

He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson 2

A Prophet's Job

Forum



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Forum

With

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Question 1:

How is the job of a prophet different from that of a simple fortune teller?

Dr. Greg Perry

In Matthew's gospel, in chapter 1 and 2, we have an opportunity to kind of see the difference between biblical prophecy and how it functions and fortune-telling. What we have in chapter 2 is the story of the magi. And the magi see these wonders in the heavens. And they also probably were scholars who studied ancient texts of different civilizations, and they would compare what would happen in the heavens and what the texts foretold. And that was really about *predicting* the future, predicting the future greatness of a king, or the importance of the birth of someone because of this phenomenon in the heavens. What we see is that King Herod asks for his advisors to search the Scriptures and tell him where the Messiah was to be born, and the quotation is taken from Micah 5 that the Messiah would be born in the city of Bethlehem. And what's interesting there is that we can see the difference between prediction and promise. Biblical prophecy is really nested in the *promises* of God. Yes, there are some predictions about what will happen in the future, but they're really based on these commitments that God has made to a particular covenant people. Bethlehem is the City of David, and Micah 5, yes, it's about a future event where the Messiah will come, but it's really rooted in this bigger promise that God has made to David's family and that out of the City of David the Messiah will be born.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

The difference between prophets and fortunetellers is that fortunetellers only predict the future. They foretell what will happen in the future. Some might think that the only role of the prophets was to foretell the future. Of course, this was part of their role, they did so, but it was not the majority of their work. Prophets did many other

things. Prophets represented God before the people. They received God's message and proclaimed it to the king, the king of Israel. They reminded the people of the covenant, the covenant with Moses. They told the people that there is a coming judgment in case of rebellion and a coming blessing in case of obedience, according to the covenant of Moses. They also called the people to repent, and encouraged them to repent and return to God. They taught the people. The prophet was like a watchman over the people of Israel. So, he didn't only foretell the future, but he did many other things.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

The prophet is the recipient of God's word, and the prophet proclaims that. We often talk about, in prophecy, two kinds of prophecy: foretelling and forth-telling. Foretelling is what many people think of when we talk about prophecy, and that is predicting the future, and we say, he's a "prophet" — he predicts the future. But in fact, forth-telling, which is proclaiming God's word, is really the essence of prophecy. Sometimes it's foretelling; sometimes it's telling the future, what's going to happen; but it's always forth-telling. It's always proclaiming God's message and calling God's people to respond.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm

Some people think the main purpose of biblical prophecy is to predict the future, and certainly that is an element of biblical prophecy. But traditionally, a lot of people have spoken of prophecy as being both forth-telling and foretelling. Foretelling would be, of course, the prediction of the future. But the forth-telling is very important when you read the prophets, because, very often, much of what they say is not predictive in nature. They're confronting the people with their sin. They're accusing them of having broken God's law. They're calling them back to repentance. So, we could say it's hortatory. And I happen to believe that the predictive element is secondary, that what God is really trying to do in classical biblical prophecy — like Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, those kinds of books — is he's calling the people back to a proper relationship with himself. And very often the predictions are contingent; they're conditional. God is showing them what their future looks like if they don't repent. And actually, that's the last thing God wants to do is judge them. So, he's warning them, "If you don't repent, here's what's going to happen." But if they do repent, God may very well not bring that judgment upon them. Or in the case of a prophecy of salvation, he's showing them, "Here's what your future will look like if you continue to obey me or if you come back." So, it can be negative or positive motivation. So, I think it's very important that we merge the foretelling and the forth-telling and understand that's what biblical prophecy is really all about.

Question 2:

What does the Hebrew word נָבִיא (*nabi*) communicate about the role of prophets?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

I think etymologically the word, the most common word, for prophet in the Old Testament, *nabi*, is correctly understood as a passive noun form from a verb, which must have meant, “to call,” and so a prophet was “one who was called.” In context of the Prophets, prophets are those who are sent; that is, they are called in the sense that they are called to a commission. Prophets are commissioned. But in actual usage, I think when the Old Testament uses the term *nabi*, it’s especially in close association with the prophet speaking and speaking the words of the Lord.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The Hebrew word that the Septuagint or the Greek Old Testament translates *prophētēs*, and therefore, we translate “prophet,” is actually the word *nabi*. And *nabi* doesn’t really correspond to the notions that are hinted at by the words *prophētēs* or English word “prophet.” Instead, from East Semitic languages we know that the word *nabi* basically means “someone who is called.” And this indicates that God *called* these people that we call prophets, called them to himself, pulled them out of the normal population and made them special to him. And as people who had been called by him, they were also given a mission. And, of course, part of that mission was to speak and to prophesy and the like, but the basic notion is that these are devout people who have been separated from the world, called by God to himself. That’s fundamentally what a “*nabi*” is.

Question 3:

In what ways were prophets called to be seers?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

Another term for prophets is “seer.” In Hebrew, this is either *hōzeh*, most prominently, or else *rō’eh*. Both terms, *hōzeh* and *rō’eh*, come from two verbs, which are synonymous — “to see” — *chazah* and *raah*. Interestingly, it’s mainly prophets in the south of Judah that are called *hōzeh* — seer — but at the same time, the normal word for “to see” in Judahite Hebrew is *raah*. So, in that context, we might speculate that the choice of the term *hōzeh* may be suggesting a specialized kind of seeing and maybe as something different from ordinary seeing. In the context of the prophets and the biblical understanding of the prophets, my guess would be that “seer” is not meant so much to be, as we might think, kind of a clairvoyant who sees the future beyond ordinary sight, but it’s one who actually comes into the presence of the Lord, into the Lord’s heavenly court, the divine counsel or heavenly council, and sees and hears the deliberations going on in the heavenly court, hears the decrees of Yahweh, and then is sent by this heavenly court to go proclaim that message.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

We can see that at times Old Testament prophets are called “seers.” Now, if you just have a limited understanding of what that means, you might think it simply means to see into the future and to be able to predict what’s going to happen, but that’s such a narrow concept of what a prophet does, and it actually doesn’t account for even the majority of what prophets do. If prophets are seers — and they are — we should actually think more in terms of them being able to see the realities of the kingdom of God, the reign of God, and the role and the move of God in the world so that people aren’t just walking by sight, but they can walk by faith because of what God is doing. One of the tremendous examples of this is in 2 Kings 6. Elisha is being pursued and he is surrounded at Dothan by his enemies. And his servant panics because he sees the armies arrayed against them, and they’re cut off. And Elisha, as a prophet, a *seer*, knows that divine realities transcend human realities, and he simply prays this, he says, “I pray that the eyes of my servant may be enlightened.” And when he prayed that, his servant looked, and the hills above their enemies were filled with chariots of fire, that is, the hosts of heaven, the armies of God that were there to defend and protect them. And so, the prophets begin their role as seer, typically, by being introduced into the heavenly courts so that they see God high and lifted up and his glory fills the temple — Isaiah saw that — and then they go out into the world, having been given the divine gift of perception by the Spirit of God, so they can pull back the curtain, if you will, to help God’s people see divine realities. In the New Testament, one of the greatest and most glorious expressions of this is Revelation 4 and 5, God’s people under suffering. And while we might not think of John as a prophet, he’s doing a prophetic thing when the angel calls him to “come up here,” that is, to come up to the throne of God and see the world from God’s perspective and report the vision. And so, seers are ones, not just who see into the future, but see the realities of God’s reign and rule in a way that will, as needed, turn God’s people back to him and give them hope in hopeless situations.

Question 4:**In what ways were prophets called to be messengers?****Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Prophets were called “messengers” because they were given messages by God to deliver, deliver down here on earth. Now, what’s most important about that is to remember from whom prophets got their messages. They didn’t just sit around thinking up thoughts or dreaming about things and making up sermons that they were going to give to people. No, they received the messages that they gave to people on earth from God himself. And very often, like in Isaiah 6, prophets are actually taken up into the court of heaven, and they receive their messages while they’re having visions or having experiences of what’s going on with the heavenly court. And, as God said to Isaiah in Isaiah 6, well, “Who will go for us? Whom shall we send?” And

the answer was, of course, Isaiah said, “Here am I, send me.” And what God wanted to send was a messenger; “I said something in my court, but the people on earth can’t hear it, so what I want to give you is the message to take to them.” And that’s exactly what prophets did. They did that as people who represented the covenant that God had made either with all of humanity in Adam and Noah, or the special covenants that he’d made with Israel, from Abraham, Moses and David. And these are the frameworks around which the prophetic message came. The messenger prophet was one who received a message from God, but those messages were always given in terms of the covenant arrangement that God had given to his people.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Prophets are regarded as messengers, which implies, and almost explicitly tells us, they’ve been given a message. In other words, a prophet isn’t some lookout on the top of the main mast of a ship trying to look out into the future and see land or see something ahead. Prophets aren’t straining forward to see something they can’t yet see. Prophets have been given a message to deliver. Deuteronomy 13 and Deuteronomy 18 are very important for understanding the foundations of the prophetic ministry, and a lot of the criteria that Moses gives for people to judge who is a true prophet and who is a false prophet is “the one that speaks the will of God.” And we see this in the calling narratives of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. In fact, in Ezekiel we see that Ezekiel is handed a scroll and told to eat the scroll, that is, he is to own, and possess, and internalize the message which God has given him. So prophets, they’re not freelancers out there trying to negotiate deals between God and man. They’re not lookouts trying to see into the future. They’re like ambassadors. They’ve been given orders, and they are under orders to speak. And you see this beautifully even running into the New Testament. When Paul says this, he says, “I have not been unfaithful to the heavenly vision,” he’s speaking of the commission he was given by Jesus on the road to Damascus. The faithful and true prophet is the one who speaks the will of the Lord — no more, no less — because he is a man under orders.

Question 5:

What regulations for kingship did Israel’s kings violate, leading to an increase in the number of prophets during the monarchical period?

Dr. Todd Berger

If you go to Deuteronomy 17, Deuteronomy 17 gives some rules for the king, and basically it says three things. In Deuteronomy 17, it says that the king should not acquire many wives, and especially foreign wives, because they will turn his heart from the Lord. It says that he should not acquire for himself much gold and silver. And then finally, that he should not acquire many horses. And oddly enough, in particular, in Deuteronomy, it says, “and he especially should not go to Egypt and buy his horses.” So, then we come to the book of Kings, and if we go to the book of 1 Kings, and — I believe it’s in chapter 10 — we’re getting kind of the summary of

Solomon's reign. And what is the summary? Well, he acquired so much gold that it says that ... they were making cups and plates out of gold, and silver was just considered as worthless because he had so much gold. And then it went to list all of the horses and the chariots that he had. And he had so many horses and chariots that he had to build cities, they had to build cities just to house the horses and chariots. And then it goes on to say, in particular, that he went and he traded with the Egyptians to get his horses. And then, of course, probably the most famous, or infamous part of Solomon's reign is that he married so many hundreds of foreign women, and it goes on to say that they turned his heart from obedience to Yahweh, or from following Yahweh, and they turned his heart towards other gods. And so, God sent a prophet in there, and God gave this message to the prophet, and he said, "Because Solomon has done this, I'm going to take the kingdom from him, and I'm going to give it to someone else."

Dr. Christine Palmer

What the Lord gives us in Deuteronomy is a picture of what he intends for kingship. And in Deuteronomy 17, starting at verse 14, the Lord instructs:

When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, "I will set a king over me, like ... the nations who are around me," you shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses, one from among your countrymen ... you may not [set] a foreigner (Deuteronomy 17:14-15, NASB).

... but "one from among your own countrymen." So the very first limitation, let's say, is that whatever king it's going to be it has to be the Lord's choice. If this man will rule the nation and represent the Lord in his office of kingship, it has to be someone who is chosen by God, someone from among your brothers, and it's someone who is not exalted to the point that other kings were. Kings in the ancient world were often thought to be divine. We see that very clearly in Egypt where the Pharaoh is thought to be deity, especially after his death. In Mesopotamia, the kings are thought to be the sons of god in a very different way than in the scriptural way. And so, there's a lot of humility in this picture of what the king is about.

Furthermore, there are other limitations. The king does not multiply horses for himself. He doesn't build a big army so that his strength is found in his army. He also will not multiply wives for himself who might turn his heart away. Oftentimes to consolidate their power, kings would marry outside of their own nation and consolidate their power with alliances. So, the Scripture right here is referring to international alliances. And we will have an example. We will have an example of the son of David, Solomon, who does marry the foreign wives and does make alliances, and it proves to be very true what the Lord has foreseen, of course, that their hearts would gravitate away from the Lord. So, don't trust in your armies, don't trust in international alliances. Those are the limitations. But there is one command for the king, and this is what he is to do:

When he [sets himself] on the throne of [the] kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and [all of] these statutes, that his heart [would] not be lifted up (Deuteronomy 17:18-20, NASB).

So, how does a king learn how to be a king? What is his training? It's not in battles, it's not in international relations, but the training that a king receives in Israel is through the law of the Lord. He is to be a man who studies God's word. He is to be a theologian, so to speak. He's familiar with God's word so that he knows the mind and the heart of God, that he pursues God's purposes as he is ruling his kingdom, that he does justly, that he knows the law of the Lord that he would rule justly over the people. So, who is this king? He does not exalt himself over the rest of the nation. It's a very democratized view of kingship, if you will, but he is a model for every Israelite of what it means to be faithful to the word of God, faithful to the covenant, devoted for the true worship of the Lord. And we see this play out in the history of Israel. When we have kings who reform the worship practices, who go back to worshipping the Lord, we see that the Lord blesses them. And when we have kings who don't know the word of the Lord, who haven't studied the Scripture, who multiply instead idolatry in the land, then that becomes a snare and the Lord gives them into the hands of their enemies. So, the limitations are not to trust in their own strength. And the command is always to look to the Lord, to walk closely to him, to keep to the covenant, and to be very familiar with the study of his Scripture.

Dr. Richard E. Aberbeck

The regulations for kingship in Israel specifically are in Deuteronomy 17, and in that passage he makes it very clear that the king was not to exalt himself above the people but see himself as a servant of the people. He wasn't supposed to multiply an army, multiply horses, going to Egypt, or anything like that, but he was to be a king who really cared for his people. And there's a special regulation about ruling as a king under the law of Moses. So, it's the rule of law through a king under the law of Moses. He was to do this by, when he comes to the throne, he was supposed to sit down under the supervision of the Levitical priests and write his own copy of the law so that he could rule according to it. This is very important. And in fact, this is what David himself emphasizes to his son Solomon when he's going to take over in 1 Kings 2, that make sure you rule according to the regulations that were given through Moses so that this nation might be pleasing to the Lord.

Question 6:

What role did the prophets play in holding Israel and its leaders accountable to God's law?

Dr. Mike Ross

The prophets play a unique role in the applying of God's law in the Old Testament. There were two offices of spokesmen for God; there was the priest and the prophet. The priest was the one who was supposed to methodically and systematically and faithfully apply God's law, the Mosaic covenant, with the people of Israel. He judged cases, he taught, he proselytized and prepared people to come into the faith. He made sure that the priests understood what the law was and applied it. But when the priesthood began to spiritually decline, and they were compromised by, oftentimes, corrupt kings, then we see the office of prophet arise more and more. There are more and more prophets, and they take a more and more prominent role as God's spokesmen in the nation of Israel. They don't go into the detail that the priests would go into. They have this big picture, this picture of the law being a covenant God made with his people. To use New Testament language, they are more concerned with the *spirit* of the law, whereas, the priest is rightly concerned with the letter of the law. So, these prophets and priests were meant to complement each other. You'll notice that when Israel was obedient to the law, the priest took a prominent role, and prophets kind of receded into the background. When Israel began to spiritually decline, of course, it was the reverse. And they'd bring this powerful message that "thus saith the Lord..." and they're not afraid to confront Israel and say, in effect, "Now, you made an agreement, contract, a covenant with God that you would be faithful to the law, and in general you were not." Sometimes they'll use specific illustrations, but they are more concerned about this covenantal aspect of being "a people of the Book," a people of the law, and that is the basis upon which the priest has his ministry to apply the specifics of the law, or "the Book," to the lives of Israel. And, I think, that complement was intended by God almost like preachers today combine both roles in themselves. There are times when they counsel and they teach specifically specific things to help and comfort and instruct people. They're doing a priestly function. There are some days when they get up and say, in the grand scheme, painting with a broader brushstroke, "Thus saith the Lord..." and they're confronting the people with the covenant of grace and calling people to faith and obedience. And what we see in the New Testament, we can see in the Old Testament through these wonderful men called the prophets.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

We really have to look at the ministry of the prophets in connection to the law of God. God made a covenant with his people — we're talking principally here the Mosaic covenant — and you can see this most fully expressed in the book of Deuteronomy. And what the prophets were sent to do was essentially to prosecute the breaking of the covenant by God's people. The idea of covenant lawsuit actually exists outside of the Bible in the political treaties of the day. The suzerain king, when he hears the vassal king is not obeying, he sends an emissary, he sends an embassy to deliver the bad news that, "If you don't change your ways, the curses of the covenant are going to become operative." And you see this in Scripture well. Deuteronomy 32, Moses is looking forward, not optimistically, but looking into the future, to the day when Israel would break covenant with him. And it begins by the calling of divine witnesses. This is part of the covenant lawsuit, the calling of heaven and earth to

witness as the jury, if you will, and the prophet brings the charges. And so, the charges will list the sins of God's people, and that will usually be accompanied by reminders of God's faithfulness. So, you have the sins of God's people as the evidence for the prosecution, the faithfulness of God for evidence for the prosecution. In the end, the people of God are called, normally, to turn back and repair their ways and repent and return to God. And so, you can say it this way: the prophets, perhaps their main job is preaching the covenant, and the covenant that God made with Israel is their preaching text.

Question 7:

Why was there so much prophetic activity prior to God's exiles of Israel and Judah from the Promised Land?

Dr. Carol Kaminski

What you find in the story of the Old Testament is we have these two major kind of times of destruction with the exile in 722, and then the southern kingdom in 586; they also go off to Babylon. But yet, with both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, there are prophets that are sent to both of them. So, in the northern kingdom you have prophets like Elijah and Elisha, you have Hosea and Amos. Of course, Jonah is a northern prophet but goes to the Assyrians. And so, the question is, what is the role of these prophets, and why do we have them? We not only have these northern prophets, but there's a whole series of southern prophets. Think about Isaiah. You have Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Habbakuk — or Ha'bbakuk depending on where you come from. You have Nahum. There's a whole series of prophets. And in order understand the role of the prophet, we need to remember again they're under the Mosaic covenant — “If you obey me and keep my commandments then there's going to be blessing, but if you disobey my commandment then judgment is coming” — and the role of the prophets, really, is a sign of God's grace and his mercy to his people because he uses the prophets to warn them of the judgment that's coming, and he's using the prophets to call them back to the Mosaic covenant, saying, “Look, go out there, and tell my people that judgment is coming if you don't keep the commandments.” And so, you have prophets like Jeremiah who has to go out into the public place... Why? Because they're trying to call God's people back to the covenant, and thereby, they're wanting to prevent the judgment that's coming. So, you have this kind of climatic, especially in the southern kingdom, this climactic moment when there's a series of prophets before the judgment comes, first in 605 B.C., first deportation, 597, 586. And the prophets, really, are a sign of God's grace and his mercy to his people. If you look at the narrative in Kings and Chronicles, 2 Kings 17 gives the reason why the northern kingdom has gone into exile, and it says, “I sent you my prophets over and over. And they got up early, and though I sent them over and over but you did not listen.” Again, it's a sign that God is warning them ahead of time. Chronicles mentions this same thing, that these prophets are being

given to Israel as a gift to Israel to warn them. And yet, we also find the sad truth; Jeremiah says this is the nation that did not obey the voice of God, did not listen to his prophets, and so judgment is going to come in both the north and in the south.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

The role of the prophets was clearly to warn the people of their sins, to call them to repent, and to remind them of the covenant between God and the people of Israel through Moses, to remind them of the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience. So, this is why there was so much activity. The people had gone far away from God, from the law, and were worshipping foreign gods. So, they were warned over and over that they had to return to the Lord. For example, in the northern kingdom, the kings were all evil, and the nation received many warnings, so their captivity occurred earlier. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken to the Assyrian exile sooner than the southern kingdom. The prophets also warned the southern kingdom. They not only warned them using the law, but they also warned them using what happened to the northern kingdom — “Be careful, this happened to the northern kingdom because they rebelled.” So, the prophetic activity also increased among the southern kingdom. These are the reasons for the prophetic activity that preceded the exile.

Dr. Donna Petter

Prophetic activity was really profound in ancient Israel before the exile... There is a great verse in 2 Chronicles 36:15-16, and it tells us from the perspective of the Chronicler. So, this is a historical writer writing after the events of the southern kingdom and giving his perspective on ... why Jerusalem fell. And the perspective is, he highlights God's character in all of this. And so, 2 Chronicles 36 says this, that “God ... sent persistently to them by his messengers.” And why did he do that? He sent them persistently with these messengers because, it says, “he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling.” And so, the Chronicler is telling us that God's very character was such that he sent the prophets, that it was in his very nature to give them warnings and grace through these prophets. And I think it is really important for us to remember that because a lot of times we think of the prophets as breathing nothing but fire and brimstone down on their audience. But from the perspective of the historian, the Chronicler, these prophets were given by God out of his grace and out of his compassion. But the sad story is, although God persistently kept sending the prophets to his people, the nation rejected the prophets so much so that the wrath of God had to be brought about in the Fall of Jerusalem, and there was no remedy, as it were, for what needed to take place. So, the prophets then are, in many ways, visual aids — the writing prophets — are God's visual aid of his grace to a nation, but they also reveal his character and that he's not ready to just judge any would-be transgressor and shake his finger at them, but he is extending his character through bringing them on the scene.

Question 8:

What were the major concerns of the post-exilic prophets?

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

After the exile, when they came back in the land, starting in the year 539, there were some major concerns that occurred during that time that different prophets and different leaders had to address. When they first came back in the land under Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest, one of the first concerns was the reestablishment of the temple, the building of the second temple. And as they were doing that, they had a good start, but then they started slowing down because they got concerned about building their own houses. They started worrying about their own well-being as opposed to the worship of God. And so, the prophet Haggai came along and rebuked the people and said, hey, wait a minute; let's not get so concerned in our own ways, in our own things that we neglect the worship of God. And so, if we want the blessing of God, we need to make sure that this temple gets built, that we reestablish the sacrifices, and so forth. Of course, there were other concerns at that time as well about who is exactly a priest. And so, again, they had to do different things to determine who was a real priest, who was not part of the priesthood, and so forth. But as time went on, when you got to the time of Ezra, Nehemiah and, sort of, those latter prophets, again, like a Malachi, you can see that they had the same problems as they did in other generations and that we see today of wanting to go away from the Lord, go into things like idolatry. As a matter of fact, they started intermarrying, which the Bible really warned about that, that they should not intermarry with the surrounding nations because that's what led to idolatry. And so, that's why Ezra did something that was quite unique, and that is, he did forced divorces, but that saved Israel from going through another round of idolatry. And as you read Malachi, you see there was all sorts of things that, again, the priests were starting to go into an apostate sort of state, condition, and so he was calling the Levitical priests back to their duties. He was calling people back to tithing and doing what the law of God teaches. So, again, what you see in almost every generation is a tendency to move away from God and his word, from his law, and so what you saw there was, again, the prophets and the last fellows, the last leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, calling people back to their covenant obligations.

Question 9:

What is the relationship between divine covenants and ancient Near Eastern treaties?

Dr. David Correa, translation

Thanks to archeological discoveries, we've found that the divine covenants appearing in Scripture have surprising similarities with the treaties made in the ancient Near East. For example, we've discovered various documents showing that ancient Near Eastern treaties followed a standard form. We find that the treaty included a preamble

in which the sovereign was identified, and later a historical prologue in which the sovereign spoke of all the ways he'd been benevolent toward his vassal. Also included in the standard form were the stipulations that the treaty had for the vassal — all the ways that the vassal was to show his loyalty toward his sovereign. After this came the sanctions, that is, what the consequences of disobedience and the blessings of obedience to the covenant would be. If the subject was disloyal, curses would come over him. Maybe the sovereign would come and make war against him, destroying him for his disloyalty. Also, of course, it spoke of the rich blessings that the sovereign would bestow on him if he followed the terms of the treaty. And the standard form of the treaty also included how the treaty was to be perpetuated throughout the generations. It's very interesting that in the Scriptures we find that the Lord, in order to describe his relationship with his people, uses that culturally familiar form... In this way, we can see that the Lord chose this well-known form for the readers of that time to help them understand how he wanted to relate with them as their sovereign, their king, and they, of course, as his vassals.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

I think because of the importance of covenant in the Old Testament, and particularly the use of covenant to define the relationship between God and human beings, we could easily draw the mistaken inference that the notion of covenant is a particularly theological concept, or it comes out of kind of a religious dictionary or encyclopedia. But in fact, it comes out of the context of international diplomacy, international law in the ancient Near East. The treaty, which is the same thing as a covenant essentially, was the prime instrument for interrelationships, international relationships, within the ancient Near East. I would define “covenant” as a “stipulated commitment under divine sanctions” — as a simple definition, “stipulated commitment under divine sanctions” — and I think the power of that definition is that it applies to covenants, whether God is a party or humans are just parties with one another. Even in the Bible, there are many covenants in which Abraham enters into a covenant with some of the surrounding peoples, or Isaac, or Jacob. Jacob and Laban had a mutual aggression pact that they called a covenant at the end of Genesis 31. Those weren't covenants in the sense of having God as one of the parties. In fact, the idea that God is a party of a covenant is almost unheard of in the ancient Near East... In this definition, that a covenant is a “stipulated commitment under divine sanctions,” it's important that the commitment is stipulated, in the sense that it's fully spelled out, and usually implies that it must be put down in writing. The fact that it's under divine sanctions means that it has divine witnesses and that it's a god or gods who executes the sanctions of the covenant, particularly the curses and the blessings of the covenant. We have such a list of curses and blessings in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28... What's unique about biblical covenants, and particularly the covenants of which God is a party, is that God is a party of those covenants. But the nature of those covenants, and we think of the covenant that God makes with humanity with Noah on the occasion of the Flood; the covenant that he makes with Abraham in Genesis 15; the covenant that he makes with Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 19–24; a covenant that he makes with David and the house of David in chapter 7 of 2 Samuel... All those covenants that I've just named operate together and cooperate together in God's

unfolding plan of redemption throughout the Old Testament and ultimately fulfilled in Christ in the new covenant.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

There's a question about the similarities between the divine treaties or covenants with the ancient people, and the treaties of the ancient Near East. Similarities are found when a master, like a suzerain or a strong country, makes a treaty with a smaller country, or a master makes a treaty with a vassal. So, the terms of this treaty, or covenant, are between a stronger party and a weaker party. In these treaties, there are similarities with the covenant — the Mosaic covenant — that God made with the ancient people, the people of Israel. The terms are similar. There are six sections, or six parts of this treaty; we can call it a treaty, covenant, contract, agreement, or convention. In the first part, there's a preamble to introduce the treaty or agreement. This comes first and is brief. In the second part, there's a historical account of the relationship between the two parties, a historical record of what has happened up until that day. The third part contains the conditions of the relationship. These are general conditions that are applied to the relationship between the two parties. The fourth part is the detailed conditions, details for every specific issue. The fifth part has a declaration of "the gods" as witnesses. We could say that, in the book of Deuteronomy, God is the witness, while in ancient Near Eastern treaties, whoever is the stronger party witnesses that this treaty occurred. And the last part in this treaty is the pronouncement of the blessings and curses. This means that, "If you obey and follow the conditions, you will be blessed. You will receive the following privileges..." While, if there is a lack of commitment to the treaty's conditions, there are warnings. According to the book of Deuteronomy, these are called blessings and curses. These are the similarities. God can use, historically, what was common in those days, but he gives it a deeper meaning and spiritual meaning in the relationship between God and his people, so the people might understand and realize how serious this treaty, how serious the relationship with God is.

Question 10:

How was the prophetic office related to the covenant God established with Israel?

Dr. Mike Ross

The prophets and their prophetic office is directly connected to the covenant of grace that God made with his people, with Israel. One scholar calls them, "God's covenant prosecutors." They are like lawyers, attorneys whom God contracts with to represent his covenantal interest with his people, Israel. So, they are prosecuting attorneys. That's why they're so polemical and sometimes even accusatory. They are bringing a case against Israel. Some of them will even use that language — God has an argument, or a case, against Israel. They will assemble, in their imagery, the people before some divine court where a judge is listening to what they say and the people's

defense to make a rendering of innocent or guilty. And this has been a history of them throughout the Old Testament. If you talk about Moses, he was the first great prophet. One scholar calls him the “pool” or the source out of which all the other prophets flow. Samuel would be the rapids of that stream, and all of the preaching prophets like Nathan and Gad who came out of that. And then there’s this great school of writing or classical prophets with Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah and Daniel, and finally, culminating in this last great prophet who was the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist. They are all covenant prosecutors. They are bringing repeatedly before Israel their covenant-breaking. The book they refer to the most in their prophecies is the book of Deuteronomy. That’s their covenant treaty, that covenant agreement, that’s the thing they keep pointing back to and calling Israel and the New Testament church to be faithful to. So they, perhaps more than maybe any other writers or speakers in the Bible, really understand not just what the covenant is but how it relates to God’s church, God’s people, and how we live as the people of the covenant of grace.

Dr. Seth Tarrer

Thinking about the Prophets, the prophetic literature, in relation to the covenant, it needs to be said, off the bat, the word “covenant” appears very rarely in the prophetic corpus. The primary place in which we see the motif of covenant, however, is in the book of Hosea in which God calls upon the prophet to enter into a covenantal relationship with a woman of questionable character. And we see modeled perhaps most clearly and dramatically later in Hosea... In Hosea 11, we see God at pains to preserve this covenant relationship he has instituted with his people Israel. So when we think about the prophets in relation to covenant, we need to understand them in their function, their office, and that is, they were called by God to be keepers, watchers, ones who are continually calling the king, calling the priests, calling the general public at large to remember the covenant of their forefathers...

There’s another component of covenant when we think about and read the Prophets, and that is, in Jeremiah and Ezekiel there’s this forward thrust, that the covenant sort of becomes the mechanism by which Jeremiah talks about the way in which God is going to not only continue and perpetuate his relationship with his chosen people, but in some sense, it’s going to take on a new and dramatic shape or form, as we see inaugurated by Christ in the New Testament... Jeremiah has told us early on in the book that the sin of Judah and Israel is engraved on their heart. Yet, when we come to chapter 31 — Jeremiah’s famous passage regarding the new covenant that he’s going to bring about with his people — the law replaces the sin that’s been engraved on our heart. And so, in this way, covenant not only is the thing to which the prophets are calling for fidelity among the Israelites, covenant is also the thing that’s thrusting Israel forward into their further-realized relationship with God.

Question 11:
How did the prophets serve as ambassadors or emissaries of God's heavenly council?

Dr. David Correa, translation

Similar to what happened in the ancient Near East, where great kings sent their emissaries to their vassal nations to warn their subjects about the consequences of their disloyalty, or to speak some word of blessing in the name of the king, we find that the prophets of the Bible, the prophets of the people of Israel, served the same function. A clear example of this is when Isaiah had his vision of the throne of God, and the Lord said, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?" And Isaiah said, "Here am I, send me." To differ with the popular interpretation of this text as a text that speaks of evangelism, Isaiah, in reality, responded to the call of the Lord to be his emissary, to be his mouthpiece, to speak on his behalf to his vassals, to the people of Israel, and, in that case, to let the people know that they had been unfaithful to the covenant, that they were violating the covenant terms, and that they would suffer the consequences of that disobedience and disloyalty.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The main purpose of biblical prophecy can be understood if we have a sense of the prophets as, say, ambassadors or secretaries of state. They came as representatives of God, and they came to call God's people back to faithfulness to God's covenant with them. At times, it was to call them to repent and to turn away from sin, and at other times it was to give them hope in difficult circumstances. When the prophets came to call the people to turn back to God, it was to turn away from sin, from individual sin, but particularly we see, to call people from sinning against one another, from gaining an advantage against others, from being unjust, from not being merciful, and those kinds of things, and also to call them to turn back from serving other gods that they had begun to worship, sometimes alongside the God of the Bible, and sometimes to the exclusion of him. And so, often we speak of the prophets as those who brought a covenant lawsuit, like a lawyer would bring, to bring God's people back, to give them an opportunity to repent and to turn to him and to be faithful to the covenant that he had given them at Sinai in the book of Exodus where we see the fuller version of that, and in the book of Deuteronomy.

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