

THE
Christ
OF THE
PROPHETS

ABRIDGED EDITION

O. PALMER ROBERTSON


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Also quoted are the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the King James Version (KJV).

Where the word “LORD” appears in the NIV and NASB, the author frequently renders the tetragrammaton as “Covenant LORD” or “LORD of the Covenant.”

Scripture quotations marked by an asterisk are the author’s translation.

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Something started God's prophets to writing. By the time they were finished, they had produced a body of literature unparalleled in human history. Nothing before or since has equaled the corpus of literature produced by the prophets of Israel.¹ Anyone doubting the uniqueness of this material need only examine it for himself and then make his own search for anything comparable. But what was it that moved the prophets to produce this unique body of writing?

Certainly its creation may be legitimately attributed to the movement of God's inspiring Holy Spirit. Isaiah's rapturous vision of "the Lord, high and lifted up" with cherubim covering face and feet as they flew; Joel's prediction that "in the last days" God would "pour out his Spirit on all flesh" so that men and women, young and old would see visions and dream dreams; Ezekiel's imagery of the "valley of dry bones," with the inquisitive challenge to his faith, "Son of man, can these bones live?"—these words, these images, and the literally hundreds of passages like them throughout the prophets—these are not the normal productions of human scribblings that can be easily duplicated. They impress any impartial reader with a sense that these words are indeed among the *extraordinaire*.

But again the question must be raised, What was it in time and history that spurred on this outpouring of inspired literature across certain decades, even through centuries of time, manifesting a form and substance that never had occurred before and never have been repeated since? Imitated, yes; but duplicated, no.

1. "Wholly unique" is the characterization of the prophetic material given by R. E. Clements. He continues: ". . . nowhere else from antiquity has there been preserved such a literary collection." A prophetic literature on the scale of the Old Testament "remains a wholly unique product" of ancient Israel (*Old Testament Prophecy*, 203).

It was the event of Israel's exile, and the future beyond the exile, that the literary prophets of Israel were called and commissioned to explain. "Prophets" they were because their calling was to speak more than to act. They would not lead the nation into actions of a redemptive nature comparable to the deliverance from Egypt under Moses or the consolidation of the kingdom under David. As prophets, they were called first and foremost to speak, and by their speaking to demand repentance from the transgression of God's law, and faith in God's word of grace.

But this group of God's servants was also commissioned to write. They were called to write because of the very nature of the historical moment in which they lived. The nation would be devastated, destroyed, annihilated. First the kingdom of the north would be overrun by the Assyrians, carried into captivity far beyond its own bounds. But then the absolutely unthinkable would occur. The kingdom of Judah, harboring the hallowed place of God's dwelling, would disappear from the face of the earth. How then would even a thread of God's redemptive purposes be extended? What hope was left for the people called Israel, and consequently for all the nations they were to bless with the good news of redemption? Where now was God's great work of revitalizing a corrupted earth?

Into this vacuum of apparent hopelessness the prophets were called to speak and to write. They must write as well as speak so that the continuity of hope could be maintained across the generations. As the period dawned in which "the great Asiatic universal monarchies arose" that were destined by God to be the instruments for the chastisement of his chosen nation, some affirmation of the unthreatened sovereignty of their God must be put on record.² If nothing remained of the institutional activities of temple-life in Jerusalem that were so perfectly designed to pass on the expectations of redemption for the generations to come, something else must arise to fire a flame of hope in the hearts of future sons and daughters. That something else would be the inspired writings, the preserved predictions not only of exile but also of restoration after devastation. If the exile itself was anticipated

2. Keil, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1.279.

in the written records of the prophets, then when that awful moment came, its place in the purposes of God could be comprehended. Instead of creating an atmosphere of unbelief, the exile as anticipated by the prophets would challenge the remnant of God's people to a faith that would see the Covenant LORD's just, purposeful hand in it all. At this critical juncture, it became necessary to establish the omniscience and omnipotence of the one true living God over the "apparent superiority of the gods of the heathen, as this became prominent in the victory of the worldly powers over the theocracy."³

Simultaneously, prophetic predictions of a restoration even after the devastations of exile could only have the effect of moving the people to a faith that looked to the future. For if God was true to his word in the message about the exile, he could be expected to be true to his word in the message about restoration.⁴

And this restoration, what would it be? Would it mean simply a return to the old state of things that prevailed before exile? Would it anticipate a cycle of decline into sin followed inevitably by repeated divine judgments? Would the future kings of a restored Israel be no better than the kings of the past who were so roundly condemned by the prophets?

Not according to the writings of these same prophets. Preserved for posterity was the hope of a restoration far more glorious than the days before exile. A new covenant, a new Zion, a new temple, a new messiah, a new relation to the nations of the world—these were the expectations designed to create future hope for the people who would have to endure the trauma of deportation from their land. But not only for their own generation were these inspired writings divinely

3. Ibid.

4. Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy in Israel*, 66, affirms that the Assyrian crisis may have led to the writing of the predictions of the prophets. But then he proceeds to note that this writing of predictions would have occurred "especially when they were in the course of time verified." This idea of predictions having originated after the supposedly predicted event has come to pass is a theme that regularly appears among modern biblical critics. Yet to suggest that some of the predictions of the prophets were recorded only after their fulfillment was assured must inevitably have the effect of seriously damaging the intended purpose of the predictions, which was to instill faith and hope in the God who controlled history so certainly that his prophetic messengers could risk the writing down of their predictions long before the events had transpired which would establish their validity.

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designed. They were meant for all future generations, until the time of the triumphant coming of the expected messiah that would eventually bring about the creation of a new heavens and a new earth.

So for all generations even until today the inspired writings of the prophets speak. Without the turning to God in faith and repentance that they demand, their words will not be rightly heard. But for all generations and peoples who will read and hear with the understanding that only faith can give, they will forever bring the message of hope and restoration.

It is for this reason that the writings of these prophets of old must be heard anew. They speak today just as clearly as they spoke at the time of their inspiration. So with renewed faith let the generation of today hear this prophetic message that centers on the coming messiah and his glorious kingdom once more.

THE ORIGIN OF PROPHETISM IN ISRAEL

“Of the beginnings of prophecy in Israel we know nothing.”
—Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*

“The beginnings of Israelite prophecy remain obscure.”
—Walther Zimmerli, *The Law and the Prophets*

“[Scripture] does not supply the information which is needed for a solution [regarding the origin of prophetism in Israel].”
—Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*

“Prophecy in Israel . . . begins in the inexplicable appearance of individual persons who claim to speak Yahweh’s revelatory word. . . . The emergence of [these persons] . . . is indeed an odd, inexplicable, originary happening in Israel. . . . These originary individuals are odd, and cannot be explained by any antecedent.”
—Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*

In this way four leading biblical critics express their united agnostic viewpoint concerning the origins of prophetism in Israel. They simply do not know how the phenomenon arose. For them, its origin is an unsolved mystery. How a two-hundred-year-long stream of individuals who were convinced that God had communicated directly to them could have originated is for them a puzzle without solution.

Yet certain sources continue to be proposed for the origin of prophetism in Israel. Basically they are three: ecstatic behavior, cultic practices, and ancient Near Eastern prophecy.¹ In this regard, the whole concept of seeking the origin of biblical prophecy in naturalistic contexts needs to be placed under the severest scrutiny. Why, in principle, should a foreign origin for Israelite prophecy be more favorable for the development of the phenomenon than an indigenous development?² What in the history or society of Mari or Assyria makes these nations more amenable to the origination of the idea of prophetism than was the nation of Israel? To the contrary, if any credence is given to the biblical testimony regarding the experience of exodus, Sinai, conquest, and kingship in Israel, then every reason existed for prophetism as a movement to arise in Israel. Similar kinds of reasons would be difficult to find in the historical records of other nations.

Prophetic Self-testimony Regarding the Origin of Prophetism

The one further source to be explored that might provide an adequate explanation for the origin of this unique phenomenon in Israel is the testimony of the prophets themselves. In their records may be found a coherent and cogent explanation for the origins of this amazing and unique phenomenon of prophetism in Israel. This source provides needed information concerning the origin of prophetism in the flow of Israel's history, while also defining the leading aspects of this unique phenomenon.

Prophetism according to scripture finds its remotest origin in the purposeful creation of all things by the one and only God of the universe. Several passages in the writings of the prophets bind together the one God's creative activity with his word of purpose as revealed through his servants the prophets:

He who
forms the mountains,

1. For a more detailed analysis of these various suggested options for the origin of biblical prophetism, see the unabridged edition of this work, pp. 10–21.

2. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 224.

creates the wind,
and *declares his thoughts to man*, . . .
The Covenant LORD, God Almighty is his name. (Amos 4:13*)

And again:

This is what God the Covenant LORD says—
he who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, . . .
I, the Covenant LORD, have called you in righteousness.
(Isa. 42:5–6)

And yet again:

This is the word of the Covenant LORD concerning Israel. The Covenant LORD, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him, declares: “I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling.” (Zech. 12:1–2)

The climax of this binding of the creative purposes of God to prophecy appears in a context of extensive ridicule of the heathen idols that cannot speak (Isa. 44:9–20). In vivid contrast with the muteness of the idolatrous gods, Israel’s God declares even future events before they occur:

This is what the Covenant LORD says,
your Redeemer, and the one who formed you in the womb:
I am the Covenant LORD,
the Maker of all things,
the one who stretched out the heavens by myself alone,
who spread out the earth, even I alone,
who foils the signs of the pretenders,
who makes fools of prognosticators,
who overturns the wise,
and makes their knowledge look foolish,
who brings to pass the word of his servant,
and confirms the anticipations of his messengers. (Isa. 44:24–26*)

This broader context of a purposeful creation and a planned redemption alone provides an adequate explanation for the emergence of prophetism in Israel. For this one and only God, standing in starkest contrast to all other “nothing-gods,” has confirmed his plan through his prophetic spokesmen to his chosen people. Through a series of self-initiated covenantal bonds, revealed and sealed in the processes of human history, God has made known his person, his purpose, and his will for his people, as well as for the nations of the world.

So Israel’s prophets saw themselves as raised up to be the living line of covenantal mediators between God and his people. Their solemn position involved being brought into the counsels of the LORD of the Covenant. Because of this privileged position, the prophet could declare authoritatively both the moral will and the redemptive purpose of the sovereign Lord of creation. In this role, the prophet could announce the consequences of blessing or cursing that would attend the chosen lifestyle of the people. In addition, by divine revelation, the prophet was enabled to anticipate the history of divine judgment and blessing in both its short-term and its long-term eventualities, making known to the people the plans of the Lord by which he would accomplish his redemptive purposes.

The Time of Prophetism’s Origins

So in the divine purposes of creation and redemption the prophetic movement of Israel had its ultimate origin. But when in time and history did prophetism arise within the nation of Israel?

It might be assumed that the prophetic movement had its origin in Israel about the time of the great eighth-century prophets such as Isaiah and Micah, Hosea and Amos. In many ways this period represents the high-water mark in the history of prophetism in Israel. But both Hosea and Amos of the eighth century attest to the activity of prophets before their time (Amos 2:11–12; Hos. 6:5; 9:7–8; 12:10, 13). So alternatively it could be proposed that prophetism in Israel originated with the earlier ministries of Elijah and Elisha, or even with

the ministry of Samuel at the time of the establishment of the monarchy. But the notation explaining the situation regarding prophetic revelations during Samuel's boyhood to the effect that "the word of the Covenant LORD was rare; there were not many visions" presumes that a prophetic ministry had been in place for some time prior to the days of Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1).

According to scripture's self-testimony, prophetism's origins go back much further than the time of the monarchy in the history of God's redemptive activity among Israel. The words of the prophet Hosea indicate the actual origin of prophetism in Israel: "By a prophet the Covenant LORD brought Israel from Egypt. And by a prophet he was kept" (Hos. 12:13 NASB). In this passage, "prophet" is chosen as the term that would best characterize the ministry of Moses. He was not "king" in Israel, though he exercised extensive powers in the nation. Though from a priestly family, he did not function primarily as a priest. He was a prophet, communicating God's revelatory word to his people.

Prior to the days of Moses, God had communicated directly with the head of individual families by vision, dream, or theophany. Hosea speaks of this more ancient mode of divine revelation in the same passage:

[Jacob] struggled with the angel and overcame him;
 he wept and begged for his favor.
 He found him at Bethel
 and talked with him there—
 the Covenant LORD, God Almighty,
 the Covenant LORD is his name of renown! (Hos. 12:4-5)

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all received these kinds of personal revelations. Rather than having another person bring to them the word of God, the Lord himself appeared to them in a variety of ways.

But in Moses' day, a massive populace involving six hundred thousand heads of families constituted the nation. How could God make known his will to this numerous nation? Would he cause the same

dream, vision, or theophany to occur simultaneously to six hundred thousand heads of families?

No. God shall speak to the whole of the nation through a single human instrumentality, to be known as “prophet.” Rather than addressing all the people individually, the Lord shall communicate his will through this single designated person. Not normally by a supernatural manifestation of the divine nature, nor by the instrumentality of an angelic being, but by another person, a brother among brothers, God will communicate his message.

Scripture attests not only that it was by the prophet Moses that the Lord accomplished the great saving event of bringing his people out of Egypt. In addition, it affirms that the formal establishment of the ongoing office of prophet occurred in connection with the events at Sinai. At that time, the people themselves requested a mediator.³ Because they were terrified at the manifestations of God’s presence on the mountain, they asked Moses to go up and meet the Lord on their behalf. This request of the people became the occasion for the establishment of the office of prophet in Israel. As the event is later reported:

A prophet from your midst, from among your brothers, like [Moses] the Covenant LORD your God will raise up for you. You must listen to him. [It will be] exactly according to all you asked of the Covenant LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Don’t make me hear the voice of the Covenant LORD my God again, and don’t make me see this awesome fire again, or I will die.” (Deut. 18:15–16*)

According to the testimony of scripture, this request of the people at the time of the assembly at Sinai explains the origin of the office of prophet in Israel. The people were terrified at the manifestation of the presence of God. So the Lord appointed a prophetic mediator to separate the people from the awesome occurrences associated with the revelation of his will. As a consequence, the prophet in scripture takes on the role of gracious mediator. He stands between God and

3. For the biblical description of these momentous events in Israel’s life, see Ex. 20:18–21; Deut. 5:22–27.

the people to deliver the word of the Lord. At the same time, the humanly fragile character of the prophet makes him much more subject to rejection and abuse by the people than the Lord himself in all his splendor would have been. No one dared abuse God at Sinai, when the glories of the deity were manifested with such awesomeness. But the gentleness of God's grace now makes his personal spokesman subject to their victimizing. Yet even by this position of vulnerability the appointed prophet of the Lord embodies the principal message of God in his gracious covenant. Sinners at their worst, abusing the high privilege of receiving a word from the Lord, may still be redeemed from their self-destructive ways because of the long-suffering of the Lord as displayed in the abuses endured by his servants the prophets.

Insights Regarding the Nature of Prophetism Derived from Its Origins

Several insights into the nature of prophecy may be derived from this biblical testimony concerning the origin of prophetism:

1. The awesomeness of the role being fulfilled by the bearers of this office deserves special notice. The person of the prophet substitutes for the presence of Almighty God himself. This small, single voice replaces all the fearsome signs that accompanied the theophany at Sinai. The smoking, shaking mountain, animated by intense fire and blasting trumpet, now finds its equivalent in the gentle voice of a brother speaking among brothers.

2. The origin of the truly prophetic word must not be sought in the subjective experience of the prophet. Even in cases in which the word of the Lord is transmitted to the prophet through an internal experience, the word itself originates with God and substitutes for his presence.

The independence of the prophetic word from the person of the prophet is underscored in that contrary to the offices of priest and king in Israel, the office of prophet was not transmitted by natural generation. The son of the king or of the priest normally would succeed his father in their respective offices. But no example in scripture even suggests that the son of the prophet ever succeeded his father. Only

by the direct calling and commissioning of the Lord could a person enter legitimately into the office of prophet. Even then, the prophet had to wait on God to reveal his word to him. He could not by his own initiative create a legitimate word of prophecy, even though he might earnestly ask the Lord to speak to him on a particular issue.⁴

3. The word of the prophet does not involve primarily a prediction regarding future events. Moses' main task in delivering the law at Sinai was not to predict the future, but to declare God's will as it was revealed to him. Not a single prediction is found in the "ten words," the heart of the revelation communicated through Moses.

In this regard, the common distinction between the "forth-telling" of the prophetic word and the "fore-telling" of the future by the prophet must be carefully analyzed. From the beginning, the "telling forth" of the prophet was just as much a revelation of the word of God as was his "fore-telling" of the future. It simply is not the case that the speaking forth of the prophet on various issues of the day was a kind of preaching with diminished authority, while his fore-telling of the future was inspired in a higher sense.

As a matter of fact, the essence of prophetism is always defined in terms of this speaking forth of the word of God, whether or not it involved a foretelling of the future. Given certain specific circumstances, the prophet would predict a future event. Obviously this kind of insight could occur only by divine revelation. Yet the essence of prophecy was not determined by the predictive element, but by the nature of the prophet's utterance as being a revelation from God.

This perspective on the essence of prophecy is important for evaluating the question of the continuation of prophecy today. Clearly no one can foretell infallibly the specifics of the future, as was the case in biblical prophecy, apart from a direct revelation from the sovereign God who controls the future. But it is just as true that no one can tell forth the word of God in the prophetic sense apart from experiencing a revelation from God. Whether as fore-teller or forth-teller, the prophet communicated revelation from God. If a person affirms

4. Notice how even the prophet Nathan's well-meaning response to David's desire to build a house for the Lord had to be corrected by a subsequent word from the Lord (2 Sam. 7:1-5).

that biblical prophecy continues today in either of its basic forms, it should be clear that he is expressing belief that revelation continues today. While a contemporary preacher may be prophetic in his pulpit ministry, he is not prophesying in the biblical sense of the word. Just as a preacher today may be apostolic but not an apostle, so he may be prophetic without being a prophet.

4. As a consequence of the uniqueness of the prophetic ministry, the nation of Israel must be seen as having a distinctive role among the peoples of the earth. The book of Deuteronomy reflects on the privileged position of the Israelite nation by pointing out their uniqueness as recipients of the revelation of God's law to them: "What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deut. 4:8). Because of the special revelation of God's will communicated through Moses in his prophetic role at Sinai, Israel stood out distinctly among the nations of the world. This uniqueness of Israel in the plans and purposes of God indicates among other things that a full understanding of prophetism in Israel can never be achieved by a comparison with similar phenomena among other nations of the same era. The agnosticism previously noted with respect to the origin of prophetism in Israel among modern critics should not be surprising. For Israel as recipient of God's revelation is indeed unique. The distinctiveness of the body of Israelite prophetic materials speaks for itself. According to the apostle Paul, Israel is unique "first of all" in that "they have been entrusted with the very words of God" (Rom. 3:2).

From this uniqueness of Israel, it should not be concluded that God had no concern for the other nations of the world. For from the beginning it was explained to Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3). When God first set apart Abraham and his descendants, he made it plain that any foreigner could become a full participant in all the privileges of the sons of Abraham, an equal heir of the same blessings (Gen. 17:12-13). Interestingly, the first usage of the term *prophet* in scripture refers to Abraham's intercession as the key to blessing for the nations of the world (Gen. 20:7).

5. As great as the office of prophetic mediator may appear in the context of its origins, it cannot represent the manner in which the

ultimate purpose of God's covenant will be realized. The essence of the covenant speaks of an intimacy of union between God and his people. "I shall be your God and you shall be my people" summarizes the closeness of the relationship established by the covenant. Yet it was out of terror in the presence of the Covenant LORD that the people asked for someone to mediate God's word to them. So long as the people felt they must have an intermediary between themselves and God, the ultimate purpose of the covenant could not be fulfilled.

This point is emphasized by Paul in his statement that "a mediator does not speak of one" (Gal. 3:20*). The presence of a mediator implicitly suggests a separation of people from one another. If husband and wife can communicate only through a mediator, then obviously they have not experienced the oneness intended in the marriage relationship.

In the processes of redemptive history, it becomes plain that only if God himself should become the one who mediates the divine word could the oneness of fellowship intended by the covenant be fulfilled. Once God himself became the mediator, the need for the intermediary work of the prophetic figure would come to an end.

The new covenant documents confirm this perspective on the final goal of prophetism. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the finality of prophetic revelation as it is found in the person of Jesus. Previously God spoke in many different ways through many different prophetic mediators. But now he has spoken with finality in a Son (Heb. 1:1–2). When the prophetic revelation comes directly through Jesus Christ the Son of God, then the ultimate goal of the covenant has been realized. He is the "one mediator" between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5). Experiencing the revelation of God through the Son means being one with God himself.

So according to the biblical testimony, prophetism in Israel had its historical origin with the establishment of the theocratic nation in the Mosaic period. As the foundational law of the covenant was being revealed, the prophetic office came into being. As a consequence, in starkest contrast with a long history of negatively critical reconstruction, law and prophecy do not stand over against one another. Instead, prophetism originates with the mediation of God's law.