

Historical Transformation and Prophetic Vision: Erich Fromm's Philosophy of History

Franz Joseph C. Yoshiy, II

Abstract: This study examines Erich Fromm's distinctive philosophy of history through his concept of "prophetic messianism." I argue that Fromm's messianism articulates a vision of historical progress that acknowledges its eschatological origins while affirming human agency in ushering historical change. Drawing from his radical interpretation of Jewish scriptures and Rabbinical literature, Fromm develops a vision of historical change that neither forces transformation through apocalyptic rupture nor passively awaits divine intervention. Furthermore, Fromm's prophetic vision recognizes continuity between present struggles and future possibilities. His concept of "dynamic hope" provides a framework for gradual transformation occurring "in steps at a time." Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates how Fromm's historical vision reveals a unique approach to social change that offers contemporary relevance for navigating transformation with both critical clarity and constructive hope.

Keywords: Fromm, critical theory, philosophy of history, prophetic messianism

"HAVE WE in fact reached the end of history?" This was Francis Fukuyama's question in his celebrated essay "The End of History." Drawing from the German Philosopher G.W.F. Hegel's insights on history being a consciousness-driven process, Fukuyama suggests that we are currently witnessing the "end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution"¹ At the very least, when Fukuyama asserts the "end of history" he was referring to the triumph of Western liberal democracy against other alternatives at the level of ideology

¹ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," in *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 4.

or consciousness (*à la* Hegel).² What is worth noting in discourses on the end of history is an implicit assumption about how history progresses. In Fukuyama's case, he relies on Hegel's notion of history as the dialectical development of human consciousness and how it shapes reality. Fukuyama's secular and political appropriation of the end of history reflects the broader and underlying problem of how we conceive historical progress.

This broader question about historical progress became the subject of intense philosophical debate. Karl Löwith, in his magnum opus *Meaning in History*, presents a deeply pessimistic view of historical progress and human agency. For Löwith, modern ideas of progress represent nothing more than secularized Judeo-Christian eschatology—relying on the idea of progress towards an “expected future” where the meaning of history is derived.³ However, Löwith fundamentally rejects this framework, arguing that “historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning. History as such has no outcome.”⁴ Consequently, it is quite unimaginable for Löwith to see an intentionally active role of human beings in shaping history, since history and its processes are always subject to contingencies and the constancy of human nature. Robert Wallace observes that the latter is a recurring theme in Löwith's works since *Meaning in History*. Not even the prospect of nuclear annihilation can transform how we relate to the world or each other, because such change in our nature is simply impossible.⁵

Hans Blumenberg offers a contrasting perspective by criticizing Löwith's secularization thesis.⁶ While Blumenberg remains critical of “grand” philosophies of history that claim history is moving toward an end, he disagrees with Löwith's view of progress as merely secularized eschatology by proposing that progress is the “implementation of ‘human self-assertion’.”⁷ Self-assertion, for Blumenberg, “means an existential program, according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him.”⁸ Unlike

² In fact, Fukuyama admits that this is yet to be fully realized in the concrete or material level. See *Ibid.*

³ Cf. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 6–19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵ Cf. Robert M. Wallace, “Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate,” in *New German Critique*, 22 (1981), 79, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/487864>>.

⁶ Blumenberg argues that progress and eschatology operate under fundamentally different logics: progress unfolds *immanently* within history, while *eschatology* requires transcendent intervention to consummate history. Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by Robert Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 30.

⁷ Wallace, “Progress, Secularization and Modernity,” 75.

⁸ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 138.

Löwith, Blumenberg seems to be more optimistic (albeit, modestly) on the active role of human beings in ‘making’ history. To this, Wallace remarks that Blumenberg “has taken pains to deny the fateful inevitability of the ‘steamroller’; to defend the possibility of man making history more bearable for himself”⁹

Drawing from Löwith’s conclusions, we can already see how one must separate history as such from philosophies (or theories) regarding history that have tended to secularize Judaeo-Christian eschatology. Because for Löwith, in history, there are only cycles and no real ends.¹⁰ Simply put, for him, there is no “progress” in history as such. Blumenberg, on the other hand, attempts to salvage the idea of progress by describing it minimally as human self-assertion realized. This raises the question of whether we can conceive of a philosophy of history that honestly acknowledges the religious origins of progress while still affirming meaningful human transformation. The Löwith-Blumenberg debate seems to present us with a stark choice: either accept historical nihilism or settle for a thoroughly secular and minimal conception of progress. But perhaps this binary is unnecessarily restrictive—this essay argues that there is a third way that can embrace both the eschatological dimension of historical thinking and the genuine possibility of human development.

Erich Fromm (1900-1980) offers a perspective that seems to mediate these competing views. On the one hand, he agrees with Löwith’s contention that the idea of progress represents secularized eschatology. However, unlike Löwith, who was pessimistic about humanity’s capacity to usher progress, Fromm believes in humanity’s capacity to change for the better—specifically, the capacity of human beings to mold history by changing the conditions that hinder progress, placing him in tangential agreement with Blumenberg’s thesis on progress as human self-assertion. Fromm’s philosophy of history does not dismiss the idea of eventual progress but rather sees progress as the very result of human beings’ active development. This development, for him, is vividly expressed in the Jewish scriptures and rabbinical teachings concerning the “end of days” or the “messianic age.”

To understand Fromm’s distinctive approach, it is helpful to contrast it with other interpretations of messianism. A typical interpretation of the messianic age holds that it can only occur as a “break”—an apocalyptic event—from the current state of affairs. This position is held by some early Frankfurt School theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse. Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* provides us with an imagery of progress as a

⁹ Wallace, “Progress, Secularization and Modernity,” 79.

¹⁰ Here, Löwith follows Polybius’ contention that “history revolves in a cycle of political revolutions, wherein constitutions change, disappear, and return in a course appointed by nature.” Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 7.

“storm” that prevents us from looking back to the past.¹¹ Marcuse amplifies Benjamin’s thesis by asserting that revolution comes at the price of a total catastrophe—a “rupture” in the present that will allow for something totally new to enter.¹² In *The Coming of God*, German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann warns that the worst will likely happen, but maintains we can only trust in the God who creates something from nothing and brings life from death.¹³

In contrast to the apocalyptic view, Fromm’s notion of prophetic messianism, developed from his early engagement with Jewish law through his mature scriptural interpretation, provides us a vision of historical transformation that recognizes the capacity of humans to usher historical progress while at the same time rejecting the idea of the end of history as a total break from the present. Following Joan Braune’s interpretation of Fromm’s messianism as “a tool for the creation of the future within the horizon of the present,”¹⁴ I aim to expand Braune’s understanding by suggesting that underneath Fromm’s messianism is a unique philosophy of history grounded in his radical interpretation of Jewish scriptures and Rabbinical literature. In the succeeding sections, I will show how Fromm’s ‘prophetic’ understanding of history illuminates what enables and impedes genuine transformation, while offering a distinctive vision of the messianic goal.

Fromm’s Philosophy of History

The seeds of Fromm’s messianism may be traced back to his early works on Judaism. In his 1922 doctoral dissertation, *The Jewish Law: A Contribution to the Sociology of Jewish Diaspora*, Fromm already laid down some ideas that point to the direction of his messianic thinking.¹⁵ He avers that the

¹¹ This is Thesis IX of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York, N.Y.: Schocken Books, 2007), 257–258.

¹² In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse presents us with an imagery of the absence of all forms of mass-media. For him, only through such absence (even if it plunges the masses into a collective shock or trauma) that one can begin see the “disintegration of the system.” See Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 250.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1996), 234.

¹⁴ Joan Braune, *Erich Fromm’s Revolutionary Hope: Prophetic Messianism as a Critical Theory of the Future* (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2014), 196.

¹⁵ Michael Löwy, “Jewish Messianism and Revolutionary Utopia in Central Europe: Erich Fromm’s Early Writings (1922-30),” *Erich Fromm’s Critical Theory: Hope, Humanism, and the Future* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 43–51. In his article, Löwy avers that Fromm’s works spanning from 1922 to 1930 share some common themes: “a messianic understanding of Judaism; a Freudian-Marxist rejection of capitalism as a socioeconomic system;

“religious content” of the Jewish law “is expressed in the [people’s] faith in the Messiah” — this “faith” being “a state in which all people recognize God as a unity and reality.”¹⁶ Thus, he further adds, “it commits the Jewish people to work towards this goal as the meaning and purpose of all history.”¹⁷ This statement contains the earliest evidence in Fromm’s thought concerning the relation between messianism and history: that messianic faith orients an entire people toward a collective historical goal, making the messianic age the ultimate purpose of historical development. He supports this view by citing passages from prophetic literature where the messianic idea is described as: 1) “the God-fulfillment of all human beings” (from Hosea 3:5); 2) an imagery of Israel’s geographical and economic security (from Amos 9:11, 13–15 and Micah 4:1–4); and 3) the idea of “prophetic universalism” or the “spread of the knowledge of God to Israel and mankind” (Isaiah 19:23–25).¹⁸

One important insight, however, is the idea that the Messiah (or the messianic age) is a “state” of the people (rather than the coming of an “individual”) and that this state is the goal of all history such that one must work towards this goal collectively as a people. From this, we can already discern that Fromm espouses an understanding of history that is teleological i.e., history having a *telos* (“end” or “purpose”). This early understanding of messianism as both collective endeavor and historical goal would mature into a comprehensive philosophy of history. In his 1966 work, *You Shall be as Gods*, Fromm develops these insights into a full account of how history moves from original unity through estrangement toward messianic return.

According to Fromm, the Genesis story of Adam’s “fall” marks the beginning of human history.¹⁹ The first human beings (Adam and Eve), after disobeying God’s prohibition, were expelled from paradise, and were never allowed to return.²⁰ With their act of disobedience (which, for Fromm, was the first act of human freedom) and their eventual expulsion from paradise, the original harmony and unity between humankind and nature was disrupted. From that moment on, the human being had to struggle painfully to survive: “... in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.”²¹ Secularly

and the revolutionary aspiration for a socialist utopia with religious roots.” Cf. Löwy, “Jewish Messianism and Revolutionary Utopia in Central Europe,” 45.

¹⁶ Erich Fromm, “The Jewish Law: A Contribution to the Sociology of the Jewish Diaspora,” ed. by Rainer Funk, trans. by Miranda Siegel, in *Fromm Forum*, 26 (2022), 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

¹⁹ Cf. Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 87.

²⁰ See Gen. 3:17–24. All scriptural passages cited in this article is taken from *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text: A New Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917).

²¹ Gen. 3:17.

speaking, Fromm explains that the Genesis story may be read as a metaphor for the phenomenon of human birth: the experience of being expelled from the mother's *womb*—which represents the paradisaical environment—inaugurates an individual's history.²² In another work, he avers that the story of the Fall represented that point in the evolution of species when the animal transcended nature "by erect posture, [and] the brain has grown far beyond what it was in the highest animal."²³ Just as the first human beings were prevented from returning to paradise, one cannot undo the process of evolution.²⁴

Having been expelled from the paradisiacal environment, human beings are left in a state of estrangement from themselves, from others, and from nature. Philosophically speaking, Fromm considers this moment (of expulsion from paradise) as the splitting of the subject (human being) and object (world).²⁵ This estrangement (or split), however, is a necessary stage in human history. For it is through this stage, according to Fromm, that human beings realize the need to overcome this "spilt" by finding new ways of harmonizing and unifying themselves with the world. This newfound unity and harmony between human beings and nature is portrayed in the prophetic and rabbinic literatures as "the end of days" or "the messianic age."²⁶

To briefly summarize, one could readily see that Fromm espouses a view of history in three stages: the pre-individual unity with nature, the split between human beings and nature, and the messianic age. In this sense, following Rainer Funk's observations, one could say that Fromm's thinking was dialectical in the sense of "a three-phase rhythm of original state estrangement and return [,] negation and negation of the negation, etc."²⁷ However, one must construe "return" here in the sense of a Hegelian *sublatio*. Simply put, it is a similar, yet different kind of harmony from that of the original state. They are similar insofar as the existential drive towards

²² Erich Fromm, *On Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), 16–23.

²³ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (London & New York: Routledge, 1956), 23.

²⁴ The law on the irreversibility of evolution was supposedly laid down by the paleontologist, Louis Dollo. According to Dollo, "[a]n organism never returns exactly to a former state, even if it finds itself placed in conditions of existence identical to those in which it has previously lived. But by virtue of the indestructibility of the past ... it always keeps some trace of the intermediate stages through which it has passed." S.J. Gould, "Dollo on Dollo's Law: Irreversibility and the Status of Evolutionary Laws," in *Journal of the History of Biology* (1970), 196. A recent study on the irreversibility of evolutionary changes in protein structure seems to support Dollo's law. See Jamie T. Bridgman et al., "An epistatic ratchet constrains the direction of glucocorticoid receptor evolution," in *Nature*, 461:7263 (2009), 518.

²⁵ Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, 88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁷ Cf. Rainer Funk, *Erich Fromm: The Courage to Be Human*, trans. by Michael Shaw (New York: Continuum, 1982), 235. See also Braune, *Erich Fromm's Revolutionary Hope*, 183.

harmony is preserved. But they are different in the sense that, as one can no longer return to the original state, one must find a new way to unite with nature as an effort to overcome one’s estrangement. (see Figure 1)

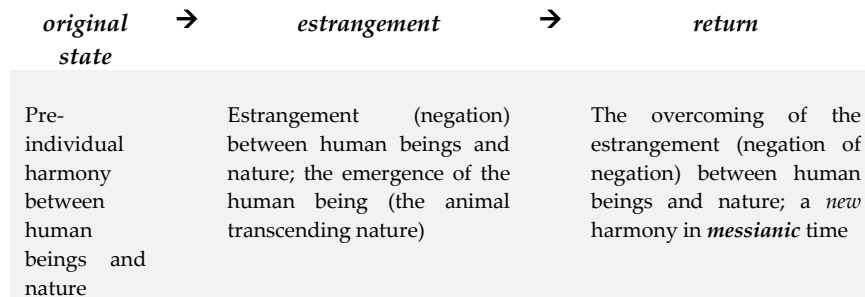


Figure 1. Diagram of Fromm’s Philosophy of History

Fromm underscores the necessity of the experience of estrangement in the progress of history. He cites the Biblical narrative of Abraham being commanded by God to leave their country and journey into the land God has promised them. According to Fromm, this event represents their rejection of their primary ties to their country (a source of familiar security)—a necessary step they had to take in order to begin their journey to the Land of Promise. And yet, their journey was coupled with the experience of estrangement—the Jewish people (the Israelites) were left “wandering back and forth between Egypt and Canaan” until such time they settled in Egypt, a land not of their own.²⁸ The kind of estrangement the Jewish people had to endure under the Egyptians was coupled with oppression: with their increasing population in Egypt, the Israelites were seen as a threat by the Egyptians. The Egyptian Pharaoh, thus, ordered that all Israelites were to become slaves and were forced to do hard labor.²⁹ Moses, the pivotal figure in the Israelites’ liberation from the Egyptians, had to flee Egypt (the country where he was born and raised) before God revealed Himself to him and commanded him to liberate the Israelites from their suffering. Again, for Fromm, the story of Moses brings us back to the theme of severing one’s primary ties as a condition for liberation.

Just as there is a need to cut off one’s umbilical cord when one is born, “[f]reedom is based on the achievement of liberating oneself from the primary

²⁸ In Gen. 15:13, God said to Abraham: “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” Somehow, this statement prefigures what would take place in the Book of Exodus.

²⁹ Ex. 2:11–14.



ties that give security, yet cripple [human beings].”³⁰ But aside from cutting one’s primary ties, the other condition for freedom is one’s capacity to suffer. This, for Fromm, was clearly exhibited in the Exodus story—the Israelites, after having been oppressed for years by the Egyptians, finally decided to stand up against their oppressors. In other words, the possibility of liberation rests upon human beings’ capacity to suffer³¹—that through the experience of suffering and estrangement, one could develop an emancipatory consciousness.

In the Exodus story, Moses reluctantly accepts the task revealed to him by God. Moses and his brother Aaron finally return to Egypt, and they tell the Israelites about God’s revelation to Moses. Next, they go to the Pharaoh and demand the release of the Israelites from their slavery. The people, however, did not seem to be uplifted by Moses and Aaron’s ultimatum. Instead, as Fromm would argue, they began to fear freedom. “They blame Moses and Aaron for the increased difficulties resulting from their first demands for freedom.”³² This only goes to show, according to Fromm, that not only were the Israelites afraid of being enslaved—they were also afraid of losing the favor of their oppressors.³³ The proclamation of their impending freedom was met with fear when the first signs of difficulty appeared. This part of Exodus story is very much evident in the history of humankind, according to Fromm: that because the first step towards freedom is difficult and alienating, there is a tendency to be afraid of freedom and fall back into various forms of dependencies (be it an idol or a charismatic leader).³⁴

When Moses and Aaron failed to convince the Pharaoh through reasonable means, this called for another approach—the use of force. From that point onwards, God uses *force* (by sending down several plagues) to compel the Pharaoh in releasing the Israelites. However, with every plague sent by God, the Pharaoh’s heart only hardened even more. Fromm observes that this “hardening of the Pharaoh’s heart” expresses “one of the most fundamental laws of human behavior. Every evil act tends to harden man’s heart, that is, to deaden it. Every good act tends to soften it, to make it more

³⁰ Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, 89.

³¹ Cf., *Ibid.*, 92.

³² *Ibid.*, 98.

³³ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁴ This phenomenon has been explored at length by Fromm in his work *Escape from Freedom*. In that work, he opines that although freedom can make human beings independent and rational, it also leaves them alone and powerless. The burden of being alone drives human beings to either *escape* the burden of freedom by submitting themselves to authorities and dependencies, or they could progress into realizing the *positive* aspect of their freedom. Cf. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1994), viii.

alive.”³⁵ In the Pharaoh’s case, his refusal to do what is right (i.e., to release the Israelites) only brought upon him more plagues and destruction—a cause for him to harden his heart. The lesson in this part of the story, for Fromm, is that one cannot rely on the threat of force to usher revolutionary change. As in the case of the story, the Israelites were eventually liberated, but it left the Egyptians destroyed (of course, due to the Pharaoh’s stubbornness). Force is a quick solution, albeit a destructive one. Which is why, for Fromm, “[r]evolution can succeed only in steps in time.”³⁶ The Israelite’s suffering enabled them to gain an emancipatory consciousness. This led them to rebel and eventually gain their freedom from the Egyptians.

Fromm’s interpretation of the Exodus story—with the central event of the Israelites’ revolution against the Egyptians—completes the picture of his philosophy of history. He might have contemplated “revolution” as tautologous with the process of “historical transformation.” That said, this process reiterates the three-phase movement I illustrated earlier: that with the emergence of human beings from their original stage, they are left to themselves – left in a state of estrangement. It may be inferred from Fromm’s theory that human history is nothing but the human beings’ attempt to overcome the state of estrangement and thus journey towards a new harmony with nature and other human beings (that is, without regressing back into their original ties with nature)—the very idea of a messianic age.

Prophetic Guidance: Non-coercive Leadership in Historical Transformation

The story of the Jewish revolution, for Fromm, is a poetic expression of this attempt to usher a messianic age. Unfortunately, the Israelites kept on falling back into their idolatrous ways, as narrated in the rest of the Old Testament.³⁷ The hopes of a true revolution—of a “freedom to a new life”³⁸ sans any dependencies or idols—ended in frustration. Despite this, God sent prophets (Nevi’im) to remind the Israelites of their *proper* goal i.e., the messianic age. As we have seen in the Genesis and Exodus stories, God does not directly meddle with human affairs. Instead, God leaves human beings to

³⁵ Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, 101.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 114. One might recall the story of the legislation (the giving of the Ten Commandments): Moses left the Israelites in order to receive God’s commandments at Mount Sinai. The Israelites, having been left to themselves in the wilderness, became impatient in waiting for Moses’ return. They created a new *idol* (in the form of a golden calf) and started worshipping it as their new god.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 113. This “new life” may be construed as the “messianic age”—the “new harmony” between human beings and nature—when human beings finally overcome their state of estrangement.

choose and create their own history.³⁹ This does not mean, however, that God passively watches humans suffer from their choices. In the Exodus story, God sent the prophet Moses to liberate the Israelites from the Egyptians. God manifests himself in history through the prophets who 1) remind the people of their proper goal i.e., to be fully human (or “to become like God”);⁴⁰ 2) provide the people with alternatives which they can choose from and the consequences of each alternative; 3) “... dissent and protest whenever [human beings take] the wrong road. But they do not abandon the people; they are their conscience, speaking up when everybody else is silent”; and 4) think of salvation as a social and collective enterprise—that salvation becomes possible through “the establishment of a society governed by love, justice, and truth”⁴¹ The prophets, in this sense, do not preach about a deterministic future. Rather, they see the future within the forces at work in the present and “the consequences of these forces unless they are changed.”⁴²

The prophets (with their fourfold role) are instrumental in the process of historical change. As dissenters, they become at the same time symbols of resistance against social injustices. The prophets do not seek to abolish history, but rather to nudge human beings into the next step in history—that is, the messianic time, in which, justice, love, and peace shall reign. And this becomes possible if human beings were to collectively make this happen. The prophets serve as a guide and reminder of the social dimension of the messianic age. By reminding the people of their proper goal as human beings (i.e., the development of their “powers of reason and love, in which [they] become fully human”), the prophets help bring history closer to its *telos*. The prophetic books in the Old Testament describe further what the messianic age signifies. Fromm already provided us with an initial description of the messianic age. In his interpretation of some of the prophetic works, he furthers his initial description by identifying three overlapping *leitmotifs* concerning the prophets’ vision of the messianic time: 1) the vision for peace; 2) the destruction of all weapons for war; and 3) prophetic universalism.

The prophetic concept of peace, according to Fromm, is more than just the absence of war. One must go back to Fromm’s interpretation of the Genesis story to understand what he meant by peace. I mentioned previously that human history began because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience—which

³⁹ Fromm argues that if God wanted to meddle with human affairs, God could have prevented Adam and Eve from falling into temptation. Likewise, God could have “softened” the Pharaoh’s heart into releasing the Israelites the first time they pleaded for their liberation from suffering.

⁴⁰ Gen. 3:5.

⁴¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 119.

led to their eventual expulsion from paradise. Again, this story is a metaphor for how human beings were separated from nature and their fellow human beings. In the messianic age, however, this separation is finally overcome: human beings will be “at peace with those from whom [they were] separated.”⁴³ Fromm further insists that the achievement of *peace* in the messianic age coincides with human beings’ achievement of their full humanity—an achievement that is disrupted by a history of alienation from nature and their fellow human beings. In the same way, human beings will have achieved peace with nature in the sense that they are no longer “threatened by nature and [stop] trying to dominate it; [they become] natural, and nature becomes human.”⁴⁴ Having transcended nature, human beings lost their natural, paradisiacal home; in the messianic age, they will be at home again in the natural world “and nature [will become] part of the human world.”⁴⁵ This brings us to the second *leitmotif*—the destruction of weapons. Fromm’s oft-cited Biblical passage for this aspect of messianism comes from the prophets Isaiah and Micah:

And He shall judge between the nations,
And shall decide for many peoples;
And they shall beat their swords into shares,
And their spears into pruninghooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war any more.
But they shall sit every man under his vine and under
his fig-tree;
And none shall make them afraid;
For the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken.⁴⁶

The destruction of all weapons is a concomitant of the prophetic vision of peace. These weapons are not only instruments of destruction, but objects that sow fear among the people. But in the messianic age, every war and strife ceases with the absence of these weapons—“when nobody has the wish and the power to make another afraid.”⁴⁷ Weapons of mass destruction shall instead be turned into tools that will be used by human beings for the cultivation of life. This brings us to the third motif: that the messianic age—

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Fromm finds an analogous concept in Marx: the *humanization of nature*. See Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 56.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibid.* For Fromm, the peace between human beings and nature is beautifully expressed in the books of the prophet Isaiah and Hosea.

⁴⁶ Micah 4:3–4. In Isaiah 4:2, we find a similar passage.

⁴⁷ Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, 128.

as a universal experience—will be a time when all human beings from different tribes and nations have overcome their separation and be at peace with each other. Nations will no longer seek power over each other. The “illusion” that one is the “chosen race” or “nation” would have been abolished. One emerges from his/her ties with clan, family, and nation and fully embraces the experience of solidarity with all human beings.⁴⁸

Dynamic Hope: Human Agency and Transformative Faith

It is also worth noting Fromm’s discussion of the rabbinical and post-scriptural sources pertaining to the concept of the messianic age. Beginning with the Book of Daniel, the messianic age was painted as an ideal world-to-come. The anticipation for the messianic age became a vertical longing (as opposed to the horizontally oriented notion introduced in earlier prophetic literatures).⁴⁹ Another perennial theme in rabbinical literature that pertains to this idealized messianic age is the notion of the “birth pangs of the messiah.” By this, it was meant that a “catastrophe” (or a degree of “suffering” and “evil” that will make human beings repent) will necessarily occur before the coming of the messiah (or the messianic age). Other rabbinical sages aver, however, that such catastrophes will not necessarily occur since the coming of the messiah will be the result of human beings’ “own continuous improvement” i.e., in their “moral and spiritual progress.”⁵⁰ Despite these apparent opposing views on the messianic age, the Jewish peoples’ hope in the coming of the messiah (be it the horizontal or vertical kind)⁵¹ fueled them with “courage to tolerate their humiliations without despising themselves.”⁵²

Insofar as Fromm is concerned, the rabbinical tradition in Judaism is in agreement that the messianic age will take place in this world.⁵³ He sees the messianic age as occurring within history, rather than a break (or rupture) from it. The political situation of the Jews under the Roman Empire largely

⁴⁸ Psychoanalytically speaking, the fixation over clan, family, and nation is symptomatic of what Fromm calls “incestuous ties.” This is a *pathological* form of compensation for the loss of the natural ties with the mother (see earlier discussion on the phenomenon of human birth). The *healthy* form, on the other hand, compensates for this loss by treating each human being as his/her brother and sister—a form that deeply resonates with third *motif* of the messianic age. Cf. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 37–59.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 133. Vertical in the sense that the *messianic* age will be ushered by a “supernatural being who descends from the heavenly heights to *end* history.” Horizontal in the sense that the messianic time is an event that will take place within the temporal-historical horizon.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 140–141.

⁵¹ Later on, these distinctions will be renamed as “prophetic” and “apocalyptic” kinds of messianism respectively.

⁵² Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, 143.

⁵³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 137.

informed their understanding of the messianic age as a symbol of their national independence. In fact, this was demonstrated during the failed uprising of Bar Kohkba (his name literally meaning “Son of a Star”), a Jewish nationalist leader. Kohkba claimed himself to be the messiah—partly due to Rabbi Akiba (who interpreted Kohkba as the “star” being referred to in Numbers 24:17).⁵⁴ The Jewish peoples’ strong desire for independence during that time—which coincided with their hopes for a messiah who would liberate them—enabled certain personalities, like Kohkba, to foist themselves as the messiah.⁵⁵ This was not uncommon throughout the rest of the rabbinic period, according to Fromm, when the Jews found themselves hoping in a false messiah or messianic time.⁵⁶

This brings Fromm to his final point regarding the *messianic age*—that it should not be *forced*. He avers that the rabbinical literatures have already warned against the idea of “forcing the messiah” (for instance, by calculating the date of when the messianic age will begin). Citing Rabbi Jose, Fromm says “[h]e who attempts to give the end [that is, to predict the coming of the messiah] has no chance in the world to come [strongest expression of censure]” (Megillah 3a).⁵⁷ The proper attitude towards the messianic age, according to him, is that of a *dynamic hope*. This hope, which is neither “a passive waiting” nor “rash impatience,” relies upon one to imagine salvation taking place *hic et nunc* but, at the same time, does not expect its fulfillment instantly—that there is always a room for failure and disappointment. Which is why, for Fromm, hope is a *paradox*. To put it poetically, as soon as the messianic age is pronounced, it must be refused. One can imagine and even say something about the messianic age albeit minimally. However, following rabbinic caution, one must refuse any attempts to idealize (or even idolize) it.

Hope, then, does not idolize the future—unlike Robespierre who worshipped “posterity” or Stalin who interpreted the “laws of history” as the sole arbiter of good and evil.⁵⁸ A dynamic hope is possible only when one ceases to see future salvation neither as imminent nor distant—but that even if it fails to occur in one’s lifetime, by holding fast to the idea that it will come,

⁵⁴ The Book of Numbers 24:17 states “There shall step forth a star out of Jacob ...”

⁵⁵ As observed by Schiffman, “strong messianic hopes helped to fuel the fires of the Great Revolt of 66–74 CE and the Bar Kochba uprising of 132–135 CE ... The revolt itself must be seen as primarily restorative, in that it endeavored to re-establish Jewish independence and sovereignty and the freedom to follow the ancestral ways of the Jewish people.” Lawrence Schiffman, “Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 4: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. by Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1060.

⁵⁶ Another case of false messianic hope that Fromm illustrates was that of Sabbatai Zevi. Like Kohkba, Sabbatai Zevi also claimed himself to be the messiah and preached that the messianic age begins in 1666.

⁵⁷ Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, 153.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Ibid.* 154–155.

“salvation has already taken place” albeit “in a provisional sense.”⁵⁹ This idea of hope, according to Fromm, was beautifully expressed by Rabbi Tarfon in the Mishnah: “[i]t is not up to you to finish the task, but you have also no right to withdraw from it.”⁶⁰

Practical Implications: Socio-Historical Transformation and Revolution

I provided a picture of how Fromm conceived human history as the history of alienation and estrangement, and that the telos or the proper goal of human history is none other than the overcoming of alienation in the messianic age. The initial question for Fromm, however, was whether a “historical revolution”—a transition from human history to the messianic age, from alienation to its overcoming—was possible. Fromm’s quick response to this question was that it is possible, and he uses the Exodus story of liberation to illustrate his point. Fromm also notes how the Israelites struggled for years before they were able to free themselves from slavery. For him, the Israelites’ revolution took steps at a time—it was not brought about by a drastic and forceful change, but by a gradual process facilitated by a prophet of God (hence, the notion of a prophetic messianism).

While Fromm held on to the idea of a messianic age, he was not expressing a kind of optimism that was oblivious to the reality of challenges and failures that may come in trying to usher historical change. Again, the Israelites were a case in point: he narrated how even after they were liberated from the Egyptians, they still fell back to their idolatrous and alienating ways. Which is why, for him, the prophets played a decisive role: they served as the conscience of the people—constantly reminding them of their proper goal (i.e., the messianic age) and providing them with alternatives on how to attain this goal. More importantly, he underscored the role of a dynamic hope in ushering a historical revolution. Again, he did not mean this as an optimistic anticipation of salvation or an idolization of the future. Rather, he meant this as an imagination of salvation taking place here and now but, at the same time, does not expect its fulfillment instantly—that there is always a room for failure and disappointment.

The possibility of a historical revolution he addressed in *You Shall be as Gods* may be used to rebut the optimistic charge against his vision for a messianic age. Just as Fromm understood that the messianic age cannot be forced, one must also understand that transforming society into a better one cannot be done through force. Fromm was aware of the dangers of forcing

⁵⁹ Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods*, 156.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

social change, citing historical examples such as Stalin's use of force to advance the socialist vision in Russia—which, for Fromm, succeeded economically but had negative repercussions on the political and cultural spheres of life. It is important to consider this example since Fromm was critical of those who used totalitarian and fascistic means of bringing about the socialist vision—that while he sees prophetic messianism and socialism as proper goals of human history, he was critical of those who try to force this goal upon human beings.⁶¹

Transforming society, for Fromm, requires an attitude of dynamic hope. In *The Revolution of Hope*, he notes how “[h]ope is a decisive element in any attempt to bring about social change in the direction of greater aliveness, awareness, and reason.”⁶² Hope, in this sense, is not about passively waiting for society to change; nor is it about forcing society to change. As Fromm has consistently emphasized: hope is a paradox—an inner state of readiness “at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime.”⁶³ Hope depends upon seeing the real condition of society, going beyond the façade of public opinion and authoritarian proclivities. This, then, demands the articulation of better alternatives that brings us closer to the aim of a better society. It does not attempt to force the people into changing, rather it simply shows them the possibilities that lie within each alternative—following the prophetic practice of providing the people with alternatives which they can choose from and the consequences of each alternative. As Fromm notes “[p]rophetic language is always the language of alternatives, of choice, and of freedom; it is never that of determinism, for better or worse.”⁶⁴ A critique of society then, for Fromm, is not simply satisfied with pointing out the wrong state of things. Critique should likewise provide us with alternatives which bring us closer to the goal of a better society, just as the prophets of old provided alternatives for achieving the messianic age.

Conclusion

Fromm's prophetic messianism was an offshoot of his radical interpretation of the Old Testament. In his reading of the Old Testament, he was able to come up with his own view of history which may be characterized

⁶¹ The affinity between prophetic messianism and socialism for Fromm is quite clear in his writings. In *Marx's Concept of Man*, he asserts that “Marx's aim, socialism ... is essentially prophetic Messianism in the language of the nineteenth century.” Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, 3.

⁶² Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper Colophon Books, 1968), 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

as both teleological and dialectical. The eviction of Adam and Eve from Paradise left human beings in a state of estrangement (the emergence of human beings from their original stage of paradisiacal unity with nature). Human history then, according to Fromm, is nothing but human beings' attempt to overcome this state of estrangement and thus journey towards a new harmony with nature and other human beings (that is, without regressing back into their original ties with nature)—the very idea of a messianic age. Fromm contemplated that the transition from the state of estrangement to the messianic age necessitated a historical “revolution.” This revolution, however, was not to take place by force, but only in steps at a time.

Additionally, for Fromm, the role of the prophets was crucial in bringing about such change in history. The prophets were dissenters; they became symbols of resistance against social injustices. They did not seek to abolish history but, rather, to nudge human beings into the next step in history—that is, the messianic time. The possibility of this taking place, however, lies in the collective power of human beings. The prophets, then, served to constantly remind the people of this social dimension of the messianic age. By guiding the people towards their proper goal as human beings (i.e., the development of their “powers of reason and love, in which [they] become fully human”), the prophets help bring history closer to its *telos*. Lastly, historical change necessitates an attitude of dynamic hope that relies on one to imagine salvation taking place here and now but, at the same time, does not expect its fulfillment instantly, acknowledging that there is always a room for failure and disappointment.

Fromm's philosophy of history, with his notion of prophetic messianism at its core, articulates a vision of historical progress that acknowledges its eschatological origins while affirming human agency in ushering historical change. Fromm's grounding in Jewish scriptures and Rabbinical literature provides crucial resources that distinguish his messianism from “catastrophic” or “apocalyptic” accounts of the messianic age. Where apocalyptic messianism sees a total break from the present, Fromm's prophetic vision recognizes continuity between present struggles and future possibilities. His interpretation of the Israelites' Exodus narrative demonstrates how historical change emerges from sustained engagement with existing conditions rather than their wholesale destruction.

In his psychoanalytic practice, Fromm emphasized the importance of having a “picture” or “model of a patient—a theoretical understanding of human nature itself.⁶⁵ This model presents the human being as fundamentally

⁶⁵ Erich Fromm, “Being Centrally Related to the Person,” in *The Clinical Erich Fromm: Personal Accounts and Papers on Therapeutic Technique*, ed. by Rainer Funk (New York: Rodopi B.V., 2009), 30.

conflicted: existing simultaneously as a being in nature and as a being capable of transcending nature. This existential contradiction creates an internal tension that demands resolution. The therapeutic process, therefore, seeks to help individuals find ways to unify these conflicting conditions and overcome their inherent discord. Analogously, in his philosophy of history, human history represents humanity's collective attempt to overcome alienation and achieve unity. However, this historical quest for unity cannot involve regression to a pre-conscious, paradisiacal state. Instead, drawing from rabbinical and scriptural tradition, Fromm locates the goal of this historical process in the messianic age—a future state of unity where humanity overcomes alienation.

Next to having a theoretical picture of a human being, for Fromm, is to try and determine the “chances for a profound change” in an individual.⁶⁶ Here, I would like to draw a parallel theme in *You Shall be as Gods*, where he inquired into the possibility of a “revolution” or “historical change” within the context of the Israelites’ history of liberation. Just as profound change in an individual cannot be expected within the initial stages of therapy, one cannot expect social-historical transformation to take place overnight. As Fromm constantly emphasized, historical revolution could only succeed in steps at a time. Through prophetic messianism, Fromm articulated his vision of a historical revolution that neither forces nor passively await social change. Rather, one must dynamically hope for such change to take place within the horizon of present. Fromm's understanding of hope as a paradox—maintaining readiness “for that which is not yet born” while avoiding desperation—provides crucial guidance for navigating contemporary crises that demand both realistic assessment and transformative vision. His prophetic messianism thus offers not merely historical insight, but a practical framework for engaging present challenges with both critical clarity and constructive hope.

*Department of History and Philosophy
University of the Philippines-Baguio
The Philippines*

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⁶⁶ Fromm, “Being Centrally Related to the Person,” 30.

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