some event took place, nor be able to specify the features of the event. Historians must plead ignorance for events beyond the grasp of interpreted evidence. The event was, but is now inaccessible. Sometimes we cannot say what happened. Sometimes we cannot say that something happened.

That is the problem of the historian and the detective.

But some events are beyond the range of our experience. We make predictions about this kind of event very precariously. That is the problem of the prophet and the prophetically inclined.

So what does that mean for the prophet and for those communities which are founded on the claim to be able to predict the future?. Sometimes the predictions refer to terrestrial events. Sometimes they refer to trans-terrestrial events, the super-terrestrial. The events predicted may also be supernatural events.

Prophecy and prediction are quite a part of our lives. Ask the economist, the sports commentator, the gambler, the weather forecaster, the investor, the pollster. You may not want to ask the politicians. But that won't make any difference. They will go on making forecasts. In their own way, of course!

But we should know how to evaluate the predictions we make, as does the scientist since prediction is part and parcel of his game. A basic part of the strategy of the physical scientist is to set up conditions, make predictions and then devise the means by which such predictions may be tested and the results examined for further research. Needless to say, such work is done on the

assumption that empirical testing is available for such predictions. An hypothesis remains an hypothesis until the evidence either falsifies it or fails to verify it.

The prophet is in a peculiar position. For to know that the prediction is true would be to have experienced the event predicted. All other considerations would render at best some degree of probability that the event will take place. So to predict an event of a certain kind, say an earthquake, the prophet is able to make reference to preceding similar events and to amass a whole range of data bearing on the claim. But whether the resultant claim is true will depend upon the actual experiencing of the events that has been predicted. The event will have to occur to verify the prediction.

In the religious context many predictions are not like that. There is in many cases no way of appealing to the occurrence of similar events for in the nature of the case, the event predicted is totally unique. So there can be no argument such as the following|:

Some events are similar to the predicted event  
Events similar to the predicted event have occurred.  
Other phenomena were present when these events occurred  
(such phenomena have been researched.)  
Since similar phenomena are now present, we can safely make  
a predictive hypothesis.  
Therefore the event predicted is probable

We could only tell whether the event predicted took place 'soon' after whatever preceding time is in view, if and when the event actually took place. In the case of the Advent it has not taken place. So even if we allow that 'soon' is to be taken to mean 'one hundred years from now', i.e. A. D. 2110, we shall only be able to verify or to falsify the claim after that time has elapsed. If by 'soon' 'at some indefinite future' is meant, there is no way of verifying or falsifying the sentence. That must be obvious, since no claim is being made.

Moreover since the predicted event is totally unique there is no way of appealing, so as to provide some empirical evidence for its probability, to preceding events. No such co-ordination is possible. This observation would be true for a totally unique physical event. But we are here dealing with a supernatural event whose origin lies totally outside the realm of nature. This is in reality an 'act of God'!

So what if one claims that it will take place 'soon'. The Bible ends with the words Behold I come quickly. Those words point to a culmination, bringing to its fulfilment what the book of *revelation* has in symbolic terms predicted. It is a word of consolation to those whose suffering has been portrayed but whose ultimate triumph has been assured. What we have to point out is that whatever precedes, and much of the symbolism of the book portrays the intensity of that in the experience of the believer and their community here reaches its final fulfilment. But the relation is not one of cause and effect. It is the decisive and majestic 'act of God' that brings about the final denouement of human history. None of the preceding events give the answer to our question. The end is utterly

and finally an 'act of God. 'Behold I come quickly' *nai erchomai tachu*. The Bible practically ends with the word 'soon' *tachu*.

Soon simple predictions