

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE CESSATION OF PROPHECY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Our survey of texts pertaining to the subject of prophecy in the Old Testament demonstrates the great importance of the role of prophecy for God's people. Through prophecy, Yahweh provides leadership, guidance, and instruction for the nation of Israel. Perhaps most importantly, Yahweh inspires the word of God that was collected into the Hebrew canon through the prophets. In the light of this Old Testament emphasis on the importance of prophecy, the value of prophecy in Israel should not be underestimated. However, there are indications in some biblical texts that prophecy was threatened at different times in Israel's history for various reasons. Surprisingly, even though the people of God initially requested prophetic mediation, they often exhibit a negative attitude towards the prophets and prophecy in general. At times they reject inspired prophetic messages and seem to prefer the words and teachings of false prophets. In other periods, they lament the silence of the prophetic word. It is this particular theme and diversity of thought that motivated our discussion of the cessation of prophecy in the Old Testament. To discuss this topic realistically, however, the investigation had to address the context in which prophecy developed. This necessitated the inquiry into the rise, nature, role, and function of prophecy in order to establish what prophecy actually involved and if it indeed really

ceased in Israel according to the Old Testament Scriptures. Hence, this conclusion will summarize some of the key issues involved in this study and will provide the main findings and salient observations regarding “The Cessation of Prophecy in the Old Testament.”

## 1 THE INITIAL ROLE AND RISE OF PROPHECY ACCORDING TO THE PENTATEUCH

In considering the beginning and origins of prophecy, the perspective of the Pentateuch is paramount for several reasons. According to both the Hebrew canonical structure, as well as the Septuagint and English versions of the Old Testament, prophetic functions are depicted as occurring early in Israel’s history. The Pentateuch presents the initial terminology concerning the *nabi* and records prophetic activity associated with Abraham, and even with the enigmatic person of Balaam. However, the Pentateuch elevates the leadership of Moses as the greatest example of a prophet in the Old Testament. Not only does he experience special “mouth to mouth” communication and revelatory inspiration, but through Moses, Yahweh elects Israel as a nation to be his special possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Ex 19:5-6). Furthermore, the greatest experience of redemption in the Old Testament is led by Moses, and the mighty miracles, signs and wonders he performs are attributed to the Spirit of God who enables and empowers him (Nm 11:24-25; Is 63:11-14). The Torah ends by extolling Moses as the unparalleled prophet, and as the one who embodies the standard by which prophets who follow him will be assessed (Dt 34:10-12). This perspective is also highlighted in Judaism, where the Torah is usually elevated over other parts of the canon, both in liturgical usage and according to the frequency of quotations. The influence of Moses and the succession of prophets after him are considered as foundational background to the faith of Israel.

From the inception of the nation, therefore, Yahweh provides a prophet through whom he elects and delivers the nation of Israel. According to the Torah, Yahweh indicates his desire to

raise up successors to Moses who will be called and commissioned to speak the divinely inspired word, and provide leadership in the nation. An integral Scripture regarding the anticipation of a continual succession of prophets is recorded in Deuteronomy 18:18: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.” Through these prophetic successors Yahweh will lead Israel and mediate his word. To an extent this is illustrated in the sharing of the Spirit of God with the seventy elders who subsequently “prophesy” when the Spirit comes upon them. They are apparently instrumental in assisting Moses with leadership concerns through charismatic empowerment. Yahweh’s pledge to raise up prophetic successors who will continue to lead Israel after Moses is realized to a limited degree during the conquest period. Joshua, followed by the judges, provides charismatic leadership particularly in military realms, but the prophetic element mainly comes to light with the call and ministry of Samuel. With Samuel, a named, called and authorized prophet is given to Israel as a successor to Moses (1 Sm 3). This major transition inaugurates the period of the monarchy where both prophets and kings provide leadership for the nation. From this time forward, the prophetic word is communicated by a wide variety of individuals who prophesy their inspired messages to the populace at large, to kings, and even to secular nations.

## 2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROPHECY DURING THE PERIOD OF THE MONARCHY

The close connection between prophecy and kingship from Samuel onwards, does indicate the integral attachment between these two major offices. From this period onwards, prophetic expression is predominately focused on the reigning monarch and matters of kingship. This connection between prophecy and the monarchy is important because the ancient Near Eastern context and documents from Israel’s neighbors affirm that prophecy was typically presented in a royal court setting. The spokesman addressed the king with a “prophetic” message that usually

concerned matters of the cult, building programs, or issues of royal interest. Because of this close connection to the monarchy, many claim that when kingship fell, prophecy automatically went with it. According to the Old Testament, however, prophetic expressions came before kingship was established, and continued into the period of the second Temple. In fact, the importance of prophecy is usually elevated as the essential role of leadership in the nation, and when kings are appointed over the nation, they are still subject to the prophetic word. Prophetic administration, is particularly critical during major times of transition, calamity, and change. Moreover, even though the political strength of the monarchy tried to control prophetic messages, prophets still managed to confront errant kings and they resolutely presented their oracles with the authority of Yahweh. Prophets may have lost their main venue for prophetic utterances in the king's court when prophecy diminished, but they still had a message to give to the general populace in Israel. Prophetic messages were often communicated to individuals and groups outside of the royal court and could potentially continue even after the monarchy ended (1 Sm 8; 12; 1 Ki 18; Ezk 1:1-4).

One central role of prophets in relation to the monarchy was the announcement of the selected king as is evident in the case of Saul and David. A development of this idea is evident in relation to the future expectation of a messianic king. When the assessment of kings as recorded in the Former Prophets is tabulated, the vast majority of kings were evaluated as errant and apostate. Frequently their assessment indicates that they followed in the sins of Jeroboam. Eventually, the prophets appear to lose hope in earthly kings and the prophetic aspiration for an ideal king is then prescribed or anticipated as coming some time in the distant future. The future messianic king will be announced and legitimized by a prophetic voice (1 Sm 10:24; Is 40:3; MI 4:5). This is evident in the development of eschatological views concerning the messiah which came about due to the deportation of Israel from their land (cf. Is 7:10-17; 9:1-6; 11:1-9; Ezk 34:23-24; 37:22-25; Mi 5:1-2; Zch 9:9-10; 13:7-9). Perhaps due to the overwhelming realization that Israel was politically unable to rise above the empires around them, prophetic views cast

political aspirations and messianic expectation into the distant future. This meant on the one hand that there was no hope for political realization under the ruling powers of the day, and therefore, specific hopes were idealized and deferred. On the other hand, expectation was presented in the model messiah to come who would be empowered to bring God's people under messianic rule. Prophecy was expected to be renewed in order that a prophetic announcement of the coming of the final redeemer could be made.

In short, the implication is that prophets presented their inspired messages mainly to kings until the royal court no longer existed. As fears that the monarchy would not last intensified, prophetic messages became more oriented to future aspirations in God's intervention by providing an ideal ruler. These prophecies were recorded and preserved by the community. Prophets then were active during the building of the temple and in the Second Temple period. They continued to work on the collection, editing, interpretation, and compilation of the prophetic books. Finally they became silent and the nation anticipated a prophetic renewal in a future period when Yahweh would call, inspire, commission, and send another prophet with an announcement concerning Yahweh's intervention in history.

### 3 PROPHETS AND THE FORMATION OF THE HEBREW CANON

According to the Old Testament, it is apparent that prophets play another essential role in the nation. In addition to the provision of leadership and the communication of the prophetic word, prophets are involved in the writing, compilation, preservation, editing and verification of the inspired words of Yahweh. The written legacy of the people's relationship with Yahweh that revealed their origins, purpose, and destiny is what sustained them even during the most desperate times. Prophets were not only involved in writing, interpreting, and preserving this record, but they also initiated events as directed by Yahweh and recorded such events along with the inspired

oracles that gave direction to the nation. Therefore, the importance of the prophetic word in the context of the monarchy should not only be estimated by the access a prophet had to the king but by the records the prophets kept concerning the king's activities. In fact, it was these records that were used to write the "authorized" books now contained in the Former Prophets. It was the "court prophets" who recorded the actions and consequences of both the prophets and the kings of Israel and provided the key sources of information. Their works were initially referred to as chronicles, records, prophecy, and visions (1 Chr 29:29; 2 Chr 9:29; 12:15; 20:34; 26:22; 32:32). The selected and edited narratives from these records serve to explain the guilt or innocence of specific kings and provide reasons for the nation's exile. Furthermore, they present the Lord's promises in order to demonstrate his faithfulness in bringing about the consequences which were foretold in the prophetic word.

These prophetic records formed an integral part of the Scriptures that were eventually received by the community of faith. Although the Torah played a key role in the formulation and evaluation of records, the prophetic books were recognized as a major part of the Hebrew canon. The Former and Latter prophets provide the primary reasons for Israel's oppression and judgment at the hands of pagan foreign powers. In fact, the pressures from political powers often intensified the process of writing and the preservation of documents. Sometimes foreign powers even required constitutional documents which would regulate the governance and life of subject nations. Whereas the Torah initially presented Israel's background, identity, instructions for life and constitutional requirements as a nation, the prophets called Israel to fulfill the nation's purpose and destiny. They emphasized covenantal relationship and loyalty to Yahweh. Concerning the content of the prophetic record, it is important to note that diversity of thought is not to be taken as an indicator of the formation of different religions in Israel. In fact, the different theological perspectives constitute a compendium of prophetic thought that provides a well rounded picture of the nation's faith. Different tenets and theological positions help to present a

wholistic belief system for the people of God, and actually bring the prophetic corpus to completion. Once this record was complete, it was understood that the Hebrew Canon contained all the inspired materials that Yahweh had revealed to his prophets to that point. After this, the work of the prophet was no longer the same. In a way, the prophets rendered themselves redundant by presenting the word of God to the nation. As prophetic work diminished, the priests came to the forefront as teachers, interpreters, and protectors of the word of God. Ultimately, the influence of prophets ceased to be evident in the intertestamental period.

The reception of the Scriptures registers the communities' implicit seal on accepted inspired writings and exposes those documents that are appraised as apocryphal and pseudepigraphal. The canonization of Scripture involves a strenuous process of the evaluation of texts and reflects the careful selection and finalization of received books. Once it was believed that the 'Spirit of prophecy' was adding nothing new to the inspired words, the canon was considered closed. In part this was facilitated by the prophetic forecasting of future events. Bleak circumstances led to a greater hope for future deliverance and the realization of the nation's aspirations. The nation held fast to inspired words and anticipated their fulfilment. Prophets had nothing more to add due to Yahweh's silence and the recorded word which was increasingly available to the community.

While this development meant that prophetic utterances diminished and ultimately ceased, it did not mean that prophetic expression could never begin again. Potentially the kind of prophecy required to be considered inspired and canonical was still considered possible, but it would have to be verified as inspired by the Spirit of God. Assessment by the community of God's people according to the same standards applied to Old Testament Scripture was necessary for "prophetic" documents to be accepted.

#### 4 THE THREAT OF DIVINATION, ECSTASY, AND FALSE PROPHECY

In presenting the overall importance of prophecy, the Old Testament texts do not give a myopic perspective but reveal that there were significant threats to prophecy at various times in Israel's history. A very realistic perspective on the complex issues surrounding prophecy is presented. In part this is evident when divinatory and ecstatic expressions are observed, and along with a variety of examples there are restrictions and differences indicated. Therefore, implied connections of prophecy with ancient Near Eastern divination were noted to be significantly different from most prophetic expressions presented in the Old Testament. Overall, it is made clear in several texts that the prophetic word of God can not be manipulated by divinatory rituals or formulaic phrases. According to the Old Testament, the word of God is only effectual when divinely inspired in the mouth of prophets. God alone has the ability to bring the spoken word into reality. Human manipulation cannot bring about desirable results through divination and ritual.

A more complicated issue concerns the ecstatic behavior of some prophets. At times, such ecstatic behavior seems to be acceptable and attributed to the overwhelming power of the Spirit of God who causes recipients of the *ruah* to prophesy. Such external behavior induced by the Spirit signifies an internal power at work in the prophet and manifests the presence of God. The ecstatic function calls people to attention in order that they might prepare to hear the word of the Lord. But due to the connections evident with ancient Near Eastern prophecy and ecstatic behavior, there are a few periods when prophets indicate a negative perspective of ecstasy. Some scholars suggest that ecstatic behavior presaged the demise of prophecy itself since a few prophets limit their references to the Spirit of God who inspired ecstatic activity in early records. Whatever the situation was, the overall view of the Old Testament implies that ecstasy could be assessed and in the end would not destroy the importance of prophecy. In fact, ecstatic expression could even enhance the prophetic message. The influence of the Spirit of God behind such



expressions as recorded in numerous Old Testament texts is important in verifying the divine role and inspiration of this behavior which is often in stark contrast to ancient Near Eastern practices. False prophecy, however, was more difficult to verify.

The prophetic record of events provides a realistic picture of the dangers associated with prophetic utterances. These dangers are evident due to the mediation process which could undermine the veracity and value of prophecy and lead to its complete rejection in Israel. Aberrations and potential minefields included human frailty, morality, matters concerning inspiration, accuracy assessed by the fulfilment of prophetic messages, theological perspectives, and a variety of social dimensions. However, false prophecy was exposed by true prophets, and in time, the true prophet was able to be authenticated by the community of God's people, as the community received authorized documents into the Hebrew canon. The assessment of prophets took time and they were not always recognized as true or false during their ministry. Ultimately, the prophetic books that are included in the Old Testament are the culmination of the words of true prophets that were proclaimed over time and then collected into their present form. No book written by a perceived false prophet is included in the Old Testament. Only some of the words, practices, character flaws, and theological views of false prophets are retained in the prophetic records.

To a degree, each prophet can be assessed not only in regards to their veracity but according to their individual overall contribution. The realistic presentation of the prophets in the Old Testament does not hide certain character imperfections and weaknesses. Rather, it shows that even a prophet like Moses can have significant failures while fulfilling prophetic assignments. At times the narratives may expose such matters in a satirical way (Elisha). Ultimately, however, true prophets are victorious over the tests, temptations, and challenges that they face in their leadership roles, and successfully record their oracles and experiences for the people of God.

Issues are noted in clear and unmistakable terms to show that Yahweh would still use prophecy to communicate his message to Israel. Both positive and negative features of prophecy are retained and in doing so, the record features the resilience of the prophetic word in Israel's history. God's people were able to identify true prophets and true prophecy in contrast to false prophets and false prophecy. Texts show that the consensus of opinion prevailed and false prophecy was recognized for what it was. Yahweh always had his remnant of faithful prophets who would fulfill their call and commission to mediate messages on behalf of God to Israel. In short, although false prophecy was troublesome for Israel, it was not the reason that prophecy in Israel would cease or radically change in its main function, or limit its future expression.

## 5 INDICATIONS OF A FUTURE REALIZATION AND RENEWAL OF PROPHETIC EXPRESSION

There are several Scriptures that anticipate the future communication of prophecy but this perspective has several elements to it. The Old Testament includes texts which indicate two different perspectives on the future of prophecy in Israel. In some passages, prophecy appears to be a permanent feature of Yahweh's relationship with his people, while in other texts, prophecy appears to be temporal. This is usually due to perceived problems associated with prophecy such as the threat of falsity, a lack of divine inspiration, periods of prophetic silence, rejection, opposition, and ultimately the withdrawal of prophetic mediation by God. Negative features of prophecy show that some prophets use the prophetic word to instigate the worship of other gods. However, the Old Testament law strictly forbids such an abdication of responsibility and advocates a death sentence for errant prophets. Prophetic silence marks another problem in Israel, and occurs when God does not inspire a prophetic message. This is usually due to the people's attitude of opposition to prophecy and their rejection of the word. At times, certain kings manage to restrain the prophetic word and keep prophets relatively silent. A few kings hire prophets who

will support the monarchic program, while others sideline prophets to limited functions and roles. Several prophets seem to function as court prophets like Nathan and Gad, while other prophets are endangered by the institutionalized monarchy and function outside of the establishment. Therefore, prophets are often threatened by the very agents they are called to serve and speak to, thus hindering the word of prophecy. With this development in Israel where kings and the populace in general tend to reject and oppose the prophetic word, some prophets and other witnesses indicate that prophecy will be withdrawn. Yahweh will be silent, and the word of prophecy will no longer convey his plans and contemporary messages for Israel. God's word for each generation or "contemporary" community will have to be sought in the written record of the prophets. The ultimate judgment on the people of God for their continual rejection of the prophetic word is exile. Continual rejection would ultimately lead to the situation where the Spirit of God who inspires prophecy will no longer be active.

While these negative consequences are significant, the strength of passages that indicates prophecy will be transformed, renewed, or changed, is also highlighted in the Old Testament. To balance these two very different perspectives, it appears that modifications to prophecy as it was initially experienced in Israel will occur. On the one hand, several passages indicate that the judgment of God will be implemented and this will bring about the withdrawal of the prophetic word. On the other hand, many texts foresee a future period of restoration and salvation for the people of God that will in fact include prophecy. The most significant change is that the prophetic word will be available to all the people of God and will not be restricted to a few individuals. The transformation will affect the purpose and function of prophecy where it will be potentially experienced by the people of God when the Spirit is poured out upon them. When all of God's people are able to "prophesy," individual prophets will have a different role to play. There may be a period of dormancy and prophetic silence, but prophecy is definitely to be anticipated and expected in the future at some point.

Transformation in prophecy is mainly evident in the different roles which prophets hold according to the Old Testament materials. Modifications in prophetic expression occur during times of transition such as the exile and in the Second Temple period. During the Second Temple period, prophecy continues to be evident. The Holy Spirit continues to speak to the community of God's people through "temple" prophets together with Levitical priests who are inspired singers. Although this prophetic function is clearly presented by the Chronicler, it still poses a limitation on who can prophesy. Only inspired singers who are anointed by the Spirit of God can prophesy.

Another crucial change in prophecy occurs when the anticipated *shalom* for the nation is replaced with calamities and the ultimate loss of national independence. Together with the end of the monarchy and changes in the social structures of society, a number of eschatological perspectives developed. When prophetic expectations for restoration were dashed and hope was deferred, apocalyptic views emerged in order to address this situation. As prophecy declined, it appears that apocalyptic views gradually took over and dominated perspectives during intertestamental times. It is critical to note, however, that prophets were involved in this transformation of views as is evident from the apocalyptic roots observed in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Zechariah, and Daniel. Prophets, therefore, were integrally involved in the presentation of apocalyptic thought and the future actions of God in history.

Furthermore, prophets re-interpret former prophecies in the light of changing circumstances and events and show their influence in the writing and compilation of Old Testament materials. This work continued until the community considered the canon closed and no other changes were permitted of the standardized text. No other documents were admitted into the canon. Nevertheless, the possibility of prophets arising and proclaiming fresh revelation from God was still considered as probable at some point in the future. In fact, such a renewal of prophetic activity was expected.

Prophets in the Old Testament are generally specific individuals but when the future realization of prophecy is indicated, a much wider group of prophets is anticipated. Prophecy will not just be for a few selected, called, and commissioned individuals but it will be democratized and made available for all of God's people. Numbers 11 provides the programmatic example of God's intention for his people, that all would be potential recipients of the Spirit of God who would be inspired to prophesy and experience prophetic benefits. The coming of the Spirit of God would re-institute prophetic utterance once again as in the past (Nm 11:29; 24:2; 1 Sm 10:10; 19:23-24). Numbers 11 indicates that prophecy was a desirable experience for all of God's people (Nm 11:29b). God will raise up an eschatological community of prophets.

Prophetic succession is an important feature that is anticipated in Israel (Dt 18:18). The potential for a continuation of prophecy rather than its cessation is indicated. Individual prophets were expected to speak on behalf of Yahweh in an unbroken succession. However, the Old Testament records indicate that there were many times when prophecy was sporadic and limited since individual prophets were not always available. The anticipation for a more consistent provision of prophets was desirable. Therefore, individual prophetic succession is overshadowed by views held by several prophets that reflect Joel's anticipation of the Spirit that will be poured out upon all of God's people.

The tenor of the texts from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Joel anticipate the pouring out of the Spirit of God upon his people so that all of them might prophesy. Yahweh will not forsake his people forever. "I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord" (Ezk 39:29). Additionally, Joel features God's eschatological activity in pouring out the Spirit of God on all people. "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in

those days” (Jl 2:28-29). Therefore, Numbers 11:29 and Joel 2:28-29 specifically anticipate a time when prophecy will not be restricted to a select few but will be enjoyed by all the people of God. The recurrence of prophecy will be extended to all flesh at some future point as is signified by the phrases “after this” and “in those days.” Hence, concerning the question of whether prophecy was over forever, the preponderance of weight indicates that the answer is no. Prophecy is to be expected at some point even after the Old Testament canon is considered closed. The Spirit of Yahweh, will no longer be just the prerogative of prophets and inspired priests but will be available to the whole community. All of God’s people can anticipate a collective out pouring of the Spirit (Is 44:4; 59:21; Ezk 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29; Hg 2:5; Jl 2:28-32). Intermediaries such as priests and prophets will no longer have a monopoly on the personal knowledge and Spirit of God. With a new heart and a new spirit given by the Spirit of God, the affirmation that Yahweh will restore his people is emphasized in the formulaic phrase, “I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord.”

With this great anticipation of renewal and a rekindling of prophecy, particular intertestamental texts agree that prophecy will continue after the Old Testament era. Although certain changes in prophecy may be evident, the basic functions of prophecy are expected to continue in the future when renewed by the Spirit of God. An eschatological prophet who is inspired by the Spirit is expected to appear first. This prophetic appearance will then inaugurate another era where Yahweh will pour out his Spirit on all his people and prophecy will continue indefinitely.