

SESSION NINETEEN

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

I. THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

Like virtually all the countries of the Ancient Near East, Israel had her prophets. Yet the origin of the prophetic function is shrouded in mystery. In fact, there is still no scholarly consensus as to the origin or correct etymological identification of the term (Heb. נְבִיא).¹ There is early evidence of "prophetic activity" with Israel, and yet we have no way of knowing what relationship existed with the "prophetic activity" of other countries.

Prophetic activity is certainly attested elsewhere, especially in connection with temple rituals. Livingston, for example, has described the prophetic function in regard to the Akkadian priesthood and temple: "*baru* priests were diviners who were skilled in observing omens in nature, interpreting dreams and the art of astrology."² He goes on to elaborate,

The term *baru* means "to see," and the task of the priests was to observe the action of oil and water in a cup, the way in which objects fall, the condition of the entrails of sacrificial animals, the relation of the various heavenly bodies to each other (astrology), the movements of animals and birds, and the symbols of dreams. Hence, the *baru* priests were highly skilled technicians, and the methods of their work were closely guarded secrets. They did record some of their knowledge on clay tablets, however, and some of these have been recovered. They believed their deities spoke through such phenomena, and referred to the conclusions they reached about the nature of coming events as "the word of god."³

¹Over forty years ago, W. F. Albright made the suggestion that the Hebrew word *nābî'* is a noun from a passive form of the Semitic root *nb'*, "to call." The implication was that the prophet was "one called" by a god (emphasizing the commissioning of the prophet for his or her mission). He based this primarily on comparison with the Akkadian verb *nabû*, "to name, invoke" (see Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1940], 231-32). Others (e.g., T. J. Meek, *Hebrew Origins*, 147) opted for an active form coming from a common Akkadian root, not found in Hebrew, meaning "to speak," and thus a "speaker," or "proclaimer" (indicating proclamation of messages from God). More recently, Daniel E. Fleming has proposed that the etymological roots of the Hebrew *nābî'* originated in West Semitic cultures, citing evidence from Mari and Emar of 2nd millennium BC Syria (see "The Etymological Origins of the Hebrew *nābî'*: The One Who Invokes God," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55:2 [Apr 1993]: 217-24). He notes, "The Syrian *nabû* is best understood as one who invokes the gods, and the noun should be an active participle from the verb *nabû*, 'to name'" (218). This would have the idea to call on or to invoke the gods in prayer, blessing or divinatory/oracular inquiry. For the Hebrews, this would be "one who invokes" the name of Yahweh for power and guidance.

²G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in Its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 107.

³*Ibid.*, 112.

Despite such examples, there is no evidence to suggest that the Hebrew prophetic function derived from such pagan practices. Bullock has concluded,

The evidence is still insufficient to draw any confident conclusion regarding the origins of Hebrew prophecy. The one thing that can be said confidently is that prophecy, like temple and sacrifice, was a general phenomenon in the ancient world of the Bible. The attempt to trace its origins to any one culture outside of Israel is no more possible than it would be to trace Mari or Canaanite prophecy to its derivation.⁴

This does not mean, however, that Israel's prophets were no different than those outside Israel. Merrill has carefully pointed out the uniqueness of Israel's prophets in regard to the Ancient Near East:

- 1) They were conscious of the call of God and performed their ministry in the name of YHWH only. Any predictive word from them came to pass (or would come to pass) within the time frame and historical context suggested in the oracle itself.
- 2) Unlike the pagan diviners and practitioners of magic, they did not seek to manipulate their God to their own plans and purposes.
- 3) They were responsible to God alone for their ministry, and hence would not merchandise their services to the highest bidder. Consequently, they spoke objectively, and reached beyond the mere interpretation of signs and portents to deal with issues of morality, righteousness, and the kingdom of God.⁵

II. "PROPHETIC ACTIVITY" IN EARLY HEBREW HISTORY

The ministry of Samuel appears to be a watershed in regard to prophetic activity for the nation of Israel. In this section, I will highlight a few of the early examples and point out the nature of prophetic activity.

A. First Biblical Mention = Gen 20:7

1. Context: God's rebuke of Abimelech as he was about to take Sarah. God told him that Abraham was a *prophet* and would pray for him. This is enacted in 20:17-18, "And Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife."
2. Observations: Abraham acted as an *interceder*! His role was not predicting, and did not involve visions, etc. In some sense, this did involve confrontation with sin.

B. Second Biblical Mention = Ex 7:1

1. Context: Moses and Aaron against Pharaoh of Egypt. The LORD said to Moses, "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet."
2. Observations: The point is that he functioned as an *intermediary* between Moses and Pharaoh! This did not involve "predicting" or receiving visions.

⁴C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 14.

⁵Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 379-80.

C. Numbers 11:29

1. Context: The verb is used in vv 25-26, and the noun is used in vs 29. When Moses established the 70 elders, the Spirit came and rested upon them so that they prophesied. "But they did not do it again" (11:25).
2. Observation: This suggests that the LORD was doing this to authenticate their authority for this office. Note the further context in which other men prophesied, but Moses did not rebuke them. He said, "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them." There seems to have been an added dimension here from what we have previously seen, in which the person was marked by a dramatic encounter with God's Spirit along with resulting utterances.

D. Numbers 12:6

1. Context: Disgruntlement against Moses on the part of Miriam and Aaron. The LORD spoke, "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream."
2. Observations: There is a unique element in this situation, in which the prophet is seen as the recipient of unique revelation by means of visions/dreams. God speaks with him personally and privately.

E. Deut 13:1-5

1. Context: Possible sources by which temptation to idolatry might come are listed for the covenant nation. False prophets could be one of the dangers, so there is the need for a test of a true prophet. The situation involves a prophet who would predict a certain sign or wonder, with the intention of lending authority to his counsel (such that others would obey him). Verse two notes that the prediction of the false prophet might even come to pass. According to vs 5, the test is to see if his counsel incites rebellion against the LORD and violates the commandments revealed in God's Word.
2. Observations: Miraculous signs are not necessarily a test of truth! Signs or human experience must always submit to the only true standard, i.e., God's Word! Thus, a prophet's counsel must be in line with Scripture.

F. Deuteronomy 18

1. Context: The warning of detestable practices by the nations in the land. In vv 9-14, forbidden practices of magic and foretelling the future are warned. In vv 15-19, the expectations of a true prophet are given. In vv 20-22, a false prophet is discussed.
 - a. True prophet

Vs 15 states, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him." Vs 18 adds, "... I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."
 - b. False prophet

In vs 22, we have the testing for a false prophet. If his pronouncements and predictions fail to come true, this reveals he is a false prophet.

2. Observations

Regarding the prediction of the true prophet of vs 15, this stands as a promise for a line of prophets following Moses, with Jesus being the ultimate fulfilment. According to John 1:19-21, the leaders of Judaism were even looking for this one in their day (cf. Acts 3:22-23).

The test of a true prophet in this passage must be correlated with the test of Deut 13. Hence, this synthesis:

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|----|---|----|-----------------|
| a. | Prediction fails to come true. | —→ | a false prophet |
| b. | Prediction comes true, but his counsel is contrary to revealed truth in the Word. | —→ | a false prophet |
| c. | Prediction comes true, and his counsel does not contradict the Word of God. | —→ | a true prophet |

III. SAMUEL AND THE RISE OF THE "PROPHETIC SCHOOLS"

With the rise of Samuel, a dramatic shift takes place in the level of prophetic activity and its importance in the life of the nation. Note the following verses:

1. I Sam 3:20 - "all Israel . . . knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the LORD."
Preceding context: God had revealed His will to Samuel by a vision concerning the judgment he was going to bring on Eli the priest.
2. I Sam 9:9 - "he who is called a prophet (נְבִיא) now was formerly called a seer (הַרְאָה)."
But see also vs 10, where he is also called "a man of God" (אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים).
3. I Sam 28:6 - "When Saul inquired (וַיִּשְׁאַל) of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets."

This verse reflects that at this stage, the primary role of a prophet was to reveal information from God, or to clarify the will of God.

One thing we observe, however, is that along with the rise of Samuel, there appears to be the rise of a "school of the prophets." This is seen, for example, in I Samuel 10:5. Samuel had told Saul that as he approached a certain city, he would meet a "group of prophets" (Heb. חֲבֵל נְבִאִים). They would be playing the harp, tambourine, flute and lyre, and would be prophesying. So, it seems that a "school of prophets" was established by Samuel. Merrill notes,

Whether that school remained intact as a cohesive, institutional body after Samuel's passing is not at all clear. In any case it served as the model for a similar movement under Elijah and Elisha, particularly the latter, in whose days it bore the name "sons of the prophets" (2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7; 4:1, 38; 5:22, KJV).⁶

⁶Merrill, 380.

Apparently, there was quite a continuity of such activity, and they became a sizeable group. We know from Scripture that they even lived in something of a communal arrangement (2 Kgs 6:1-2).

IV. THE MINISTRY OF PROPHETS IN THE MONARCHY

It is during the period of the monarchy that we observe the most activity of the Old Testament prophets, particularly in close relation to the two exiles (722 and 586 BC). During this time, the prophets were raised up by God as a kind of third order along with priest and king. Merrill notes, ". . . they were not viewed as opponents to the temple and state, but as spokesmen of God who were called to speak words of blessing, encouragement, advice, rebuke, or judgment to people, priest, and king as the need required."⁷

A. Theological Background for Prophetic Activity

To understand the ministry of most of the *writing prophets* (those who authored the prophetic books of the Old Testament), it is essential to see their ministry in relation to the progress of revelation and historical developments. The notable observation to make about the prophets is that their ministries focus primarily on three crucial periods:

1. The period around the downfall of the northern kingdom in the 8th century BC.
2. The period around the downfall of the southern kingdom in the 5th–6th centuries BC.
3. During the postexilic period when the nation was trying to reestablish the theocracy and rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.

The key to understanding their purpose is to recognize God's principles of dealing with the nation in response to their obedience and disobedience. This is clearly spelled out in Deut 28–30. God has outlined the cycles of discipline which he would impose upon them for disobedience (cf. Lev 26). The curses for disobedience include failure of crops in the agricultural realm and the cessation of rainfall. Continued disobedience would even result in the invasion of the land by enemy nations, and most severely the removal of the covenant people from the land into exile and captivity.

In light of this, one of the main functions of the prophets was to bring an indictment against the nation for their disobedience. The prophets would point out the violations of the covenant, and call their attention to the curses falling on the nation. The curses were there for a reason: the nation was being unfaithful. Furthermore, they warned the nation that continued disobedience and failure to repent would bring on harsher forms of discipline, and even the ultimate discipline of exile. The prophets center around the crucial periods of Israel's history when the worst was about to befall them. God obviously wanted to use the prophets to confront the nation, helping them to understand why things were working out the way they were. Invasion and exile were serious, and God did not initiate this apart from intense confrontation and warning.

The prophets go beyond this, however, in announcing that ultimate restoration will eventually come about. This is in keeping with the principles of Deut 30: to turn back to the LORD would bring restoration and blessing. The prophets clarify that God's initial intentions (primarily the Abrahamic promises) will not be cast aside. However, they will be left for another generation. The prophets confirm that the judgments by God do not mean an end to God's purposes and promises to the covenant nation. But they will come in God's timing, when the proper season comes. Many generations of Israelites will miss the full provision of divine blessing, but a future generation will experience their realization.

⁷Ibid., 379.

While ultimate restoration and blessing is affirmed by the prophets, by grace even hope for the present generation is offered if the people will turn from their ways back to the LORD.

B. The Ministry Activities of the Prophets (Oracles)⁸

1. To rebuke the nation for departure from the Mosaic covenant (indictment oracles). Sometimes this is expressed in legal terminology (lawsuit) as the people are charged with breach of covenant (e.g., Hos 4:1-19). "The full lawsuit form contains a summons, a charge, evidence, and a verdict, though these elements may sometimes be implied rather than explicit."⁹
2. To point out social injustices and abuse of power [conviction speech].¹⁰
3. To argue against those who opposed the Lord (e.g., false prophets) and show the worthlessness of their reasoning [disputation speech].¹¹
4. To evaluate the religious activities of the people (their acceptability to God), or why God is not pleased with their religious activities such as sacrifices.
5. To call for true righteousness.
6. To counsel the people as to how they should conduct themselves (instruction oracles).
7. To plead for God's mercy on behalf of the nation (Jer 14:7-9) [intercession].
8. To announce the judgment that God would consequently bring on His people (or individuals). [judgment oracles]

One sub-type of judgment oracle is that known as a "war oracle" (e.g., Hosea 5:8-10), in which the prophet announces the judgment of God as carried out through battle. The elements of this form include (1) the call to alarm, (2) the description of attack, and (3) the prediction of defeat. Sometimes the prophet would predict imminent doom by use of the device known as a "woe." "Woe oracles contain, either explicitly or implicitly, three elements that uniquely characterize this form: an *announcement* of distress (the word 'woe,' for example), the *reason* for the distress, and a *prediction* of doom."¹² See, e.g., Hab 2:6-8.

9. To clarify Israel's future (hope) in the face of judgment (salvation oracles).¹³ Here, the focus is upon a future generation of Israel with whom God will achieve His promised blessings (examples: Amos 9:11-15; Hos 2:16-20; 2:21-23; Isa 45:1-7; and Jer 31:1-9).

⁸For further help in identifying *oracles* and their delimitations, see Fee & Stuart, *How To Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, 158-161.

⁹Ibid., 160.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Carl Laney, "The Prophets and Social Concern," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:585 (Jan-Mar 1990): 32-43.

¹¹ Cf. R. Patterson, "Old Testament Prophecy," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 303. He asserts that the "desired effect . . . in disputation speeches is to leave the opponent devoid of further argumentation and resigned to the divine decision."

¹²Ibid.

¹³These may also be referred to as "hope" or "promise" oracles.

10. To be of service to the nation at critical transition points (e.g., anointing of a new king).
11. To encourage the people to take specific action in keeping with God's will (e.g., to rebuild the Temple).
12. To denounce Israel's enemies, and pronounce judgment oracles upon them.

V. PROPHETIC LITERATURE VERSUS APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

It is somewhat difficult to always distinguish sharply between prophetic and apocalyptic literature. They share a general set of characteristics, and it may be helpful to think of a prophetic-apocalyptic continuum. Walton writes,

Elements that would position a section on the apocalyptic side of the continuum include rich symbolism (often mythological), visions, conversation with spiritual beings, and cosmic catastrophe leading to the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. In general, apocalyptic literature can be characterized as simply using a slightly different medium for conveying the prophetic word of God.¹⁴

VI. PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND TODAY

Many claim that God is giving prophecy today. Is this valid? Answering in the affirmative, see Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1993). The negative position is articulated by F. David Farnell, "Is the Gift of Prophecy for Today?" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:595 (Jul-Sep 1992) and the following three issues (no. 596-598). For a critique of Deere's works and theology, see Richard L. Mayhue, "Alarmed by the Voice of Jack Deere," *Master's Seminary Journal* 8:2 (Fall 1997): 151-61.

¹⁴Andrew Hill and John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 312.