

THE
PROPHET
AND HIS
MESSAGE

READING OLD TESTAMENT
PROPHECY TODAY

MICHAEL J. WILLIAMS


P U B L I S H I N G
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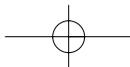
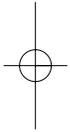
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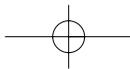
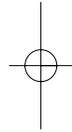
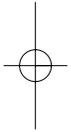
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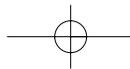
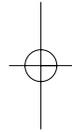
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P R E F A C E

This book is partly the fruit of several years of teaching and discussion with students and faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The eager, insightful, and committed students at this Reformed institution made it clear to me that some comprehensive and coherent explanation of the continuing relevance and contemporary significance of the Old Testament from a Reformed perspective needed further explication. My gifted fellow professors, who unselfishly gave their time, thoughts, and advice, greatly assisted me in this attempt at such an exposition. Although we are a collegial bunch and work closely together toward advancing the cause of Jesus Christ in the world, I am sure that at least some of my particular perspectives in this book will not find unanimous endorsement among them.

The other main contributing factor that led to this present work is my experience in Reformed churches. Countless sermons, Bible studies, adult education classes, and conversations with parishioners all have convinced me that there exists within the church a general lack of understanding about how to deal with the Old Testament. It has been my goal in this book to provide some guidance for interested

laypersons, as well as those who are embarking on vocations that require them to think more deeply about such things, on how to approach the entire Old Testament from a prophetic perspective. While my success in achieving this goal must be decided by the reader, I am confident that I have provided at least the basis for healthy, productive conversation in this area.

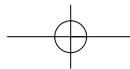
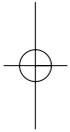
The possibility for physically accomplishing this project was provided in large part by a generous grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Their enormous efforts on behalf of religious education are widely unrecognized, but are nevertheless widely felt.

I must also acknowledge the gracious beneficence of the board of trustees of Calvin Theological Seminary, who provided me with a sabbatical within which I was able to complete the bulk of the research and writing.

Finally, I want to express my deep appreciation for the tireless assistance and faithful support of my wife Dawn, who patiently read every word of the manuscript. It and I certainly owe her an enormous debt of gratitude for her attentive and caring treatment.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i>
<i>CAD</i>	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i>
<i>EDT</i>	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i>
<i>EuroJTh</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IDB</i>	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSTOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series</i>
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
<i>OTL</i>	<i>Old Testament Library</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TLOT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>VTSup</i>	<i>Supplements to Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>



INTRODUCTION

A new pastime is gaining popularity among people who have time and money on their hands, but are dissatisfied with the usual slate of vacation and recreational options. Perhaps uneasy with their ignorance of other cultures, or simply curious, vacationers are willingly handing over large amounts of money to participate in “adventure travel.” These exotic expeditions are designed to awaken participants to patterns of life in places far beyond their comfort zones. “Adventure travel” describes

travel patterns that take Western people into what are essentially non-Western, geographically remote places. . . . [It] includes both the natural and cultural systems of the visited place. Moreover, adventure travel usually is linked to some thematic form of travel—safaris, trekking, kayaking, and in many cases simply local public transportation—which can be adventure enough for those coming from the industrial, convenience-oriented societies of the Western world.¹

1. David Zurick, *Errant Journeys: Adventure Travel in a Modern Age* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 10.

Most contemporary readers of the Bible probably never realize that they are embarking on a sort of “adventure travel” all their own. Our “thematic form of travel” is essentially reading, and through our reading we encounter an ancient and often mysterious world of foreign and harsh geography, strange and unfamiliar customs and practices, and peoples for whom religion was not conceptually compartmentalized, but interwoven into the fabric of everyday life.

To maximize the benefit of our journey into this foreign environment, we must sensitize ourselves to the subtleties of the biblical world and acquaint ourselves with its various features on its own terms. Steve Conlon elaborates on the responsibilities of the adventure traveler:

The Art of Adventure Travel involves seeing beyond the new environment’s surface, using all of your senses to connect with the essence of a place. . . . It means listening, with your inner ear, to the sounds of a place: the yak bells, the mother calling her child, the monk chanting, the wind whispering. . . . It means sitting in a tea shop, or wherever, and looking into the eyes and spirit of a fellow human being, and marveling at the similarity of people and the diversity of the human race. It means stretching your mind and imagination as well as your legs, and coming home a little richer than you left.²

It may take us a little time and effort to accomplish these goals during our reading excursion into the biblical texts. It may mean that we might have to jettison some of our pre-

2. Steve Conlon, “The Art of Adventure Travel,” in the 1990–91 catalog of the Above the Clouds Trekking Agency (P.O. Box 398, Worcester, MA 01602), p. 2, cited by Zurick, *Errant Journeys*, 135–36.

conceptions and tune our ear to hear the voices of the biblical passages themselves. It certainly means that we will have to proceed slowly and carefully to ensure that we learn as much as possible during our stay in this foreign literary culture that we have come to visit.

Though the difficulty of comprehendingly encountering the foreign biblical culture is formidable, this task is significantly compounded when we focus our attention upon the Old Testament prophets.³ Of all the characters in the Old Testament, the prophets are probably the most unusual and the most mysterious—and they were already recognized as such in their own day and by their own people! Just imagine the reaction of the local populace to a naked Isaiah running around in their midst (Isa. 20), or to a yoked Jeremiah (Jer. 27), or to the freshly shaved head of Ezekiel (Ezek. 5)! In addition to such bizarre behavior, the biblical prophets are also associated with fantastic visions, wonderful miracles, passionate discourses, extreme emotions, and both clear and vague pronouncements concerning the future. Robert R. Wilson notes: “Prophets have always been surrounded by an aura of mystery. Because they are intermediaries between the divine and human worlds, prophets appear to their hearers as terrifying yet magnetic and fascinating figures.”⁴ Before we begin to examine their messages, we need to come to some understanding of these enigmatic personalities.

3. I will be using the terms “Old Testament prophets” and “biblical prophets” purposely to avoid any confusion of these figures with their contemporary counterparts in the ancient Near East. While there are certainly areas of overlap between these two groups, and we can gain some understanding of the former by giving attention to the latter, they are fundamentally different. This radical difference is that the biblical prophets alone are singled out by the only true God to accomplish his purposes among his people.

4. Robert R. Wilson, “Early Israelite Prophecy,” in James L. Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier, eds., *Interpreting the Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 1.

The biblical prophets encompass a rather large group of characters, including both men and women, who come from a variety of walks of life. They include the well-known writing prophets, who have given their names to biblical books, but also include less familiar, even obscure, figures. While some of these less well known figures are named in the text, we know very little else about them. Consider, for example, the brief biblical mentions of Ahijah (1 Kings 11:29–39), Shemaiah (1 Kings 12:22–24), and Hulda (2 Kings 22:14–20). We even know some of the words and actions of several prophets who are not even provided with names in the text, such as those mentioned in Judges 6:7–10; 1 Samuel 10:10–13; 19:18–24; and 1 Kings 18:4 (where reference is made to a hundred unnamed prophets). How are we to understand such a diverse collection of characters and characteristics?

While many contemporary books are dedicated to explicating the messages of the writing prophets, not much study has been done of a more comprehensive nature. What we seek to do in this book is come to some understanding of what the prophets are all about. What makes a person a prophet? What, exactly, should we understand the essential function(s) of the prophet to be? And how do they carry out their function(s)? These are critical questions and deserve some careful consideration.

If we are ever to arrive at a secure understanding of any individual prophet and his⁵ message, we must first be sure that we are aware of the larger framework within which that prophet is conducting his ministry. What should we look for? Many years ago Egyptian hieroglyphs presented a seemingly

5. While there are also female prophets in the Old Testament (for a discussion of these, see Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* [Chicago: Moody, 1968], 35–36), for simple convenience I will be using the masculine pronoun to refer to an individual prophet.

insoluble riddle to scholars who sought to understand the message communicated by those strange shapes and figures. Not until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, which provided the translation of those shapes and figures into a known language, did the linguistic knot become untied. That is the way it is with the prophets. Without some sort of key for understanding not only what but also how they are communicating, their messages are in danger of being largely indecipherable or misinterpreted.

This interpretive danger has often resulted in the distortion of prophetic messages into proofs of the interpreter's particular theology. The biblical prophets seem particularly susceptible to having attributed to them all sorts of odd and fanciful ideas, especially concerning the future. They have been credited with forecasting everything from the precise date for the end of the world to the specific details of its demise. Besides being contrary to Scripture, such abuse of the prophets for Armageddon calculations not only results in embarrassment when those calculations prove incorrect, but also presumes that the role of the prophet is primarily that of predictor—a presumption, as we will see, that needs to be carefully examined. We find such fanciful, though popular, exegesis of biblical prophecy in works such as those by Hal Lindsey.⁶ This dangerous practice of jumping to unwarranted or at least highly speculative conclusions about the fulfillment of biblical prophecy can be averted by a prior careful consideration of what a “prophet” is and what he is supposed to accomplish.

A final danger that we want to avoid is one that unfortunately often threatens our churches and religious schools. It begins with a legitimate and prudent realization of the difficulty involved in correctly understanding the biblical

6. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

prophets, but is ultimately unwisely resolved by a simple avoidance of them. It is rare that one hears a sermon from the prophetic books today.⁷ Even in educational settings, teaching concerning the prophets is often restricted to introductory matters or surveys of the content of individual prophetic books, without substantive or comprehensive biblical-theological exposition of their messages. The primary reason pulpits and classrooms neglect the prophets is the simple fact that most people do not feel equipped to deal with them. Lacking a comprehensive, “big-picture” perspective on the prophets as a whole results in an understandable difficulty in comprehending the role of any individual prophet within God’s redemptive revelation and continuing redemptive activity. We need to step back from a narrow concentration on specific individual prophets or specific functions of the prophetic ministry in order to gain a much broader perspective of the defining characteristics of the biblical prophets as a whole and the role they play in God’s redemptive program. Only then will we be in a position to grasp the significance of the contributions of individual prophets as well.

The point of view we will be taking in our comprehensive and focused analysis—indeed a standpoint that makes such an analysis possible at all—is a Reformed perspective of Scripture. This perspective involves some fundamental presuppositions that intellectual honesty demands I set forth before we begin our study.

7. It is rare to hear a sermon from *anywhere* in the Old Testament today (except for the occasional psalm). Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 16–25, lists four reasons for this general neglect: (1) the New Testament weighting of lectionaries; (2) the negative effect of critical Old Testament scholarship; (3) the outright rejection of the Old Testament for various reasons; and (4) historical-cultural, theological, ethical, and practical difficulties with preaching from the Old Testament.

Perhaps the most important of these presuppositions is the conviction of the all-encompassing sovereignty of God. As we take careful note of the details of what Scripture records for us, it is my presupposition that every aspect of what we observe is intended, directed, and effectuated by our sovereign Lord: the prophetic call, the reception of the prophetic message, the content of the prophetic message and its mode of delivery, the way the prophetic message is received by those who hear it, the specific form the prophet's words and biographical information take in the recorded word, the realization of the prophetic message throughout time, and the providential delivery of the written record of the prophet's words and life to us. Far from a disjointed chain of unrelated circumstances that can be studied individually in an objectively detached fashion, these details, I maintain, are all under the sovereign control of God, who has preserved them in Scripture and directs them toward their appointed end (Isa. 55:10–11).⁸ Our response to the prophetic message is nothing less than a response to divinely intended and directed communication, and therefore has eternal consequences for each one of us.

Another aspect of the Reformed perspective affecting our study of the prophets is its assertion of the organic nature of Scripture. By this we mean that there is no essential difference in character between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Each is inspired by God, who by the Holy Spirit moved holy men of old to write divine words in their own style (2 Peter 1:20–21). The redemptive revelation grows over time as an organic entity. It develops and unfolds,

8. This aspect of God's sovereignty extensively overlaps the concept of his providence, defined as "that continued exercise of the divine energy whereby the Creator preserves all his creatures, is operative in all that comes to pass in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941], 166).

but does not radically change in its essential nature or purpose.⁹ It is here that we part company with theologies that regard God as behaving one way toward humankind in one testament, and another way in the other testament. We maintain, instead, that God is consistent in his interaction with human beings and has been communicating the same redemptive message in various ways throughout human history.

Another important aspect of the Reformed perspective is simply that all of redemptive revelation finds its focus in the culminating redemptive work of Jesus Christ. All of the Old Testament points forward to him, and all of the New Testament reflects back on the significance of the Christ event.¹⁰

Finally, because of the Reformed conviction that our world belongs to God, and because of our firm belief that we have the responsibility to be God's agents of reconciliation in the world (2 Cor. 5:18–20), we are led inescapably to the conclusion that we, as Christians, are called to active involvement and interaction with the unbelieving world for Christ's sake. What form should this take? How can we be certain that our own pet concerns are not eclipsing or distorting our scripturally based responsibilities? By focusing our attention on the prophets, we will be able to answer

9. Willem A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 46: "The progressive revelation of God is like a seed that germinates, grows, and develops. . . . The organic and progressive message of the prophets is inner-related, distinct, full of movement, diverse, but always revealing an inner unity, being bound together by one Spirit and disclosing one plan of redemption."

10. Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 142: "All the facts of the redemptive history that is recorded in the Bible center in that great fact [i.e., the redemptive act of God in Jesus Christ]. The various lines of the Old Testament revelation converge towards it, and those of the New Testament revelation radiate from it. It is only in their binding center, Jesus Christ, that the narratives of Scripture find their explanation. The interpreter will truly understand them only insofar as he discerns their connection with the great central fact of Sacred History."

these and other questions with confidence because the prophets too addressed their culture amid a myriad of concerns and distractions present in their day. The message they communicated and how they communicated it are still vitally important as guides for the church today.

Because of this continuing importance to believers, and because of the dangers we face if we simply ignore the prophets or interpret them incorrectly, we must proceed carefully and systematically in our study if we are to understand correctly the biblical prophets and what they are doing, or, more precisely, what God is doing through them. To this end, let us briefly note a few principles underlying the methodology followed in this volume.

First, the prophetic writings comprise a substantial portion of Scripture; and, as we read in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” To benefit from the prophetic portions of Scripture, we cannot ignore them. In fact, I hope to demonstrate that far from being a tedious exercise, studying the prophets opens a window through which, if we look carefully enough, we may glimpse the entirety of God’s redemptive plan.¹¹ Indeed, the church itself is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20).

While such claims may seem to be hyperbolic and promise a little too much, the importance of correctly understanding the prophets can hardly be overstated. In Amos 3:7 we find a remarkable passage that states: “Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his ser-

11. Freeman, *Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 11: “The religion and history of Israel are fundamentally prophetic. The Old Testament revelation was, according to Hebrews 1:1, a revelation through the prophets”; and VanGemenen, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 18: “The prophets opened windows to the grand plan of God by which the eye of hope may have a vision of what God has prepared for his people.”

vants the prophets.” This is an amazing statement with profound implications. It suggests that spending some time studying “his servants the prophets” holds the promise of yielding insight into everything that God does. Surely no better motivation exists for anyone interested in understanding God’s special revelation and redemptive activity than such a promise as this.

Yet before we can focus our attention on the prophets and their messages, we have to know what we’re looking for. Therefore, in the first two chapters, we will consider the fundamental question of what a prophet is. While this may seem like a simple question and one for which we all may have developed personally satisfying answers over the years, historically the question of what the prophets are has been answered in a wide variety of ways. Acknowledging the groundwork of many skilled researchers who have preceded us, we will examine their scholarly contributions for any help they may give us in our efforts to understand the essential nature of a prophet. Weighing these insights against the biblical data, we will subsequently develop a definition of a prophet that is wide enough to account for all of the information we have obtained and that may serve as a beginning point for our subsequent investigation.

Second, we study the biblical prophets to gain insight into one of the three offices of the Old Testament—the other two being the priestly office and the kingly office. I use the term “office” here in a formal sense to mean a distinct position of leadership among the people of God to which certain specific duties and expectations are attached.¹² In the Old

12. The report (Report 44) on “Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination” prepared by a study committee of the Christian Reformed Church and found in its *Agenda for Synod* (1973), 501–82, describes those occupying the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king as “the necessary functionaries to aid in the nurturing, correction, and regulation of the life of the covenantal community” (p. 518).

Testament, the prophets as well as the priests and kings were anointed with oil;¹³ that is, they were publicly designated as set aside by God for a special purpose.¹⁴ It does us little good, however, simply to be aware of the prophetic office without having any comprehension of what it entails.¹⁵ We study the prophetic office not only to expand our understanding of one of the three main emphases of the Old Testament, but also (as we will come to appreciate more fully later) to prepare ourselves to recognize the parameters of this office in later redemptive history, in Israel/Judah, in Jesus Christ, and finally in the church today. Therefore, in the third chapter we shift our focus slightly and concentrate more specifically on a functional description of a prophet. That is, we will ask the question What does a prophet do? In this chapter we will begin to bring into focus three general emphases or directions of the prophetic task. These will be developed following the biblical texts and will further enhance our subsequent investigation from a practical perspective.

Third, the functional understanding of the prophetic ministry leads to another benefit of studying the biblical prophets. Once we understand the general outline of the prophetic task, we will be able to recognize when it is being deliberately carried out. This applies not just to individuals, but also to communities that behave as corporate personalities. In the fourth chapter, therefore, we will use the outline of the prophetic task that we have distilled to consider the

13. See, for example, 1 Kings 19:16 and Isa. 61:1.

14. John Van Engen, "Anoint, Anointing," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 51–52.

15. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.15.1 (p. 494): "Yet it would be of little value to know these [offices] without understanding their purpose and use."

question of whether the prophetic task belongs not only to individual biblical prophets, but also to the nation of Israel/Judah as a corporate personality. When viewed from a prophetic perspective, the redemptive history of Israel/Judah becomes far more revelatory. Reflecting on the prophetic role of Israel/Judah will enable us to grasp the role of this nation in God's redemptive plan and will give us a perspective from which to view the entire Old Testament.

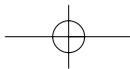
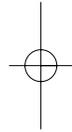
Fourth, an appreciation of the prophets and their functions also enables us to understand the ministry of Jesus Christ more comprehensively. For Jesus not only fulfills prophecy, but also perfectly fulfills the prophetic office. It would be extremely difficult to understand the person and work of Christ without understanding the prophetic office. Conversely, because all of redemptive revelation finds its fulfillment and focus in Jesus Christ, we must check our understanding of prophets and the prophetic task by looking for their fulfillment in him. If our conclusions are correct, we will find our definition of a prophet and our outline of prophetic functions fulfilled in the person and work of Christ. Moreover, the fulfillment that we find will not simply consist of a recognition of the presence of certain elements, but we must find *all* of the elements carried to a point of ultimate realization—that is, *perfectly fulfilled*—in Christ. In the fifth chapter, therefore, we focus our attention on this true light foreshadowed in the Old Testament to check our conclusions and to sharpen further our conceptual framework in preparation for applying our findings to contemporary circumstances.

Finally, because Christ fulfills the prophetic office, a deeper understanding of that office has direct implications for contemporary Christians. Romans 8:29 informs us that “those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.” If one dimension of the Son is his fulfillment of the prophetic office, it is logically inescapable

that those being conformed to his likeness must also have a prophetic task. Our analysis of who a prophet is and what a prophet does will inform our understanding of what the church should be doing today. In the sixth chapter, we reflect upon the significance of the fact that the church is called upon to fulfill a prophetic role in the world today. What does this task look like in practical terms? How should the church undertake its responsibility in this regard? These are the questions that bring our study down from the realm of purely academic recreation to transformative personal and communal application. These are questions that must be answered and whose answers must be implemented if we are truly serious about following our Lord. Promoting the realization of the fruit of these questions in the life of the church is the goal of this book.

As I hope is clear by now, this book will not be surveying the biblical prophets ad seriatim as has been done sufficiently by any number of contemporary introductions to the prophetic books.¹⁶ Rather, this book will be at the same time more comprehensive and more focused. It will be more comprehensive in that we will be examining the biblical prophetic phenomenon in its entirety from the written materials available to us. We will be developing an understanding of the prophets that is able to comprehend all of the data. Our study will also be more focused in that from its very beginning we have a clear goal for our efforts. We are not conducting this exercise for the purpose of producing an abstract and academically sterile volume having no apparent contemporary relevance. Instead, we will always be engaging the texts with a view toward applying what we find to our lives today.

16. See, for example, Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*; and John W. Miller, *Meet the Prophets: A Beginner's Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets—Their Meaning Then and Now* (New York: Paulist, 1987).



O N E

WHAT A PROPHET
IS NOT

When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's great detective, Sherlock Holmes, sought to establish the facts of a case upon which he had focused his considerable mental powers, one of the precepts he applied was: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."¹ In a sense, we are now playing the role of detectives ourselves in seeking to establish the facts surrounding the mysterious characters called prophets, whom we find at work in the Old Testament. So we too may apply Holmes's precept to our own investigation. Is it possible to eliminate certain characteristics, behaviors, or other features of a prophet's life so that the remaining details leave us with a clearer understanding of the truth? The Bible enables us to answer this question affirmatively. Scripture itself informs us of certain things that are not allowed to play any part in the biblical

1. Consider, for example, Holmes's application of this precept in the mysterious case entitled "The Sign of the Four" in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1930), 111.

prophets' functions. When we have eliminated these from possible prophetic functions, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Two of the most significant passages that describe prohibited behaviors occur already in the fifth book of the Old Testament.

SCRIPTURAL PROHIBITIONS

Deuteronomy 13:1-5

In chapter 13 of Deuteronomy, we find Moses warning the people of Israel about the harmful influences that may seduce them away from fulfilling the demands of the covenant. The seduction he describes in the first five verses comes from a false prophet. While we are not given much specific information about what identifies this person as a false prophet, we *are* told that such a person encourages God's people to follow after other gods and worship them:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. . . . That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God.

One impossibility for a true biblical prophet, therefore, is that he would proclaim any message that promotes other gods or their worship. Conversely, one characteristic of a true prophet is that his message will encourage obedience and faithfulness to God. A true prophet calls people back to

the requirements of the law and not to new theological paths. This is a difficult truth for some to accept these days when new and even radical theologies are in vogue and the ancient, historically forged and tested theological understanding of the church throughout the ages is regarded as dry, dusty, and hardly worthy of serious attention.

While it is not too surprising that false prophets would encourage a departure from the orthodox faith, another feature of this passage is a little more unexpected. For we are clearly told that the apostasy encouraged by a false prophet may be accompanied by a miraculous sign or wonder! This is disturbing for the simple reason that *true* prophets often pointed to signs as evidences of the truthfulness of their pronouncements.² When signs proceed from false prophets, it may be that they are the result of simple intelligence or happenstance. However, we learn from our passage that these signs of the false prophets may also be a means by which the Lord is testing his people to determine their loyalty: “The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 13:3).³ Since this is the case, we must also disallow fulfilled prophecy as *the* single defining characteristic of a true prophet. The signs or wonders the prophet performs are of secondary importance to the message they accompany. This no doubt explains Jesus’ later frustration with those Jews who focused their attention so exclusively on miraculous signs (Matt. 12:39–42; John 4:48) while ignoring the revolutionary significance of his message.

2. Consider, for example, the sign provided by the unnamed “man of God” in 1 Kings 13:3, or Isaiah’s sign for King Hezekiah in 2 Kings 19:29.

3. Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 97: “Did [the signs] come from Yahweh at all? Yes, they did; for behind such phenomena, too, there stands Yahweh, that is to say, he is using a deliberate divine method of teaching. In ways like this he devises a test of Israel’s loyalty.”

Today, we too must not allow ourselves to be similarly overawed by apparent signs of God's blessing in our churches, such as expansive facilities, growing congregations, flashy programs, and huge budgets, so that we fail to give proper attention to the messages we hear. God does not change. He still tests the loyalty of his people, and we are still responsible to check everything we hear over against established truth. Consider, for example, the Bereans, who had the privilege of listening to one whose credentials were impeccable—the apostle Paul. Yet, even though it was Paul who was speaking to them, Luke praises them for checking out Paul's message: "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness *and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true*" (Acts 17:11). A person is not necessarily a prophet because he is able to announce a sign or wonder that comes to pass. If the message that person speaks calls people to faithful obedience to the God of the Scriptures, only then should the sign or wonder be acknowledged as legitimate.

Deuteronomy 18:9–13

In chapters 16–18 of Deuteronomy, Moses describes in detail the duties and responsibilities of those who hold special offices in the community of Israel. In Deuteronomy 16:18–20, he gives instructions regarding judges—how they are to be appointed and how they are to carry out their tasks. In Deuteronomy 17:8–13, Moses expands upon his instructions for judges to include those difficult cases that should be brought before the priests. In Deuteronomy 17:14–20, Moses talks about the time when the Israelites will demand a king. He explains the requirements and limitations associated with this office as well. After prescribing the appropriate provisions for the priests (Deut. 18:1–8), Moses

proceeds to list what the people must not do when seeking a message from God. This fascinating passage (Deut. 18:9–13) is filled with information about the prophetic office in Israel and how it was to differ from those efforts at securing information from the deity that were practiced by the surrounding nations. Our understanding of the prophetic office must therefore exclude anything found in these verses. After eliminating these “impossibilities,” we will be in a better position to deduce the true function of a biblical prophet from the remaining evidence. Let’s consider these forbidden practices one at a time.

Child Sacrifice. It is not well understood what this practice entailed. It may have consisted of a simple, though gruesome sacrifice of one’s own child as an expression of devotion to a god or, more probably, as a way to persuade the god to grant one’s wishes. The specifics of how this was accomplished are lost to antiquity. Earlier in the book of Deuteronomy, we were informed that the nations inhabiting Canaan “burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods” (Deut. 12:31). Scripture informs us that one of these gods was Molech, the national god of the Ammonites, who is repeatedly mentioned in connection with this horrible practice.⁴ Even Israelite kings such as Ahaz (2 Kings 16:2–3) and Manasseh (2 Kings 21:1–6) are guilty of sacrificing their children to this pagan deity. King Solomon too followed this god and built a high place for him on the Mount of Olives (1 Kings 11:5–7). The practice is also associated in some passages with divination; that is, a way of ascertaining desired information from the deity.

4. See Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5; 2 Kings 23:10; Isa. 57:9; Jer. 7:30–34; 32:35; Ezek. 16:20–22; 23:37–39. John Gray provides an excellent description of this Ammonite deity and its influence on Israelite culture in *IDB*, s.v. “Molech, Moloch,” 3:422–23.

Ezekiel 20:30–31 contrasts this practice with inquiry of the true God, suggesting that the former involved inquiry of a pagan god. Leviticus 20:1–5 also forbids this procedure in verses that are immediately followed by a proscription against mediums and spiritists—again suggesting that this practice involved seeking information outside of the realm of accepted practice.

Now certainly there seems to be little fear these days of repeating this particular error of the past in our contemporary churches. Nevertheless, while the specific practice may be virtually extinct, the motivations and attitudes prompting it certainly aren't. We should note that the one who seeks to approach the deity by child sacrifice certainly cannot be faulted for a lack of devotion or zeal! It is hard to conceive of a greater expression of religious zeal than this. There is an important qualification for zeal, though, that we often ignore to our own harm. We read in Proverbs 19:2, "It is not good to have zeal *without knowledge*, nor to be hasty and miss the way." In our passage, the zeal of the sacrificer is completely uninformed by the word of God. The sacrificer illegitimately presumes the privilege of expressing his zeal and devotion in whatever way he chooses. Moreover, the ultimate goal of this practice seems to be to bend the will of the god to one's own will. In other words, the deity is subtly made to be a servant of his "follower."

We can certainly recognize this sort of topsy-turvy religiosity in our congregations today. We also demand to worship God in whatever way we choose. In fact, it almost seems that the more novel an idea is, the more we clamor to incorporate it into our worship services. It is no coincidence that preaching is becoming an increasingly smaller component of the liturgy. Demands for freedom to worship in whatever way we choose and a desire to be able to prompt God to perform our will (instead of asking him to help us

perform his will) are still alive and well in the twenty-first century. Moses' words remind us that these motivations and attitudes are to play no role in the prophetic task.

Divination or Sorcery. These are probably umbrella terms that are used to denote a wide range of divinatory practices without specifying the particular means used in each case.⁵ Moses follows this general heading with more specific examples.

Interpreting Omens. This involved a great variety of mechanical techniques for discerning the will of the gods, usually by the examination of the entrails of sacrificial animals (extispicy) or, more specifically, their livers (hepatoscopy; see Ezek. 21:21). Other items interpreted for their supposed divinatory content included heavenly bodies (i.e., astrology; see Isa. 47:13 and Dan. 2:2, 4), natural phenomena, births, arrows shot (Ezek. 21:21; 1 Sam. 20:18–42; 2 Kings 13:14–19), animals and birds, rods or sticks of wood (Hos. 4:12), and cultic images (Zech. 10:2).⁶ John Walton explains that this practice reflected the belief that all of reality was an interlocking totality. This led to the conclusion that the events occurring at the same time as a particular phenomenon had a likelihood of occurring again when the same phenomenon recurred: “It was possible, and even likely, that history would repeat itself, but the purposes of the gods were indiscernible. The omen mentality gave the people some help in trying to figure out *when* history might repeat itself.”⁷

5. Malcolm J. A. Horsnell, “עֲרַב,” in *NIDOTTE*, 3:945, states that this root signifies to “practice divination in general without indication of means.”

6. Horsnell, “עֲרַב,” *NIDOTTE*, 3:946.

7. John Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 123. An instance of the king of Babylon “examining the liver” is found in Ezek. 21:21.

The fundamental problem with this practice of interpreting omens (apart from its specific prohibition in Scripture) is that it seeks to tell the future or uncover otherwise hidden knowledge by means other than those which God himself has appointed. Those who carry out this practice behave as though God were not necessary or were not inextricably involved in bringing to pass the future he has ordained. It ignores the carefully crafted redemptive revelation that God provides in favor of practices tailored more to the practitioner's desires or interests. It is an expression of disobedience and faithlessness.

Even today we may find ourselves guilty of divination when we seek to discover the future by means other than those God has appointed and provided. Horoscopes, palm readings, tea leaves, psychic hotlines, tarot cards, numerology, scrying,⁸ and many other avenues are offered to us as alternative means for discovering our futures without reference to God. The fact is, there is no future worth considering apart from God. The true prophet is one whose insights proceed from the only one who really knows what is to come, and who gives all of life its ultimate meaning.

Witchcraft. This involves the practice of magic, including the use of "spells, incantations, charms/amulets, and special rituals to manipulate natural powers and to influence situations, people, and gods."⁹ Exodus 7:11 links this practice to the magicians and sorcerers in Egypt. Similarly, Daniel 2:2 links it to the magicians, sorcerers, and astrologers in Babylon. Malcolm Horsnell observes: "Magic sought to manipulate the divine world to satisfy human needs; it was more

8. This unfamiliar term describes the technique of gazing into a crystal ball, black mirror, bowl of water, etc., in order to see into the future.

9. Horsnell, "כַּשְׁפִּי," *NIDOTTE*, 2:735–38.

human centered. . . . Ancient Israel's Yahwistic faith allowed for divine revelation but not for manipulation of the divine world."¹⁰

This illegitimate method of interacting with the natural order is still in vogue in contemporary times in some segments of Western culture,¹¹ and even more so in other parts of the world less influenced by Christianity. In this case too instead of reliance upon the providential care of a loving God who knows the end from the beginning, those who practice witchcraft seek to manipulate people and events for their own selfish ends. This practice even goes so far as to attempt to coerce the divine realm into the service of the practitioner. Once again, submission to the authority of God has been replaced by efforts to get God to submit to human authority. A more subtle manifestation of this principle appears when we co-opt religion as a handmaiden to our own success. There are those in the church whose main interest in God and religion is how God and religion can serve their own purposes. We need to reflect seriously on how we may find in our own lives traces of this sin, which the Bible condemns. True biblical prophets, we may safely conclude, do not use their office to attempt to manipulate God or others for their own purposes.

Casting Spells. Literally, this translates as "one who knots knots" (חֹבֵר חֻבֵּר, *hover haver*). Although the biblical and ancient Near Eastern evidence clearly indicates its connection

10. Horsnell, "חֻבֵּר," *NIDOTTE*, 3:946.

11. On the basis of extensive research, B. A. Robinson, "How Many Wiccans Are There in the U.S.?" (n.p. [cited 29 March 2002]. Online: <http://www.religioustolerance.org>), estimates that there are "something on the order of 750,000 [Wiccans] in the U.S. and perhaps 30,000 in Canada . . . making Wicca about the 7th largest organized religion in the United States." He also cites support for the disturbing conclusion that Wicca/neo-paganism is the fastest-growing religion in North America.

to sorcery,¹² the precise nature of this occult practice has been lost to history. Inasmuch as this practice is utilized to manipulate persons or events for one's own purposes, it poses the same fundamental problems as those practices already considered.

Spiritualism. This term refers to the practices of a medium or spiritist (שֹׁאֵל אוֹב וַיִּדְעֵנִי, *sho'el 'ov weyidde'oni*), or one who consults the dead (וַדְרֵשׁ אֶל-הַמֵּתִים, *wedoresh 'el-hammetim*). These practices involve conjuring up and consulting the dead or ghosts on behalf of others. We find the witch of Endor engaging in this procedure for Saul in 1 Samuel 28:7–25. This practice is explicitly forbidden under penalty of death in Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27. Here, again, those who perform these forbidden practices are seeking to sidestep responsibility to God by endeavoring to gain access to hidden knowledge without any appeal to him.

This kind of godless spirituality has become very popular these days as well. There is a best-selling author and television host who offers to provide inquirers with information from those “on the other side.” Those who represent themselves as mediums or, more popularly, as “channelers,” are no longer viewed with disdain by the popular culture. Ouija boards and séances are used to attempt to communicate with the dead. Movies and books whose plots involve contact between human beings and the spirit world with no reference to God are smash hits. Even though the cultural trend is clearly toward acceptance of spiritists, we as Christians must shun these avenues in favor of the legitimate avenue God himself has appointed—the prophets.

All of these cultic and mantic practices are forbidden because they spring from a conception that is entirely at odds

12. See George J. Brooke, “חִבְרָה,” in *NIDOTTE*, 2:16–18.

with biblical faith. They proceed on the fundamentally flawed notion that their practitioners are able somehow to obtain for themselves some measure of the divine power or knowledge, or are able to manipulate the deity in some way for their own ends. Moreover, these pursuits after wisdom and power properly belonging exclusively to the divine realm take place according to the desires and timing of the mantic practitioners rather than those of God. There are, of course, at the bottom of all this a terrible lack of faith in God's ability and providence and an arrogant assurance in one's own perspicacity. It's as though one were to say, "Thanks anyway, God, but I'd prefer to handle this situation myself." Such an attitude, manifested by such practices, has no place in the covenant community of God and his people. In the passages we have considered, God makes it clear that the prophetic task is characterized by different practices, motivations, and attitudes.

So we are not to regard the prophets as having some special ability to manipulate people, events, or even God for their own or their people's ends. Nor do they have the capability to pry into the divine counsel at times other than those that God himself chooses. How then should we regard them? What are their distinguishing characteristics that will enable us to identify them with certainty? We have made some progress in answering this question by eliminating some possible answers given by the Israelites themselves and their ancient Near Eastern neighbors. We are not limited, however, to ancient documents. Many modern scholars have wrestled with the question of *the* distinguishing feature of biblical prophets and have proposed some answers of their own. I have included these answers in this discussion of what a prophet is not because I believe that all of them are insufficient to account for all of the biblical data. They do provide helpful insights into and ingredients for the answer we're

seeking, but not a complete recipe. Nevertheless, before we proceed to make some suggestions of our own, let's see what we can learn from the work of those who have gone before.

INADEQUATE PERSPECTIVES

Messengers

Many scholars have concluded that the essential function of a prophet—the function that explains all of his other actions—is that of a divine messenger.¹³ Alexander Rofé argues that this perspective of the prophet's task is supported by the phraseology used to introduce the prophetic messages, namely, "Thus says the LORD": "In the world of the Bible this is the formula through which the messenger conveyed the words of his master, most specifically the words of his king (see for example Judges 11:15; 2 Kings 18:19, 29). The prophet is thus the messenger of a most mighty king."¹⁴

We should also note at this point that the messengers—of a human king or the divine king—deliver their messages

13. From the abundant examples that may be cited, consider Mary Evans, *Prophets of the Lord* (London: Paternoster, 1992), 17: "A prophet is someone who is called by God to perform a task or a set of tasks for him, and in particular to deliver a message from him"; David Noel Freedman, "Between God and Man: Prophets in Ancient Israel," in *Prophecy and Prophets*, ed. Yehoshua Gitay (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 61: "The prophet is the ambassador or messenger of God, and his/her sole duty is to deliver the message as given"; Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Divine Passion: Reflections on the Prophets* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1988), 15: "Fundamentally, the prophet is a spokesperson for God"; E. W. Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977), 29: "They [i.e., the prophets] were essentially *spokesmen*"; Gene Tucker, "Prophetic Speech," in James L. Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier, eds., *Interpreting the Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 27: "[The prophets'] basic vocation was to be as speakers who brought a communication from God"; and VanGemenen, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 43: "The prophets were first and foremost speakers."

14. Alexander Rofé, *Introduction to the Prophetic Literature*, trans. Judith H. Seeligmann (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 61–62.

in the first person. This is evident, for example, in Genesis 32:3–5, where Jacob gives the content of the message to his designated messengers. These messengers are evidently supposed to deliver this message verbatim, as though it were proceeding from the mouth of its originator himself. Similarly, in 1 Kings 22:26–27, Ahab’s messengers are given a message they are instructed to repeat verbatim in the presence of the designated recipients, prefaced by the phrase so familiar in the prophetic books, “Thus says the king.” To these examples may be added those cited by Rofé above. A derivative point we should note is that the authority for the message is clearly that of the message sender.¹⁵ Hence the need for the identification of the sender at the beginning of the delivery with the formula “Thus says X.”

Because the behavior of the biblical prophets in their proclamation of the divine word so clearly parallels the behavior of other biblical messengers, it seems beyond dispute that delivery of divine messages was at the very least part of the prophet’s responsibility. But was it the whole? Or is it legitimate to subsume every other biblically recorded behavior of a prophet under this one perspective? There *were*, after all, other functionaries within Israel and Judah who spoke for God. The priests, for example, had been assigned tasks that could also be viewed as delivering divine messages. These include blessing the people after the daily sacrifices (Lev. 9:22; Num. 6:23–27), declaring people clean when the appropriate conditions had been met (Lev. 13–14), addressing the troops before they entered into battle (Deut. 20:2–4), and, most importantly, instructing the people in the

15. Klaus Koch, *The Prophets*, vol. 1: *The Assyrian Period*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 22: “Thus says so-and-so is the phrase with which the ancient oriental kings and dignitaries legitimate themselves when sending verbal messages, or in their letters.”

law and rendering verdicts in difficult legal cases (Deut. 17:8–13; 19:17; 21:5).

But the prophets had to contend not only with the words of the priests, but also with the official proclamations of kings. God had acquiesced to his people's demand for a king and had established an enduring royal line through David. It would be natural for the people to view this leader as God's vicegerent; that is, as the one whom God had designated to rule on his behalf. The words of the king, in addition to the fact that they proceeded from one having tremendous power to affect the life of every citizen, had authority derived from God himself.

The office of prophet, therefore, was not the only one that issued messages that the people would regard as having divine authority. How did the prophets interact with these other bearers of divine words? Were they at odds with the priests and kings, or did they work together with them for the good of the people of God? If we are eventually to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the prophets that will influence our activity in the church today, this is not a question of purely historical interest. How one answers this question will obviously have a direct bearing on how one assesses the kind of interactivity that contemporary counterparts of the biblical prophets should have with other church functionaries today. Should that interaction be antagonistic or supportive? Contemporary authors have endorsed both positions.¹⁶ But what help can we receive from those who have considered this question before us? As we will see, the ques-

16. Those promoting an antagonistic relationship include J. Elliot Corbett and Elizabeth S. Smith, *Becoming a Prophetic Community* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980); Dan Allender, "Mimicking Our Disruptive Father and Our Diverse Older Brother," *Mars Hill Review* 5 (1996): 35–46; Patrick D. Miller Jr. "The Prophetic Critique of Kings," *Ex Auditu* 2 (1986): 82–95. For those who promote a more cooperative approach, see Alexander Rofé, *Introduction to the Prophetic Literature*, 75–77.

tion of the prophets' role with respect to the offices of priest and king has vexed biblical scholars for some time. Let us consider the prophets' interaction with each of these offices separately.

Antagonists or Supporters?

With Respect to Priests. The relationship between the prophets and the priests has produced considerable debate in the history of biblical studies. There is, of course, always a danger of caricaturing either side of the argument by summarizing what has been a rather protracted discussion in ways that favor our own position. Nevertheless, we may safely say that the essential question over which the disagreement arises is, "To what extent did the prophets participate in the formal religious rituals usually associated with the priests?"

There are many who argue on biblical grounds that the prophets not only did not participate in the formal rituals, but absolutely repudiated them.¹⁷ One of the factors contributing to this conclusion is the view that religions evolve in the same way that biological entities are believed to have done. This view of the evolution of religions, which had its greatest influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, holds that religion eventually evolves from the presumed dry, rigid, static, and confining formalities of ritualized worship into the enlightened, freeing, and contemporarily relevant worship of the Spirit.¹⁸ The priests were regarded as representing the older type of worship, the prophets the later, more advanced stage. Hence, the

17. For a survey of those who hold such views, see Lloyd R. Bailey, "The Prophetic Critique of Israel's Cultic Order," *Faith and Mission* 6/2 (1989): 41-57.

18. The reader will surely notice the striking similarity between these two poles and the sides taken in the current debate over formal versus contemporary worship in the church.

prophets were regarded as antagonistic to the formal, cultic worship and its leaders, the priests. The scriptural passages appealed to in support of this view seem, at first, to provide overwhelming proof of its accuracy.

According to 1 Samuel 15:22, the Lord desires obedience rather than sacrifice. This is also the message of the prophets Hosea (6:6) and Jeremiah (7:22–23). The Lord seems to go further in Isaiah 1:11–13, where he uses very strong language indeed to express his dissatisfaction with his people’s offerings: “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me? . . . I have more than enough of burnt offerings. . . . I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. . . . Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me.”

This strong language continues in the prophecy of Amos, who declares in 5:21–25 that the Lord would give no regard even to the best and choicest offerings the Israelites could bring. Similarly, in Jeremiah 6:20 we read the prophet’s message from the Lord that burnt offerings and sacrifices are not acceptable, but rather are displeasing to him.

Although such a collection of biblical passages seeming to support the antagonism of the prophets toward the priests appears formidable, this conclusion results from a failure to study such passages carefully. When we do so, it becomes obvious that what the prophets were condemning was not the sacrificial system itself, but rather the performance of these religious rituals without the proper attitude or mental posture toward God. In the words of the New Testament, such empty practices were performed by “lovers of pleasure . . . having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:4–5).

If the relationship between the prophets and the priests was not antagonistic, perhaps it was close—perhaps even very close. Some scholars have gone in this direction and

concluded that far from representing an alternative religion separate from the formal religious practices associated with the priests, the prophets actually participated in such practices themselves. In academic shorthand, this view holds that the prophets were cultic functionaries.

Here too there are scriptural passages that seem to suggest that the prophets and the priests worked closely together. In many passages, the prophets and the priests are mentioned together.¹⁹ In other passages, the prophets are associated with high places, such as Gibeah, Shiloh, and Mount Carmel—places of special religious significance usually associated with the priests (1 Sam. 9; 10:5–13; 1 Kings 11:29; 14:1–4; 2 Kings 4:22–25). To further complicate matters, we sometimes encounter priests and Levites prophesying. In 2 Chronicles 35:15, the descendants of Asaph are referred to as Levites. In 1 Chronicles 25:1–3, some of these descendants of Asaph—Levites—are set apart “for the ministry of prophesying.” Similarly, in 2 Chronicles 34:30 the “priests and the Levites” were among those who went up to the temple of the Lord, but in the parallel passage in 2 Kings 23:2, it is “the priests and the prophets” who went up. Does this indicate that the functions of the priests and the prophets had become so compatible that the two offices had effectively merged into one?²⁰

19. For example, Isa. 28:7; Jer. 4:9; 8:1, 10; 13:13; 14:18; 26:7, 16; 29:1; Lam. 4:13; Hos. 4:4–5; Mic. 3:11; Zeph. 3:3–4.

20. Rofé, *Introduction to the Prophetic Literature*, 76–77: “In the days of the monarchy the status of the prophets changed both socially and professionally. They became established as permanent functionaries of the Temple, side by side with the priests.” Aubrey R. Johnson is perhaps the most significant proponent of the view that the prophets—at the very least the later ones—had been subsumed into the formal religious system and that their functions were performed within this system. His arguments, which draw on significantly more than we can deal with in our brief study, are set forth in his book *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel*, 2d ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1962).

Here, again, we need to consider some important details before drawing any conclusions. First, in the many passages in which priest and prophet are mentioned together we need to differentiate between true prophets and false ones. Many times the biblical prophets denounce corrupt priests and false prophets together (along with other groups), but this does not mean their responsibilities were the same. Second, unlike the priests, the prophets did not inherit their office, so it is unlikely that they were on the staff of the sanctuary. Third, God called some people to be prophets who were also of the priestly line,²¹ but this does not mean that prophets and priests had the same functions any more than the fact that Paul the apostle made tents means that apostles and tentmakers have the same functions.

In conclusion, it is probably best to avoid both extremes when considering the prophets' role with respect to the priests. The prophets worked together with the priests in a complementary way for the spiritual development of the people of God, but they were free to criticize the priests when religious practices were becoming too formalized.

With Respect to Kings. The other office bearer with whom the prophets had to deal was the king. In this case as well there is some debate over how these two interacted. Again, we find two extremes—either the prophets were antagonistic to the kings, or the prophets collaborated with the kings.²²

21. Consider, for example, Jeremiah (1:1) and Ezekiel (1:3).

22. Among those who highlight the antagonism of the prophets toward the kings are Simon DeVries, *Prophet Against Prophet: The Role of the Micaiah Narrative (1 Kings 22) in the Development of Early Prophetic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), and Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970). DeVries maintains (p. 148) that within Israel “the most central conflict was the constant polarity between the spiritual power of prophecy . . . and the political establishment.”

Arguments for the former position usually include the fact that Israel's request for a king appears to have sprung from less than noble motives and seems to involve a rejection of the theocratic system that had characterized their community.²³ God himself maintains that by their request, the Israelites had rejected God as their king in favor of a human one (1 Sam. 8:7). It is also true that the prophets frequently pronounce judgments against kings. For example, Samuel rebukes Saul for disobeying the command of the Lord (1 Sam. 13:1–14). Later, Samuel again rebukes Saul for disobeying the Lord and pronounces the Lord's rejection of him as king (1 Sam. 15). Similarly, we find Nathan and Gad rebuking David (2 Sam. 12:1–14; 24:11–17); Hanani rebuking Asa (2 Chron. 16:7–9); and Hanani's son, Jehu, bringing God's word of condemnation to Baasha (1 Kings 16:1–4).²⁴

The prophets cannot have been against kings per se, inasmuch as the book of Deuteronomy provided for one. Rather, it seems that the prophets were concerned to preserve the understanding that though there was a human king, he derived all of his authority from the true ruler of the people, God himself. That is, the prophets were striving to preserve the theocratic ideal—that the people were governed by God. This perspective has led some to label the prophets as “guardians of theocracy.”²⁵ In other words, even though God had provided a king for Israel, the prophets labored to

23. 1 Sam. 8:5—“Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”

24. To this abbreviated list we may add 1 Kings 14 (Ahijah and Jeroboam); 1 Kings 22 (Micaiah and Ahab); 2 Kings 1 (Elijah and Ahaziah); Isa. 7 (Isaiah and Ahaz); and Jer. 21–22 (Jeremiah and Zedekiah, Shallum, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin).

25. For example, Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 186, and Edward J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 82.

ensure that no one ever forgot that the human king was *not* to be “such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam. 8:5), but was to rule in a way that brought glory to God and not to himself.

Scripture is appealed to as well for the contrary view that the prophets had a much closer association with the monarchy than was afforded by periodic confrontation. In fact, some would say that the prophets had a semiformal position in the court as royal counselors.²⁶ This function is exemplified by Nathan’s advice to David regarding the construction of the temple (2 Sam. 7:1–17) and Isaiah’s advice to Hezekiah regarding the attack of Sennacherib (Isa. 36–39).²⁷ The prophets seem to have been particularly called upon to give advice to kings concerning the undertaking of military action. Samuel gives instructions to Saul regarding war with the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:1–4). Elisha counsels Joram, king of Israel, and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, regarding war with the Moabites (2 Kings 3:14–19). Moreover, we find the prophets announcing the establishment or fall of kings (e.g., 1 Sam. 10–11; 1 Kings 11:29–31; 14:1–11; 2 Kings 8:7–13).

All of this prophetic involvement in civil administration may lead to the erroneous conclusion that the prophets were essentially government servants, but this is not the case. As E. J. Young has summarized: “It would be a grave mistake . . . to assume that, because of the great interest of the prophets in the monarchy, they were themselves pri-

26. Rofé, *Introduction to the Prophetic Literature*, 75: “The prophet at the king’s court has a well-defined role. If the individual occasionally needs help and guidance, how much more so does the king.”

27. Other examples of the prophets providing counsel to kings abound. Consider, for example, Gad’s counsel to David (1 Sam. 22:5); Nathan’s counsel to David (1 Kings 1); Micaiah’s counsel to Ahab (1 Kings 22); Elisha’s counsel to Jehoshaphat (2 Kings 13); and Isaiah’s counsel to Ahaz (Isa. 7).

marily politicians. Their political activity is always subservient to a religious end. They did serve as counsellors, but they did so in order that the theocratic kingdom might prosper.”²⁸

It seems best to conclude, therefore, that just as was the case with the prophets’ relationship with the priests, so it was with the kings. The prophets were not auxiliaries of the priests or the kings, but had their own distinct role to fulfill that at times brought them into conflict with one or both of these other officeholders. At other times, however, the prophets were able to work in concert with the priests and the kings for the physical and spiritual betterment of the people with whose care they had been entrusted.²⁹ Because the prophetic role is distinct from these other offices, identifying the primary prophetic function(s) as something subsidiary to that of the priests or the kings is not justified.

Mediators

Previously, we saw that at least part of the prophet’s role consisted of carrying out the functions associated with an ancient Near Eastern messenger. The prophet delivers messages with the authority of the commissioning sender—in this case, God himself. However, to focus exclusively on this single direction of communication is to overlook another important function of the prophet. The prophet also communicates to God on behalf of the people.³⁰ A prophet therefore carries out a mediatorial task, standing between God and his people, communicating from each party to the other.

28. Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, 82.

29. Cf. *ibid.*: “[The prophets’] work in one sense was to supplement that of the kings and the priests.”

30. Freedman, “Between God and Man,” 70: “In addition to the primary task of the prophet as messenger and spokesman for God, mention should also be made of another at least equally important role: intercessor on behalf of the people of God.”

This responsibility to mediate the two-way communication between God and his people is a task usually associated with the priests. As we saw in the previous section, the roles of the prophets and priests are complementary and may overlap, while yet remaining distinct. The prophetic mediation on behalf of the people will be explored in greater detail in chapter 3, where we will discuss the specifics of what a prophet does. For now it is sufficient to note that the prophet speaks for the people as well as for God. For confirmation of this fact we need look only at “the most dramatic case of intercession,”³¹ in which Moses intercedes with God concerning the sin of Israel involving the golden calf (Exod. 32).

While this perspective of a prophet’s role adds substantially to our understanding and fills out the picture of this biblical figure to a great extent, *it is still inadequate* as an overall perspective of the prophetic function(s). For though we now accept that the prophet speaks for both God and his people, we have not yet investigated the content of that speech and the manner of its communication, whether the communication is limited to speech or includes other aspects or characteristics of the communicator. We have yet to find an overarching description of a prophet under which all of his tasks may be legitimately placed. So we continue on our journey of discovery by considering some further perspectives on the prophets provided for us by earlier explorers in this area.

Social Reformers

Related to the perspective discussed earlier where the prophets were viewed as antagonistic toward the priesthood and promoters of a more evolved and formally unencum-

31. Freedman, “Between God and Man,” 70.

bered religion is the perspective that regards the primary prophetic function as social reform. This perspective focuses more on the prophets as forthtellers than as foretellers.³² At least part of this shift away from regarding the prophets as foretellers is due to the rejection by critical scholars and liberal theologians of a legitimate predictive element in prophecy. At this point one may well ask how the prophets point us toward the coming of Christ if supernatural prediction is rejected. From the perspective of the prophets as social reformers, the answer is that they do so by pointing us toward the moral idealism that is to characterize human relations and that is exemplified by Christ. Thus the prophets are no longer considered as foretelling Christ, but encouraging the kind of life modeled by Christ.

This is, of course, a broad generalization for a noble endeavor to apply prophetic concerns to contemporary contexts. And there is absolutely no doubt that the prophets are concerned with human relations and social justice. There are numerous passages in which the prophets exhort God's people to give special care to the weaker members of society—that is, the four “withouts”: (1) the poor, afflicted, or humbled (עֲנִי, 'om), who are without money or means of defending themselves against the more powerful; (2) the orphan (יָתוֹם, yatom), who is without parents to see to his welfare; (3) the widow (אַלְמָנָה, 'almanah), who is without a husband and provider in the patriarchal society; and (4) the

32. David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1990), 49, ties the origin of the phrase “forthtelling, not foretelling” to R. H. Charles (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1929], xxvi) and explains this new understanding of the prophetic function to mean “that the prophet looked deeply into the affairs of his day and at the lessons of the past and to the nature of Yahweh; then he was able to proclaim, his fallible human nature doubtless charged by the Spirit, what the outcome of the contemporary situation would be.”

sojourner or resident alien (גֵּר, *ger*), who is without the rights, protections, and privileges that society affords its citizens.³³ Indeed, the prophets repeatedly indict Israel/Judah for failing to carry out social justice within the covenant community.³⁴

This stress on social justice is significant for a couple of extremely important reasons. First, the laws concerning interpersonal relations within the community were intended to reflect the righteousness of God. His compassion, kindness, mercy, and love for his people are supposed to be demonstrated by their compassion, kindness, mercy, and love for one another. When more powerful members of the community of God oppress weaker members for personal gain, they send exactly the wrong message to the Gentiles, to whom, after all, they were supposed to be “light.” Second, and more specifically, Israel herself had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt—the place of her own oppression. To oppress other members of the community in the land to which she had been delivered was to demonstrate a callousness to human need exactly the opposite of what she had experienced. It was an exhibition of the worst kind of ingratitude and effectively undid the redemption that God had provided for *all* his people.

Social justice is, therefore, a legitimate emphasis in prophetic proclamation; but placing exclusive emphasis on this dimension of the prophetic task, as though it were the defining prophetic function, leads to contemporary

33. For emphasis on these groups of people with special needs see passages such as Is. 1:17; Jer. 7:5–7; 22:2–3; and Zech. 7:9–10. In their emphasis on special care for those members of the community in special need, the prophets are reiterating a concern found throughout the Scriptures; e.g., Exod. 22:21–27; Ps. 72:1–4, 12–14; Prov. 14:21, 31; 19:17; 22:9, 22–23; 23:10–11; 29:7.

34. See, for example, Isa. 1:23; 3:14–15; 10:1–2; Amos 2:6–7; 4:1; 8:4–6.

applications that are unbalanced and even harmful. One such application that gained momentum in the late nineteenth century was the social gospel movement.³⁵ Combined with an evolutionary view of the development of religion, this emphasis on social justice, fueled by the intolerable conditions of the Industrial Revolution, led to the subordination of every other interest of the church. Other sectors of the church reacted in fear to this overemphasis. No doubt this fear was exacerbated by the theological and political liberalism, as well as the ecumenism, usually associated with the social gospel movement. This negative reaction to the social gospel movement led many in the church to reject entirely the prophets' social concerns and to focus almost exclusively on the spiritual life. As a result, the evangelistic mandate was no longer viewed so broadly as to include the wider cultural mandate. After all, why polish the brass on a sinking ship? Like the Essenes of the Judean wilderness, this part of the church withdrew from involvement in society. Its salt was locked away in the cupboard—safe from contamination, but without influence.

Clearly, neither a focus on social justice to the exclusion of the gospel, nor a focus on a gospel so narrowly defined that it has no impact on the culture is desirable. Rather, the goal of the contemporary Christian should be a position somewhere in the middle, one that accepts the social responsibility enjoined by the prophets while not confusing this effort toward a harmonious and compassionate social order with the totality of the gospel. By itself, then, the view

35. For a description of this movement from the writings of its most notable proponent (Walter Rauschenbusch), see the convenient collection of Benson Y. Landis, *A Rauschenbusch Reader: The Kingdom of God and the Social Gospel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957).

that seeks to subsume all of the prophetic tasks under the rubric of social reform is inadequate and ultimately mistaken.³⁶

Until the day when a perfect society is realized, the prophetic task will certainly include calls for social reform. But the prophets were about much more than this. For example, regarding the prophets simply as agents for social reform does not necessitate a divine origin for their prophetic message. Indeed, Robert R. Wilson has suggested that the prophets were driven more by the need to maintain the backing of their support groups than by divine compulsion to utter the word of God.³⁷ Gary Herion has described the problems with this approach:

In this view, the prophet's autonomy and individuality essentially have been stripped from him: his personal convictions, values and beliefs are either non-existent (which makes him a hypocrite) or more simply they are reflective of his particular (central or peripheral) group's interests (which makes him a spokesman). The prophet's genuine sense of any "good" transcending his social group's interests has been effectively denied.³⁸

36. Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1995), 104: "The designation 'social critics' applies only to some of the prophets and then only in a general way to a few of their prophecies, while 'social reformer' seems hardly appropriate to any of them."

37. Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). He summarizes his views in his article "Interpreting Israel's Religion: An Anthropological Perspective on the Problem of False Prophecy," in *The Place Is Too Small for Us: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 339–41.

38. Gary Herion, "The Impact of Modern and Social Science Assumptions on the Reconstruction of Israelite History," *JOT* 34 (1986): 11.

While the prophet was surely influenced to some degree by the group supporting his ministry (an influence keenly felt by anyone in ministry today), we have seen that whatever else the prophets were, they were at least messengers of God and not of themselves or others. The testimony of Scripture is clear: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20–21). We who wish to address prophetically the social ills of our own day should also ensure that the words we speak are rooted in Scripture and not in our “own interpretation” of what constitutes the ideal human society.

Ecstatics

Shifting our vantage point a bit from considerations of the defining characteristic of the prophets in terms of their function(s), we now turn to the view that the defining characteristic of the prophets is a particular psychophysical state called “ecstasy.”³⁹ This psychophysical state is characterized by a detached or abnormal state of consciousness in which normal sensory input and mental function are interrupted and replaced by a consuming focus on revelatory experience.⁴⁰ The truth of the matter, however, is that this myste-

39. David L. Petersen, “Ecstasy and Role Enactment,” in *The Place Is Too Small for Us*, 279–80, traces the development of the view of ecstasy as “constitutive for Israelite prophetic activity.” Originating in the works of Bernhard Duhm (*Das Buch Jesaja* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982 reprint]) and Hermann Gunkel (“Die geheimen Erfahrungen der Propheten Israels,” *Suchen der Zeit* 1 [1903]: 112–53), this view achieved its place of central importance in G. Hölscher’s seminal work *Die Propheten: Untersuchungen zur Religionsgeschichte Israels* (Leipzig: J. Hinrichs, 1914).

40. Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), 1–6, maintains that prophets are men of religion (*homines religiosi*). He relates prophetic inspiration to poetic inspiration (which is associated with the Muses). When inspiration intensifies, it becomes ecstasy, which he defines as “an

rious state is extremely difficult to define for the simple reason that unless one personally experiences it, one is entirely dependent upon secondhand reports of what it entails. Such reports in Scripture are very rare and sketchy. Elias Andrews, describing ecstasy, candidly admits, “Appearing with great diversity universally, it defies rigid definition, and is better viewed collectively to cover conditions of trance, dream, vision, audition, rapture, frenzy, exultation, and related states ranging from entire absence of consciousness to complete or partial awareness.”⁴¹

On the basis of biblical descriptions of at least some prophets, ecstasy is occasionally thought to include various bizarre behavioral phenomena.⁴² While the scriptural evidence is slim, enough exists to raise at least the possibility of occasional peculiar prophetic behavior. In the book of Jeremiah, Shemaiah is quoted as directing Zephaniah the priest to “put any madman who acts like a prophet into the stocks and neck-irons” (29:26). In 2 Kings 9:11, one of Jehu’s officers refers to a young prophet as “this madman.” This comparison of prophetic behavior to insanity continues in Hosea 9:7, where the prophet/inspired man is labeled “a fool” or “a

abnormal state of consciousness in which one is so absorbed . . . that the normal stream of psychical life is more or less arrested. The bodily senses cease to function; one becomes impervious to impressions from without; consciousness is exalted above the ordinary level of daily experience; unconscious mental impressions and ideas come to the surface in the form of visions and auditions” (4–5). He further maintains that this unusual condition is also usually accompanied by abnormal psychophysical manifestations.

41. Elias Andrews, “Ecstasy,” *IDB*, 2:22.

42. Cristiano Grottanelli, *Kings and Prophets: Monarchic Power, Inspired Leadership, and Sacred Text in Biblical Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 92: “The verb ‘to prophesy’ does not mean precisely to ‘make prophecies’ but rather ‘to behave like a prophet,’ that is, like an ecstatic, or, better yet, like ‘one possessed,’ with connotations of madness.”

maniac.”⁴³ We should note, however, that Hosea attributes such a characterization of the prophets to Israel’s sinfulness. This might indicate that the prophet did not actually behave like a madman, but only that his words were treated like a madman’s by the unbelieving populace.

Perhaps also indicating abnormal behavior is Jeremiah 23:9, where Jeremiah claims to have become “like a drunken man” or “a man overcome by wine” because of the Lord and his holy words. On the other hand, Jeremiah’s words could be explained simply as his reaction to the dark content of the message he had received rather than a physical manifestation exhibited during its reception. Today we might express a similar reaction with the idiom “going weak in the knees.”

Nevertheless, some passages appear unambiguously to indicate unusual behavior associated with prophesying. In 1 Samuel 10:5–6, Saul is told that he would meet a company of prophets and that he too would prophesy and “be changed into a different person.”⁴⁴ In 1 Samuel 19:20–24, Saul’s detachments of soldiers sent to capture David are incapacitated once they begin to prophesy. When Saul himself goes to David, he too is incapacitated by prophecy. Additionally, we are told that he stripped off his robe and “lay that way all day and night.”

There seems to be little doubt that abnormal behavior occasionally accompanied prophecy, but certainly not always. How are we to explain this inconsistency? Around this question another great debate has raged. In general, those who hold to an evolutionary view of the development of Israelite religion explain the inconsistent manifestation of ecstasy-induced be-

43. The words “madman” (Jer. 29:26; 2 Kings 9:11) and “maniac” (Hos. 9:7) both translate the same Hebrew word (משוגג, *meshugga*), whose root (שגע) means “raving, crazy” (Chou-Wee Pan, “שגע,” *NIDOTTE*, 4:46).

44. Literally, “another man” (איש אחר).

havior by making a distinction between the early (also called nonwriting or precanonical) and the later (also called writing or canonical) prophets.⁴⁵ The early prophets are viewed as ecstatics or “prophets of the Spirit,” while the later prophets, or “prophets of the word,” are not.⁴⁶

Such distinctions, however, go far beyond what the data warrant. Hobart Freeman has nicely summarized the only legitimate conclusion from the biblical evidence:

From all this evidence it is quite apparent that the distinction between the precanonical prophets and the canonical prophets in which the former are said to be ecstatic *n^ebhi'im* who were Spirit-possessed, and the latter refined recipients of the word of the Lord, is both arbitrary and artificial. The true prophets of Israel, whether precanonical or canonical, possessed *both* the *word* and the *Spirit* of the Lord.⁴⁷

Other scholars have gone in the other direction, denying the existence of anything like the frenzied ecstatic behavior exhibited by the pagan prophets. Freeman basically redefines ecstasy as the “revelatory, prophetic state” that overtakes the prophet during times of reception of divine revelation. Abnormal behavior on the part of the prophets is explained as nothing more than the response one would expect to a supernatural communication. The strange behavior involved with the symbolic acts performed by the prophets is certainly abnormal, but hardly the result of an ecstatic

45. See, e.g., R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 45–46.

46. This distinction between Spirit-prophecy and word-prophecy was introduced by Sigmund Mowinckel, “The Spirit and the Word in Pre-exilic Reform Prophets,” *JBL* 53 (1934): 199–227.

47. Freeman, *Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 58.

state. Thus Freeman concludes, “The Scriptures do not deny the reality of some form of an ecstatic experience to the Hebrew prophets, but describe it as a *divinely induced revelatory condition* of a more or less restrained nature which was not on a continuum with pagan prophetism.”⁴⁸

Underlying all of these arguments about ecstasy and whether or how it was manifested among the biblical prophets is an uncomfortable reality: no one knows exactly what ecstasy is or what it involves. Its amorphous character renders it capable of being defined and described in whatever way suits the need of the argument. Ecstasy does not appear to be a necessary component of prophecy inasmuch as it is very often not mentioned.⁴⁹ It is not clear, therefore, that pursuing this perspective will add much, if anything, to our goal of translating the prophetic function(s) into contemporary Christian experience. Moreover, ecstasy cannot be the *sine qua non* of prophecy, because it pertains primarily to the individual prophetic experience and not to the prophet’s interaction with others.⁵⁰ As Johannes Lindblom correctly notes, “That which distinguishes a prophet from other *homines religiosi* is that he never keeps his experiences to himself; he always feels compelled to announce to others what he has seen and heard.”⁵¹ The experience was not for the prophet’s private enjoyment. Focusing on ecstasy as something to be emulated today will not only set before us a goal with no clear definition (and thus impossible to

48. Ibid., 62.

49. This is a fact pointed out with great ability by Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 352–53.

50. But cf. the disagreement of Hölscher, cited by Petersen, “Ecstasy and Role Enactment,” 280, who contends “ecstatic behavior was part of the prophet’s public performance.”

51. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 1–2. Lindblom also maintains (p. 310), contrary to Hölscher, that far from being a central feature of prophetic life, ecstasy was “an accessory and accidental phenomenon.”

achieve with any certainty), but also make private an office with primarily public responsibilities. While allowing that ecstasy, however understood, may occur because of or during the reception of divine revelation, we reject further speculation on this issue as ultimately unhelpful for our purposes.

CONCLUSION

After considering all of the evidence of a negative sort, we may conclude that there are several very specific things a prophet is not. Other suggestions for the distinguishing characteristic of a prophet, while yielding helpful components of the comprehensive picture, are not comprehensive in themselves. The following list summarizes our findings:

1. A true prophet does not lead people away from God.
2. A true prophet is not identified exclusively by his ability to perform a sign or wonder.
3. A true prophet does not seek to manipulate people, events, or God for his own purposes.
4. A true prophet does not perform his task by going around God.
5. A true prophet is more than a messenger.
6. A true prophet is not fundamentally characterized by his disposition toward priests or kings.
7. A true prophet is more than a mediator.
8. A true prophet is more than a social reformer.
9. A true prophet is not fundamentally characterized by ecstasy.

All of the descriptions of a biblical prophet that we have considered so far are lacking in some respect, and this might lead us to a degree of pessimism regarding the possible success of our study. After a somewhat frustrating investigation

in which we hit one foul ball after another out of the theological park, we may well be ready to agree with that great contemporary philosopher, Calvin (no, not John Calvin, but the boy of that name in the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip), who exclaimed in exasperation, “The harder I work, the behinder I get!” It is not true, however, that we have not made any progress at all in our efforts at understanding biblical prophets. By heeding Holmes’s advice and first considering all of the things a prophet is *not*, we have already safeguarded ourselves against many potential wrong turns and dead ends. Also, by eliminating the impossible, we have considerably narrowed the field on what *is* possible. Our field of vision will be further focused in the next chapter by the optometric power of Scripture as we consider the positive evidence for what a prophet *is*.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What are some contemporary ways by which people seek to find out the future instead of studying what God has revealed in the Scriptures? What are the possible motivations for doing this?
2. What is the danger of focusing primarily on religious enthusiasm in our efforts at approaching God? What is necessary to safeguard us from the errors to which this enthusiasm might lead?
3. Reflect on how you might have used your faith or place in the church to attempt to manipulate people, events, or even God.
4. Describe the problems associated with seeing the prophetic task as primarily engaging social concerns. Describe the errors associated with regarding the prophetic task as essentially oblivious to social concerns.
5. What do you understand the essential function of a prophet to be?

