

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTORY MATTERS REGARDING THE STUDY OF THE CESSATION OF PROPHECY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Chapter One of this thesis will set forth the basic contours of the study of the theme of prophetic cessation in the Old Testament. Introductory comments pertaining to the subject are outlined, the assumptions and presuppositions of the author are presented, and some of the methodological aspects for the study are noted. Additionally, various considerations concerning the Old Testament Scriptures and the Hebrew Canon set the parameters of the study in the context of the discipline of Old Testament Theology.

### 1 THE THEME OF THE CESSATION OF PROPHECY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A considerable amount of literature in the Old Testament canon is related to the genre referred to as prophecy. In the Hebrew canon, the Former and Latter Prophets make up a large part of the Old Testament. In this literature, as well as in parts of the Law and the Writings, there are indications that prophecy as an expression, goes through various transitions and eventually comes to an end in Israel. Usually it is claimed that prophecy in Israel arose together with the monarchy and then after a period of decline, came to an end after the Babylonian exile. Therefore, with the fall of kingship and the kingdom in Israel, classical prophecy is believed to have come to an end (Cross 1973:343). Whereas there is much research material available concerning the beginning of prophecy

in the Old Testament, the same can not be said regarding matters pertaining to the end of prophecy. Fortunately, this apparent neglect of the decline and end of prophecy is being addressed to a greater degree. Some of the important articles or books which specifically discuss the cessation of prophecy include materials written by Petersen 1977, Overholt, 1988, Sheppard, 1988, Greenspahn, 1989, Utschneider, 1991, Barstad, 1993, Gordon, 1995, Meyers, 1995, Sommer, 1996, and Bergen, 1999. Many other authors make comments on this theme as will be reflected in the research. The discussion concerning prophetic cessation then, will be the overall focus of this thesis.

Prophecy is introduced in the Pentateuch as a vital function among the people of Israel. It is presented as the primary way in which Yahweh communicates with his people and provides them with the leadership they require during the Exodus and wilderness wanderings. Thereafter, prophecy is featured in the Old Testament as a dynamic force in Israel, and together with the priesthood, prophecy helps to develop the theological and religious views of the nation. Prophets are observed to be active in all the major transition periods of Israel's history. However, in addition to texts that emphasize the importance of prophecy, there are other passages which indicate potential problems in the mediation process of this vital function. Problems may include aberrations in the delivery and content of prophecy. Some individuals who prophesy, may use prophecy for their own advantage and for a variety of purposes, motivations, or agendas. It is, therefore, not surprising to find texts which indicate developing problems in prophetic circles as well as different perspectives regarding the same.

Certain texts outrightly refer to some prophets as *pseudoprophets* (in the LXX), and others are presented as unfaithful prophets of Yahweh who are instead more loyal to monarchic concerns (e.g. 1 Ki 22). Therefore, in a number of Old Testament texts, the demise and failure of prophecy is envisioned. The development of this perspective occurs as prophecy is perceived to be deteriorating from the special kind of prophetic leadership that Moses exemplified (Dt 34:10). At times the loss of inspiration is implied, or the community may lament the silence of God and the absence of prophets,

and yet at other times, prophets are perceived to be mad men and aberrant from espousing true prophecy. People may long for a message from God, but apparently there is no response to the communities' prayers and special requests for direction and guidance.

Since the period when the writings of the Old Testament were collected, endorsed by the community, and finally considered to be canonical, a number of questions probably arose for the community of faith--some of these questions continue to be asked today. Has prophecy come to an end with the closing of the Hebrew Canon? Did false prophecy sound the death knell for true prophecy? If prophecy ended, what if anything eventually took its place? If prophecy did indeed end, when did this cessation actually occur? If Old Testament prophecy did not cease, did it lapse or simply become dormant? When the Hebrew Canon was closed, was prophecy something that could be revived and anticipated at some point in the future? These questions are relevant to the main focus of this thesis which is an investigation of the events presented in the Old Testament that indicate changes to, as well as the cessation of prophecy. In order to understand possible transformations of prophecy at some point in Israel's experience, however, the background and nature of Old Testament prophecy must be analyzed. In the discipline of Biblical Theology, observations concerning the beginning of a theme are crucial to the understanding of the development and eventual culmination of a theme.

## 2 METHODOLOGY AND CHAPTER CONTENT

The assumption that Israelite prophecy ceased continues to be a matter requiring serious thought and research. In the past few decades there has been renewed interest regarding the subject of the cessation of prophecy and the evidence concerning this subject is apparently only or mainly available in the Old Testament documents. Relevant passages will be discussed in the light of Old Testament composition and canonical formation issues since views pertaining to what actually constitutes 'Scripture' are closely related to what also constitutes biblical prophecy. This discussion

is essential so that conclusions drawn in regards to the cessation of prophecy will depend on what the Old Testament record indicates prophecy actually is. Issues regarding the rise and development of prophecy according to Old Testament texts will be discussed in Chapter Two. Passages related to prophecy are examined to determine what perspectives were evident among the people of God during the major periods of Israel's history. A variety of terms are used to refer to prophets and this terminology will be examined.

Furthermore, the consideration of similar expressions of prophecy which are evident among ancient Near Eastern cultures that perhaps influenced Israel will also be undertaken. Israel was only one part of the mosaic of Near Eastern peoples which had similar practices, beliefs, and experiences, as indicated in several extant ancient Near Eastern texts. These writings often provide evidence of similar prophetic expressions and an examination of the same is enlightening for the Old Testament understanding of prophecy. Primarily, the Law and the Former Prophets will be examined in Chapter Two since they predominately indicate the background information concerning early prophecy and its initial development in Israel.

In this study, Old Testament passages concerning the beginning and future of prophecy are mainly considered in the light of scholarly views regarding their exegetical meaning. The same approach is followed in Chapters Three and Four, regarding the nature of prophecy, its primary functions, roles, practices, problems, and the various evaluations regarding the veracity of prophetic messages. Numerous perspectives of problems associated with prophecy that could lead to its demise or failure as well as the future anticipation of transformations to prophecy are presented and analyzed. The writer attempts to discuss or refer to all relevant passages in the Old Testament which address negative and positive elements of prophetic expression. In Chapter Five the focus is on Old Testament passages that directly refer to the view that prophecy will be a permanent mode of communication for God's people, and is considered to be a continuous process. On the other hand, texts that indicate the demise and end of prophecy will be examined in order to provide contrasting

opinions. Chapter Six concentrates on the major views held in scholarship concerning the cessation of prophecy. These perspectives are presented, discussed, and analyzed in order to form appropriate conclusions concerning this subject, which are then elucidated in Chapter Seven.

### 3 ASSUMPTIONS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

The author considers the books which are contained in the Hebrew canonical structure, or the structure of the same body of literature contained in the Septuagint or English translations of the Old Testament, to be inspired literature that came to be recognized as authoritative Scripture by the people of God. Inspiration is a term which describes the process of how a divine word is communicated to the people of God through a prophet. The Old Testament indicates that this process involves the Spirit of God who reveals the divine message through a vision, dream, impression, or verbal word. When inspired, prophets can claim, "Thus says the Lord." When these oral proclamations are made, they eventually are written down so that the prophetic word can be assessed, implemented, and remembered. Ultimately, the prophetic records are referred to as the sacred Scriptures. Once received as the Scriptures by the community of faith, the revelation is considered unalterable and the books are carefully preserved by the community.

These Scriptures present the complex and variegated record of Israel's faith and experience which indicate actual historical events that led to the introduction and development of prophecy during Israel's formative periods as presented in the Old Testament record. Although there is a trend in recent scholarship which denies the historicity of the Old Testament documents and of Israel as a nation, there are other substantive claims to refute this trend. We accept that in addition to the narrative and literary value of the biblical records, there are historical facts and indicators which are to be accepted as reflecting actual events and beliefs in Israel when they are intended to do so. These are not only verifiable in comparison to other ancient Near Eastern documents but are evident from numerous archeological discoveries which verify many of the events described in the Old Testament.

This combination of history and narrative, wisdom and prophecy, as well as many other genres of literature, provides the written record from which Israel understood their covenantal relationship with Yahweh, their cultic institutions, and their moral requirements.

Additionally, the writer assumes that there is a diversity of thought evident in the Old Testament concerning prophecy. A variety of views concerning prophecy arise due to the long historical period in which prophetic expression was developed. However, this diversity of thought also recognizes the unity that pervades much of the prophetic material. Passages which present the rise, functions, and different expressions of prophecy, indicate the importance and necessity of this vital part of Israel's religion and the importance of prophecy as contained in the prophetic record.

Concerning the selection of texts to be considered, the author specifically discusses those passages which indicate views and beliefs concerning prophecy and its future. Passages that are relevant to the theme will be considered from all parts of the Old Testament canon. Exposition and conclusions assume exegetical work in the biblical context in which texts are written. Passages will normally be considered according to the order of books as structured in the Hebrew Canon.

#### 4 THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE HEBREW CANON

The documents which are now collected in the Old Testament went through a long process of oral dissemination, writing, reading, editing, assessment, collection, reception, compilation, and preservation. Finally and formally, the books which are now contained in the Old Testament or Hebrew Canon were considered authoritative in comparison to many other books that were rejected as not inspired and authoritative. While there is much about this process that is not known, there is sufficient evidence to determine the basic way in which this process occurred. The addition of books to the canonical books and sections which ultimately led to the place where the canon was considered 'closed' or 'sufficient' and considered 'authoritative Scripture,' has some historical

indicators to how this process was realized in various communities of God's people. Moreover, in Judaism as well as in protestant Christianity, the canon of the Old Testament is identical in content--only the structure is different. Details regarding the process of canonization are discussed to a certain extent in Chapter Two since this also has implications for the cessation of prophecy.

In our view, the Hebrew Canon's structure has some important ramifications to be considered. The initial structure of the documents in our present English versions of the Old Testament were specifically ordered in the Hebrew Canon to reflect various theological views on the nature and genre of diverse documents. The translators of the Septuagint, changed this structure to conform with other ideological views. In the Hebrew Canon, the books which are referred to as "historical books" are called the "Former Prophets," a designation which indicates an important distinction of genre and content. That is, the books of Joshua through Second Kings are not just historical reflections on events, information, and religious opinions, but are primarily prophetic perspectives of Israel's theological development in narrative form. They are referred to as the Former Prophets which feature how the prophetic word is communicated and then realized or fulfilled in Israel's history.

The prophetic books according to the Hebrew Canon include not only the Former Prophets, but also the Latter Prophets, which comprise of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Book of the Twelve. While the prophetic books will be the main focus of our attention, we would be negligent in not considering the Torah and the Writings which also include perspectives concerning prophecy. In consideration of texts in those sections of the Hebrew Canon, the study rightly becomes a biblical theological approach based on the whole Old Testament according to the Hebrew Canonical structure of books. This study does not in anyway consider New Testament texts or perspectives and as the title indicates, is limited to the Old Testament Scriptures. However, certain intertestamental perspectives that reflect on the theme of the cessation of prophecy will be discussed in Chapter Six since they may represent theological beliefs that stem from earlier Old Testament views.

All quotations made from the Bible by the author are based on the New International Version published by the International Bible Society. However, some quotations of the Bible made by scholars who are quoted in the thesis may be taken from other versions or may represent their own translation.

## 5 BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

As far as a discipline may be concerned, this investigation is predominately structured according to the contours of an Old Testament theological study. Since the topic of the cessation of prophecy is only one theme out of many, this study seeks mainly to add knowledge to the theological themes and motifs related to prophecy that are evident in the Old Testament. It does not presume to be an Old Testament theology which usually seeks to construct “a complete picture of the Old Testament’s realm of belief” (Eichrodt 1961:25), but addresses the various facets of prophecy, its development, and demise in Israel. Although Old Testament theology is a relatively recent discipline, it is closely connected to Biblical Theology. Biblical Theology is mainly a descriptive and historical discipline that sets forth its conclusions according to the Scripture’s own biblical and historical perspectives (Ladd 1979b:506; Hasel 1972:169). It recognizes that revelation has occurred in historical events and seeks to present that information in a structured manner. The goal of Biblical Theology is generally “the description and the interpretation of God’s redeeming acts in history, whereby God desires to bring men into fellowship with Himself” (Ladd 1979b:509). Although Biblical Theology involves the study of themes raised in Scripture from the Old into the New Testaments, space limitations and the nature of this study focuses the discussion exclusively on the Old Testament materials (Hasel 1972:177). However, the study necessarily considers other ancient Near Eastern records which pertain to the subject matter since, “*No presentation of Old Testament theology can properly be made without constant reference to its connections with the whole world of Near Eastern religion* (Eichrodt 1961:25; italics his).



According to (Hasel 1972:178), “A theology of the Old Testament is first of all a summary interpretation and explanation of the Old Testament writings or blocks of writings.” This will be the basic format of our investigation, but only in regards to the theme, beginning with the Law, the Prophets, and then the Writings. Texts will be considered as they relate to the topic of discussion according to the Hebrew Canon structure. The procedure for the development of the theme of the cessation of prophecy will generally follow Hasel’s recommendations (1972:181) by considering individual books and groups of writings that address the topic in a longitudinal direction. According to Hasel (1972:93) the task of Old Testament theology “consists of providing summary explanations and interpretations of the final form of the individual Old Testament writings or blocks of writings that let their various themes, motifs, and concepts emerge and reveal their relatedness to each other.” The information that arises from this investigation will usually be summarized at the end of each chapter and the main conclusions presented in Chapter Seven.

