

INTRODUCTION TO OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETIC LITERATURE

The Covenants

Central to the ministry and message of the prophets were the covenants God had made early in Israel's history. In particular, the prophets serve within the framework of the Mosaic covenant that grows out of the broader Abrahamic covenant.

Covenant-making between two or more parties in the ancient Semitic world was a common institution. Modern scholarship has discovered that the book of Deuteronomy (Mosaic Covt) closely follows the structure of second millennium covenants, (especially the covenant structure of the Hittites).

“The idea of a covt between a deity and a people is unknown from other religions and cultures. *** It seems that the covenantal idea was a special feature of the religion of Israel, the only one to demand exclusive loyalty and preclude the possibility of dual or multiple loyalties.”
–Moshe Weinfeld, *Encycl. Judaica*

In this historical context of the covenants, God's prophets will be seen in the true light of being **covenant messengers**.

–They come as God's spokesmen calling the wayward vassal back to the terms of the original, Mosaic covenant.

–They threaten the stipulated curses for rebellion, and offer the carrot of the blessings for their fealty to the Sovereign God (Jer 35:15; see Lev 26 and Deut for the terms of the covt).

The prophets' addresses are often formulated in the style of a lawsuit (Heb. = *rib*) for breaking the treaty: admonitory speeches, a call for the original covt witnesses (e.g., Is. 1:2), warnings, denunciations, and pleadings.

–Note how Malachi couches his message in the terms of a legal cross-examination.

An understanding of these covenants is essential to understand the prophetic office and standpoint.

Theological Covenants as articulated by the Westminster Confession:

Covenant of works: life upon condition of perfect obedience is promised to mankind through Adam, with threat of death for disobedience

Covenant of redemption: the Father and Son determine to call a people, rewarding the Son for his perfect obedience to the will of the Father (Isa 53:10,11; John 6:37-39; 17:4ff.; Eph 1:5; 1:9-12)

Covenant of grace: the Son enters a covenant with an elect people to save them (Gal 3:16; 2:20)

Biblical Covenants

In the Jewish mind, the great covenants come at the three critical stages of human history, each with an attending sign:

- 1) Creation = the Sabbath [Gen 1-2:3; Exo 31:16-18; cf. Jer 31:35-37]
- 2) Covenant renewal of mankind = rainbow [Gen 9:1-17]
- 3) the organizing of God's people = circumcision [Gen 17]

–Covenant with Noah (Gen 6:18 = re-“establish”ment of an apparently pre-existing covenant; 9:8-17)

Covenant with Abraham (Gen 12, 13, 15, 17, 22)

The unconditional enablement of this promissory covenant is expressed in Gen 18:19:

“For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.”

continued with Isaac (Gen 17:15-21; 26:2-5, 24)

continued with Jacob/Israel (Gen 25:23; 27:27-29; 28:3-4, 13-15; Mal. 1:2-3)

Covenant with Moses (Exo 19-24, esp. 19:5,6; Lev 26; book of Deut, esp. ch. 28-30; (cf. K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, pp. 90-102)
(Gal 3:17 = Mosaic Covt did not replace Abrahamic!)

Palestinian? (Deut 29-30): NO

Covenant with David (2 Sam 7:15-16; 1 Chron 17:9-14; Psa 89:3-4, 20-37)

New covenant (Jer 31:31-34; 32:41; Ezek 36:24-32, 37:24-27; cf. Lev 26:40-45 and Deut 30:1-10. Cf. Matt 26:28, Lk 22:20; Heb 8,9)

Of special importance to the study of the OT prophets are the biblical covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David.

–The covenants with Moses and David are based on the covenant with Abraham which is foundational.

1. Significantly, these three primary covenants do not all share a similar structure.

–The **Mosaic covenant is an “obligatory”** covenant and parallels the ancient **“suzerain/vassal” treaty** wherein the vassal is bound to his lord on threat of curse for treason and with promise of protection and other benefits for obedience (Exo 19:7,8;24:3-8).

2. On the other hand, the **Abrahamic and Davidic covenants may be called “promissory,”** paralleling the ancient land grant (or **“royal grant”**) treaties wherein a sovereign would bestow gifts upon individuals who had distinguished themselves in faithful service.

The terms of the former obligatory covenant are conditional, whereas the promissory covenants are unconditional.

Still, this must be qualified by saying that, since the Mosaic Covenant grew out of the foundational and unconditional Abrahamic covenant, the particular terms which stem from the overarching promises to Abraham must also be fulfilled. At the same time, the promised blessings through the Mosaic Covenant were not unconditionally guaranteed to ancient Israel as the sole recipient in the same exclusive way the promises were granted to Abraham or David.

–I.e., the ultimate promises through Moses seem to be unconditional, whereas the party itself (theocratic Israel) is never unconditionally guaranteed to be the recipient of the promises. Note all the conditional “if clauses” of the Mosaic Covt.

The **Abrahamic covenant** is specifically defined in Gen 12:2-3,7; 13:14-17; 15:5-7, 13-20; 17:4-8; 18:18-19; 22:16-18.

–We believe the following to be true concerning the promises of the Abrahamic covenant:

–they are sure to be fulfilled:

“...do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. 13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” 15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise... 17 Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath, 18 that by two immutable things, in which *it is* impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. (Heb 6:12-18)

–they were not fulfilled in biblical times:

39 And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, 40 God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. (Heb 11:13, 39-40; cf. 10:36; 12:28)

–they will be fulfilled at the resurrection
(Matt 22:31-32; believing Gentiles included, cf. Rom 9:6-13, 24,30; 11:11-24)

The Theocracy

The kingdom promised in the covenants and in the prophets has been called the theocracy.

–The etymology of that word comes from theos (God) and kratos (power, might); cf. democracy, or bureaucracy.

The word theocracy was first used by Josephus (*Contra Apion* 2:17):

“Now there are innumerable differences in the particular customs and laws that are among all mankind, which a man may briefly reduce under the following heads: Some legislators have permitted their governments to be under monarchies, others put them under oligarchies, and others under a republican form; but our legislator [Moses] had no regard to any of these forms, but he ordained our government to be what, by a strained expression, may be termed a theocracy, by ascribing the authority and the power to God, and by persuading all the people to have a regard to him.”

It is important that we distinguish the formal theocracy from God’s universal sovereignty.

–God is completely sovereign over all his creation, which is his eternal kingdom (Psa 103:19; Psa 145; Dan 4:34-35).

The special providence he has shown by visibly governing Israel has been called his mediatorial kingdom. –Most of the references to “the kingdom” in the prophets refer to this mediatorial or messianic kingdom.

Be familiar with these elements of the theocracy:

1) God is the supreme national law Giver.

Deut 4:13-14; 12:32

This legislation includes both religious and civil laws.

2) Representative rulers are appointed directly by God.

before the formal kingdom: the patriarch

Moses, Joshua, the judges, Saul, David, Solomon, David’s line, Jeroboam, Jehu

priests, Aaron and his line

3) Duties of the rulers are defined by God.

kings, Deut 17:14-20

priests, Lev, etc.

judges, Deut 16:18-20

4) God's presence is seen among the people.

The "shekinah glory" of God was seen by the people of Israel.

–The term "shekinah" is not used in the OT, but in other Jewish writings.

–Its etymology comes through the Aramaic (*shekinah*) from the Hebrew word, /k5v6 *shakan*, which means "to dwell, to sit," and its meaning is associated with the term "glory," referring to the Lord

Zech 2:5,10,11: 5 'For I,' says the LORD, 'will be a wall of fire all around her, and I will be the glory in her midst.' "... "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst," says the LORD. 11 "Many nations shall be joined to the LORD in that day, and they shall become My people. And I will dwell in your midst.

(see also Rom. 9:4,23,24; Heb. 9:5 [cf. 1:3]; 2 Pet. 1:17,18, "majestic glory")

"Shekinah" is related to the NT term σκηνωω *skena-o*

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. –Jn. 1:14

And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God *is* with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. ... 22 But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.–23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb *is* its light. –Rev 21:3,22,23

The "shekinah glory" has an interesting history:

--seen on Sinai (Exo 19:16, etc.)

--seen with Hebrews in the wilderness (Neh 9:19)

--seen in the tabernacle (Exo 40:34)

--seen in the temple (2 Chron 7:1)

--departed with the Babylonian Captivity:

6th year of Jehoiachin's captivity (ca. 590 BC; Ezek. 1:2; 8:1)

Zedekiah's wickedness, Jer 52:1-3

priests' wickedness, Ezek 8:5-18

Ezekiel's vision (Ezek 8:3; 11:24-25):

8:4, glory in temple

9:3; 10:4, glory moves from cherubim to threshold

10:18-19, glory moves over cherubim at east gate

11:23, glory moves from city to east mountain

--the Shekinah glory **to return** from the same direction (Ezek 43:1-7; Zech 14:4; Acts 1:11)

--not seen in Zerubbabel's or Herod's temples

“It was the belief of the Jews that the glory of the Lord did not dwell in the Most Holy Place in the second temple. –The Talmud (Yoma 9b) explains this on the ground that God only dwells in the tents of Shem; not of Japheth, of whom Cyrus was a descendant.–This was deplored, and the promises of more intimate fellowship to be enjoyed by the Church in the Messianic age are in the Targum all made to predict the presence of the Shekinah (as in Ezek 43:7, 9; Hag 1:8; 2:9; Zech 2:10).”
–J. T. Marshall, “Shekinah,” *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:489

5) God gave direct revelation and direction to the nation.

--choosing of leaders, see (2) above

--making decisions:

helping the judges, Deut 17:8-9; Num 5:16-28

helping in military decisions, 1 Sam 30:7-8 (ctr. 28:6)

--mode of direction:

written law

direct voice (Num 12:7)

dreams and visions

Urim and Thummim

prophets

The Israelites recognized that they lived in a theocracy, where God was king (Gideon in Judges 8:23; cf. 1 Sam 8:7; 12:12, 14-15). The theocracy, as defined here requires the personal and visible presence of God and will not be restored/fully realized until the return of Jesus the Messiah to the earth.

The Prophetic Office

Terms used

Only I Chron 29:29 uses all three OT terms for a prophet:

“29 Now the acts of King David, first and last, indeed they are written in the book of Samuel the *seer*, in the book of Nathan the *prophet*, and in the book of Gad the *seer*....”

ayb1n6– *nabhi'* (306X), “prophet”

FUNCTION

Perhaps from Akkadian *nabu*, “speak; to call.” Some make it an ecstatic term, related to Arabic *nb'*, “bubble forth.”

In its usage in the OT it means “spokesman (for God),” one who “speaks forth” [compare Aaron’s relation to Moses, and Moses’ to God (Exo 4:10-17; esp. 7:1,2)]. It implies a close relation to God (Abraham in Gen 20:7). Cf. Nathan the prophet as “mouth of God” in 1 Kings 8:15 (2 Sam 7).

“And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee: and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh...” -Exo 7.1,2

hazr' – *ro'eh* (12X), “seer”

MODE

From hā6r6 *ra'ah*, “see.” –An early popular term, used mostly of Samuel (1 Sam 9:9), who was also called a ayb1n6 *nabhi'* (3:20) and a “man of God” (9:6). – Samuel uses the word of other prophets (10:5). –Revelation is obtained by seeing (Isa 30:10).

hz3j' ~ *chozeh* (17X), “seer”

MODE

From hz6j6 *chazah*, “see, behold.” –Parallel with hazr' *ro'eh* in Isa 30:10. –Used of Amos 8 times. –Related to word “vision” (several forms of noun, ca. 52 times).

,yh1l'a8 vya1– *'ish elohim* (ca. 75X), “man of God”

CHARACTER

See discussion in *TDOT* 1:233-35.

–Used of many prophets: Moses (Deut 33:1), Samuel (1 Sam 9:6), David (2 Chron. 8:14), Elijah (1 Kings 17:18), Elisha (2 Kings 4:7), Shemaiah (1 Kings 12:22), Igdaliah (Jer 35:4), anonymous (1 Sam 2:27; 1 Kings 13, 20:28; 2 Kings 23:16; 2 Chron 25:7-9). It is interesting that this term never refers to the OT literary prophets.

The term must be idiomatic, since “man of Yahweh” is never found.

The emphasis is on his mission as a divine representative and announcer (cf. angel in Judg 13:3; cf. vv. 8, 16).

πρὸς ἡτ ἡς *prophetes* (ca. 150X in NT), “prophet”

This is the primary Greek term for prophet and is commonly used in the LXX and NT (Eph. 4:11; I Cor. 12:28).

Function of the prophets

For function of NT prophets, see Kaiser, *Back toward the Future*, p. 79:

- (1) Edification
- (2) Instruction
- (3) Conviction
- (4) Prediction

OT Prophets were to be God’s mouthpieces in revealing, not so much the future, but his will to men: “Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, Unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.” –Amos 3:7

Occasionally God’s revelation was directed to the Gentiles, notably through Jonah, but also in Abraham, a proto-prophet (“Now therefore, restore the man’s wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live.” –Gen 20:7); compare Noah, the “preacher of righteousness.”

* The prophetic function was to summon the theocracy to allegiance to the **Mosaic covenant**.

–Note Malachi’s final admonition which closes the message, not only of the prophets, but of the whole first testament: “Remember the Torah of my servant Moses, whom I commanded at Horeb concerning laws and judgments for all Israel” (4:4).

–The prophetic message flows out of Moses and the Pentateuch even as the apostles’ message of the established New covenant flows from Jesus and the gospel accounts.

From a more technical perspective, Meredith Kline emphasizes the prophets as **treaty messengers**, sent by the great king to demand loyalty from his vassals (*By Oath Consigned*, pp. 51-52).

In this regard, Vangemeren says that Samuel is the prophetic model who serves as the bridge between the Mosaic/Joshua era that failed to subjugate the promised land, and the beginning of the mediatorial theocracy (p. 28).

–Elijah will be the first main “covenant prosecutor” in indicting the monarch and people for breach of the covenant.

–John the Baptist will be the last great Mosaic covenant spokesman.

Sometimes there were many prophets (as Samuel's group, 1 Sam 10:5; 19:20; or during the divided kingdom), sometimes few prophets (1 Sam 3:1; Amos 8:11,12).

Types of prophets

Canonical prophets--(to be studied during this semester)

Non-literary and/or Non-canonical OT prophets:

- 11th BC: Samuel (1 Sam 1-25)
Nathan (2 Sam 7:2)
Gad (1 Sam 22:5)
- 10th BC: Ahijah, informs Jeroboam (1 Kings 11, 14)
Shemiah, tells Rehoboam not to invade Israel; Shishak's invasion (1 Kings 12:22-24; 2 Chron. 12:15)
Iddo, history of Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijam (2 Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22)
- 9th BC: Azariah son of Oded, helps Asa's reform (2 Chron. 15:1-8)
Hanani, rebukes Asa for Benhadad alliance, imprisoned (2 Chron. 16:7-10)
Elijah (1 Kings 17 - 2 Kings 2)
Elishah (1 Kings 19 - 2 Kings 13)
Micaiah, opposed by false prophet Zedekiah, opposes Ahab going to Ramoth-Gilead battle (1 Kings 22; 2 Chron. 18)
Jahaziel, predicts Jehoshaphat's victory over Ammon and Moab (2 Chron. 20:14ff; ps Psa Psa 83)
Eliezer, opposes Jehoshaphat's and Ahaziah's ships at Ezion-geber (2 Chron. 20:37)
Jehoiada, rears and counsels Joash (2 Chron. 23-24)
Zechariah son of Jehoiada, stoned by Joash (2 Chron. 24:20-22, pbly. same as in Mt. 23:35 and Lk. 11:51)
- 8th BC: Zechariah, instructs Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:5)
Oded, tells Pekah to release 200,000 Jewish captives (2 Chron. 28:9-15)
- 7th BC: Huldah the prophetess, warns Josiah of judgments (1 Kings 22:14-20 = 2 Chron. 34:22-28)
Hilkiah, Josiah's high priest, finds book of the law in the temple (1 Kings 22-23)
- 6th BC: Uriah, predicts Babylonian captivity, killed by Jehoiakim (Jer 26:20-23)
false prophet Hananiah, opposes Jeremiah under King Zedekiah (Jer 28)

... in addition, many unnamed "men of God"

The prophetic test

To determine true prophets from false ones, the people were to apply two primary tests:

- 1) did the spokesman lead the people to false gods, and
- 2) did his predictions come true?

(1) Truthfulness and obedience: True prophets led people to the exclusive worship of Yahweh and obedience to his law; false prophets would lead people to worship other gods

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 "If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 "and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods' -- which you have not known -- 'and let us serve them,' 3 "you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

No miracles, signs, or astounding predictions could overcome this first rule (Isa 8:20).

(2) True Predictions: The predictions of true prophets would always come true. –False prophets could not guarantee fulfillment of their predictions

Deuteronomy 18:15-22 20 "“But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ 21 "And if you say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' 22 "when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that *is* the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”

–Occasionally, true prophets made short-term prophecies as an earnest in connection with their long-range prophecies (e.g., Zech 9:1-6 ctr. vs.9).

False prophets would lead the people to false gods (as Baal’s prophets in 1 Kings 18), were sometimes deceived by a lying spirit (as Zedekiah in 1 Kings 22), or were sometimes impostors (as Hananiah in Jer 28).

–Even true prophets did not always understand fully or appreciate God’s message (Samuel weeping for Saul; Samuel observing David’s brothers; Nathan telling David to build the temple; man of God out of Judah disobeying God’s command; the old prophet misleading the man of God; Jonah discouraged when Nineveh repented).

–But in the case of true prophets, God corrected their mistake so that their message was clear in the end.

The prophetic state

–Some take the prophetic state to be psychologically abnormal, a “prophetic frenzy,” or even serious mental illness.

–Compare the story of Wen-Amon in *ANET*, p. 26c.

–The following Scriptures often are used:

Num 11:24-29
Num 24:3-4, 15-16
1 Sam 10:9-13
1 Sam 19:20-24
Ezek 3:15
Ezek 3:22 - 4:8
Dan 7:28
Acts 10:10: Peter in “*extasis*”

There is no evidence in these cases for ecstasy as normally understood. Rather, it appears that these are cases of close communion with God, accompanied by God’s compulsive revelations to them (as with Balaam).

Knowing that ancient cultures have tolerated and protected the insane, modernism has supposed that the prophetic office itself, apart from a prophetic state, implied social maladjustment or madness (Hosea 9:7).

–For further study, see L. Wood, “Ecstasy and Israel’s Early Prophets,” *Bulletin of the ETS*, 9:3 (1966), 125-37, who discusses the references in Numbers and in 1 Samuel; see also in the same issue R. L. Alden, “Ecstasy and the Prophets,” pp. 149-56.

The prophetic call

See Isa 6; Jer 1; Amos 7:14-16

The prophets knew their office and place, and spoke with authority, “Thus says the Lord.” The canonical prophets were “men” who “were moved along by the Holy Spirit,” who therefore “spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21, Greek).

Difficulties in Interpreting the Prophets

“[The prophets] have a queer way of talking, like people, who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them what they are getting at” (in Vangemeren, 72).

Applying literal interpretation

The message of the prophets should be interpreted in a normal or literal fashion.

The first step must be to take the prophet’s words in their simplest meaning, recognizing figures of speech. Yet one must find a balance between over-literalness on one hand, and undue allegory on the other.

For reasonable guidelines, see Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 89-96; J.B. Payne, “Introduction,” *Encyclopaedia of Biblical Prophecy*; also G. N. H. Peters, *TK*, Prop. 4.

Classic amillennialists like Augustine and Calvin tend to interpret historic places and names figuratively. Even literalistic dispensationalists are not immune; see their treatment of the figures of speech in Isa 14, or Henry Ironside on Ezek 47:1-5.

While undue allegory often is practiced, some ignore plain figures of speech employed in the OT. The importance of these figures is emphasized in all modern books on hermeneutics, and was thoroughly discussed by such older writers as T.H. Horne, *Introduction to the Scriptures*, Vol. 2, Part 1, pp. 444-92, and E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*.

A current area of debate is the extent of these figures of speech, and the question as to which terms should be included. For example, should Zion, Israel, and Jerusalem be understood as literal or symbolic in OT prophecies?

Near and far prophecies –Some prophecies seem to be speaking of events near to the time of the prophets; others seem to refer to events associated with the first coming of Christ, or to his future second coming. Some prophecies seem to apply to more than one event: one near, another farther away.

Isaiah 61:1,2: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, And the day of vengeance of our God...”

Isaiah 7:14-16: “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. 15 "Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 "For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings.

Promise vs predictions –How are clustered “near” and “far” fulfillments related to each other and to the original prophecy?

Rather than always looking for fulfillment of explicit eschatological predictions, interpreters should remember to see prophetic revelation as unfolding promises. These promises may be multi-dimensional, but in the Hebrew prophet’s eye, they were generally one package with little or slight emphasis on the temporal.

Prophecies of the Messiah. –How does one recognize which OT passages are speaking of the Messiah, as opposed to some other person or group? –This is especially difficult when we consider the prophecies of both glory and of suffering (cf. Luke 24:26; 1 Pet 1:10-12).

The “apotelesmatic” nature of prophecy (perspective gaps) telescopes events together which in reality are hundreds or thousands of years apart.

Examples:

–prophecies of the Messiah’s first and second coming

–Isa 61:1-2; cf. Luke 4:17-19

–Joel 2:28-31; cf. Acts 2:16-21, 33; 3:18-21