

Robert Vannoy, Foundation Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 1B

1. Prophetism in Ancient Israel: Some General Remarks

Let's start then with Roman numeral I in your outline. "Prophetism in Ancient Israel: Some General Remarks."

A. Prophetism in Israel is a Unique Phenomenon

A. under that is "Prophetism in Israel is a Unique Phenomenon." I think we can say that the prophetic movement of ancient Israel constitutes a unique phenomenon, not only in the history of Israel itself, but also in all human history, even though attempts are frequently made to find parallels to the prophetic movement in Israel. Here you have a stream of 400 years of prophets arising, and speaking God's word to this small group of people, Israel located in the land of Canaan. Beginning with Obadiah, which I think is probably dated around 835 B.C., that's the earliest of the prophets. Malachi is about 435, so you see that it is stretched over 400 years. Think of the history of this country which is a little over 400 years, so we're talking about an enormous span of time. Through that long span of time, one after the other, God raised up these individuals and gave them a word from himself, the message to his people.

1. Various Country's Unique Aptitude

Sometimes it is argued that various peoples or nations have a particular ability, a particular aptitude, or expertise or proficiency in some area of intellectual thought, endeavor, or artistic, creative ability or whatever that is recognized by other people and held in high esteem. Think of ancient Greece: they had their sculptors. You see that the results of their work are in some of the great museums of the world, and you can be amazed at their ability. They also had great philosophers who thought great thoughts, so Greece had a particular gift for producing philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. You think of Rome, they've had military commanders and jurists; the Roman legal system certainly had a lot of influence. You think of England as the colonizers; they sent

their administrators out all over the world and created the British Empire. You think of the United States with economists, business management principles and high-tech kind of research and development. Germany has composers Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven as well as many prominent philosophers and theologians. Germany seems to have had a particular bent or gift or frame of mind for producing people of that type. So you can look at peoples and see that certain nations seem to have particular abilities in certain endeavors.

2. Israel's Genius Producing Prophets

But you see what some do is look at something like that and say, in the same way that Germany produced these great composers, Israel showed genius at producing prophets. Then that phenomenon of prophetism you see is put on the same level as these products of human ability and genius that are found among other peoples. I think what that kind of approach loses sight of is the principal difference that exists between Israel's prophets and these works of genius of other peoples and other times and places. In other words, I think prophetism, by very definition of what it is, is a phenomenon that is principally distinctive and different from any other achievement of the human spirit in all of human history.

3. Divine Revelation

It seems to me by virtue of its character as divine revelation, prophecy in ancient Israel must be defined as a unique phenomenon. In other words, God says, and we'll look at a lot of these texts probably later this morning, "I will put my words in your mouth." He says that to Jeremiah. It wasn't Jeremiah so much that was speaking. It was God that was speaking through Jeremiah.

4. Prophets Endowed by God

Even someone like Ronald Clements, who wrote a book called *Old Testament Prophecy* in 1996 and is not an evangelical, makes this statement, "Nowhere else from antiquity has there been preserved such a literary collection; prophetic literature, on the

scale of the Old Testament, remains a wholly unique product of ancient Israel.” In other words, there weren’t just have a few isolated individuals who lived and spoke, who claimed they were speaking for God; this movement spanned a period of 400 years.

Now it’s a very unique thing. I think that when you look at the Bible, what you’ll see is that the prophets are presented to us as individuals endowed by God with the prophetic function. They were endowed by God with the prophetic function so that God’s word might be given to Israel, and through Israel given to the rest of the world. The Bible clearly presents the words of the prophets as God’s words rather than the prophets’ own words. For that reason I think we can say that the prophetic message as it is presented in Scripture is not presented as the product of human creativity or human ingenuity. That’s not what’s going on. It’s rather the product of divine disclosure. It’s divine disclosure in a very special, direct sense. Now I don’t think the importance of that distinction can be overemphasized. Right at the outset you have to be clear about what’s going on with the prophets. Now we’ll get back into the discussion of how the human element works with the divine, because these men, as human beings, also had a role in the formulation of these things. How do you unpack that? How do you describe that combination of the human spokesperson on the one hand and the divine revelation on the other. We’ll get to that eventually. So that’s A. “Prophetism in Israel is a Unique Phenomenon.”

B. Prophets were Servants of the God invested with the Prophetic Function

Now let’s move on to B. “Prophets were Servants of God Invested with the Prophetic Function.” I have three sub-points under that. First “The Prophets were Servants of God.” E. J. Young wrote a book on the prophets called *My Servants the Prophets*. The reason he used that as a title is that this is a label you will find attached to the prophets in numerous references in the Old Testament, they are God’s servants. I want to run through just a few of these references with you. In 2 Kings 9:7 a prophet says to Jehu, “I anoint you king over the Lord’s people of Israel. You are to destroy the house of Ahab your master. I will avenge the blood of, (notice), my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the Lord’s servants shed by Jezebel.” In 2 Kings 17:13, the Lord warned

Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers, “Turn from your evil ways, observe my commands and decrees in accordance with the entire law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets.” Jeremiah 7:25: “From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, (and that’s the end of the Old Testament period), day after day, again and again, I sent you my servants the prophets, but they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked, did more evil than their forefathers.” Jeremiah 25:4: “And though the Lord has sent all his servants the prophets to you again and again, you have not listened or paid any attention.” I could go on with numerous other references of this sort, describing the prophets as servants of God. God himself calls them “my servants.”

1. Some of the Prophets Received a Special Call to the Prophetic Task

Now 1. under B. is “Some of the Prophets Received a Special Call to the Prophetic Task.”

a. Isaiah’s Call

I want to mention four of them where that is described, and the first and probably the most impressive is Isaiah 6:1-13. You read in the first verse of that chapter, “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord seated on the throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.” Then there’s a description of these seraphs saying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty.” Isaiah has this vision of the Lord the same time he gets a vision of his own sinful condition before the Lord; so he says in verse three “Woe is me, I am ruined for I’m a man of unclean lips; I live among a people of unclean lips; my eyes have seen the King; the Lord Almighty.” This is a visionary experience for Isaiah. He sees this, he sees himself, and his sinful condition, and says, “Woe is me.” Then one of those seraphs takes this coal from the altar and touches his mouth with it, and says, “Your guilt is taken away; your sin is atoned for. And I heard the voice of the Lord say, ‘Whom shall I send, who shall go for us?’ I said, ‘Here am I, send me.’” So the Lord commissions Isaiah, Isaiah responds, and the Lord says in verse nine, “Go and tell this people.” The message he has is not one that is very pleasant, his message is largely a

message of coming judgment and punishment. But it is going to fall on deaf ears. And that's basically what happened with Isaiah's ministry. Although the judgment will come, at the end of that chapter, you find a brief note of hope; a remnant would remain faithful to the Lord. But clearly here is Isaiah's call and commission to be a prophet, to be this person who proclaims God's message to a people who were unwilling to listen and obey.

b. Jeremiah's call

Secondly, Jeremiah, if you look at the first chapter of Jeremiah, verses four and following, you read: "The word of the Lord came to me saying, 'before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.' 'Ah, sovereign, Lord,' I said, 'I do not know how to speak, I'm only a child.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say I am only a child, you must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you, do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,' declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand, touched my mouth, and said to me (and this becomes an important text as far as the prophetic phenomenon is concerned). 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See today I appoint you to the nations, appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot, to tear down, to rebuild and plant.'" Here the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah; he tries to avoid the responsibility and the difficulty attached to the prophetic task, saying he feels too weak, too young, unable to do the job. But the Lord says, "Don't say that. You go to all whom I send you, and do whatever I command you, and I will put my words in your mouth."

c. Ezekiel's call

We also have a call for Ezekiel that's described in the first three chapters of the book. I'm not going to take time to read through all of that, but if you've read that, remember in the first chapter, Ezekiel sees this throne carriage of God, which is this wheeled carriage pulled by four creatures and on that throne chariot, above it, you read in verse 26 of the first chapter, "Above the expanse over their heads is what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw

that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal as if full of fire. And that from there down he looked like fire and brilliant lights surrounded him like the appearance of a rainbow and the clouds on a radiant day so were the clouds around him.” What was it? This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord, so he has this vision of God, much like Isaiah did. “When I saw it I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking, he said to me, ‘Son of man, stand on your feet, I will speak to you.’” And what’s the message? Verse three, “Son of man, I’m sending you to the Israelites, the rebellious nation that has been revolting against me.” Verse four, “The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says,’” and whether they listen or fail to listen, and many times they will fail to listen, but that’s not your responsibility. Whether they listen or fail to listen for they are a rebellious house, they will know that a prophet has been in among them “I’m going to give my word to those people, through you, and you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words.” Verse seven, “you must speak (what?) my words to them.” (Whose words?) “My words, whether they listen or fail to listen for they are rebellious, but you, son of man listen to what I say to you, do not rebel like that rebellious house. Open your mouth, (and here’s the remarkable thing,) and eat what I give you.” And what’s he giving him? He gives him a scroll. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning. “He said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what is before you; eat this scroll. (Now remember this is a visionary situation.) Then go and speak to the house of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. Now he said to me, ‘Son of man eat the scroll I am giving you, fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.” I think what’s going on there with this scroll that’s to be eaten is that symbolically that scroll is the message that Ezekiel is to make his own by eating it. As he does that, even though it’s a message of judgment, the message he says, “tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.” This was God’s word.

d. Amos’ Call

Those are three prophets with a pretty clear call; Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In

Amos there's something similar to this, and there are a number of issues here and we'll come back and discuss them later in another context. But notice in Amos 7:15, Amos has gone to the northern kingdom. Amos comes out of Judah, and he goes up to Bethel in the Northern Kingdom, in the time of Jeroboam II and prophesies against Jeroboam, king in the Northern Kingdom. In verse 12, Amaziah, a priest of Bethel, says to Amos, "Get out you seer, go back to the land of Judah." I don't want you up here. Then he says, "Earn your bread there, and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary in the temple of the kingdom." Amos responds to that priest Amaziah of the Northern Kingdom and says, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I took care of sycamore fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me: 'Go prophesy to my people Israel.'" Now then here is the word of the Lord. So what Amos is saying was, "I wasn't originally a prophet, but the Lord called me and told me to go and give this message, and that is what I'm doing." Alright, so those are four examples of prophets who received a special call for a prophetic task.

2. For some prophets, no special calling is recorded

Number 2. For some prophets, no special calling is recorded, but all the prophets demonstrate an awareness that they are endowed with the prophetic function. So, I don't think there's sufficient biblical information to conclude that every prophet received some sort of special call to the prophetic task, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos did. They may have, but there's no record of it. When you think about that whole question of call, I think there are some other things to be aware of; I think there are some examples of individuals who performed a prophetic function very clearly, who quite clearly did not receive a call.

a. Balaam

I think a primary example of that is the heathen soothsayer Balaam, in Numbers 22-25, who had been hired by Balak king of Moab, to curse Israel. Balaam tried to do that, but he couldn't. The Lord put other words in his mouth, and instead of cursing

Israel, he blessed Israel, and said all these great things are going to happen to Israel, much to the chagrin of the king of Moab who had hoped for something else. Now Balaam was a heathen soothsayer, but I think you can say at the same time he was a true prophet. God put his words in his mouth. There are some remarkable prophecies in Balaam's oracles. So he was a true prophet; he performed a prophetic function. I don't think you can say he received a call in any sense like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel did.

b. David performed other functions as well

There are other individuals who are clearly prophets, but who perform some other function in the theocracy as well; think of David. David was anointed to be king, and the Holy Spirit came upon him to equip him for that task. But he's also referred to as a prophet. Of course, there are many Psalms that are written by David, and any piece of Scripture is certainly the work of a prophet—God's word through that human individual. In 2 Samuel 23:2, David even speaks of the Holy Spirit coming upon him. In 2 Samuel 23:2, often called the last words of David, he says, "The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me. His word was on my tongue." That very much seems like what you have with Isaiah "I put my words in your mouth." The Lord put his words in David's mouth, but David was not, "a prophet" in the sense that he received a call in this kind of prophetic manner, and he was a king. Ezekiel was a priest. Now, Ezekiel did receive the call to be a prophet but if you look at Ezekiel 1:3, he was a priest, and he performed a dual function of both prophet and priest.

c. Prophets Aware that They Had Been Endowed by God with the Prophetic Function

I think what's clear is when prophets speak for God, they do so in a way that indicates that they know that they have been endowed by God with that prophetic function. In other words, they know when they are speaking their own word or God's words. They're conscious of it. That's true whether they receive some sort of special call to perform that prophetic function, or whether the Lord just comes upon them. They are aware that they are endowed by that prophetic function and by the Lord himself. So, for

some prophets no special calling is recorded, but all the prophets demonstrate awareness that they're endowed with the prophetic function.

3. The Endowment of the Prophetic Function was a Power no Prophet Could Resist

Thirdly, just a brief comment on the following point: "The Endowment of the Prophetic Function was a Power no Prophet Could Resist."

a. Amos

In Amos chapter three there's an interesting passage, beginning in verse four you read, "Does a lion roar in the thicket when he has no prey?" This is a series of cause and effect relationships: if you hear a lion roaring there's probably reason for it. "Does he growl in his den when he has caught nothing? Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground where no snare has been set? Does a trap spring up in the earth when there is nothing to catch? When a trumpet sounds in the city do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to the city has not the Lord caused it? Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plans to his servants the prophets." There's that phrase again "my servants the prophets." But then notice verse eight: "the lion has roared, who will not fear?" When a lion roared it's going to cause fear. "The Sovereign Lord has spoken, who can but prophecy? The Lord speaks, who can but prophesy?" That was a power a man could not resist. I think what Amos is saying here is just as a man must be fearful when a lion begins to roar close by him and he can't do anything else but be fearful, so a man must prophesy when God tells him to. You can't withdraw from it.

b. Jeremiah

Jeremiah says he tried to withdraw from it. That's in Jeremiah 20 verse nine. Jeremiah says, "If I say I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, his word is in my heart like a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in, indeed I cannot." He must speak. So the endowment by the prophetic function was a power that man could not resist. Balaam couldn't resist that; he did what he didn't want to do. He blessed Israel instead of cursing it.

C. The Function of the Prophet is the Proclamation of the Word of God

Alright, let's go to C. "The Function of the Prophet is the Proclamation of the Word of God." It's already been emphasized and I will continue to do this for a time as we're discussing this. The true prophet does not bring his own words; he does not bring his own thoughts, his own ideas. When he speaks, he brings God's words and God's thoughts. If you're going to ask what is the difference between the true prophets and the false prophets the fundamental difference between the true and the false prophets is that the true prophets, proclaim God's words and the false prophets proclaim their own words.

Deuteronomy 18

Let me point you just to three texts: one of them we've already looked at; but if you go back to Deuteronomy 18, you have a description by Moses about how Israel will receive revelation after Moses is gone. Moses has been a mediator from God to his people, he's been the spokesperson for God, and he's about to die at the end of the book. In Deuteronomy 18 there's a description of the rise of the prophetic movement. The Lord says, "I will raise up a prophet like unto you, and to him, you shall listen." In Deuteronomy 18:18, the Lord says, "I will raise up from them a prophet like you from among your brothers." Then notice the next few words, "I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him," and then it goes on to say that the people were accountable to listen, because when that prophet speaks, those are God's words.

Jeremiah 1:9

That is the same thing that we already read in Jeremiah 1:9, where the Lord said to Jeremiah, "I will put my words in your mouth." So you see the prophets speak God's words.

Jeremiah 23:16

Next look at Jeremiah 23:16: "This is what the Lord Almighty says, 'Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you (these are false prophets). They will fill you

with false hopes, they speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.” You see the false prophets give their own ideas. These are visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. So what’s the fundamental difference between the true and the false prophets? The true prophet speaks the word of the Lord; the false prophet speaks his own words and his own thoughts.

1. Expressions with which the Prophets Introduced Their Sermons are Indicative that the Message is God’s, not Their Own

Now, 1 under C: “Expressions with which the Prophets Introduced Their Sermons are Indicative that the Message is God’s, not Their Own.” I mentioned earlier E.J. Young’s book, *My Servants the Prophets*. On pages 171-175 of that book, you can see a list of references and then short phrases that follow. What he does is take expressions from Isaiah. For example: in 16:13 of Isaiah, “This is the Lord; the Lord hath spoken.” In 18:4: “thus has the Lord said to me.” Verse 10 of chapter 21: “That which I have heard from the Lord.” 21:17: “For the Lord has spoken.” 22:14: “The Lord has revealed himself in my ears;” 22:25: “Thus saith the Lord of hosts.” 28:22: “this I have heard from the Lord.” It goes on and on. See the variety of different expression, and Young’s book has four pages of those expressions taken just out of the book of Isaiah. The prophets make clear, that when they were speaking, they were conscious that what they were saying was God’s Word. So the expressions they used to introduce their sermons tell us quite clearly over and over again that this is God’s word. It’s not their own word.

2. The Prophet Must Declare God’s Word Regardless of Whether or Not It Was Pleasant to Him

Number 2 under C. “The Prophet Must Declare God’s Word Regardless of Whether or Not It Was Pleasant to Him.” Very often the message that the prophets had to declare was not a pleasant message. It was a message of judgment, woe, doom, and a call to repentance.

a. Samuel Anointing Saul

Let me give you a few illustrations: go back to 1 Samuel 15. There's a long sequence of events there, coming to a climax in chapter 8 of 1 Samuel where the people come to Samuel and say, "Give us a king." Samuel is very displeased at that request because he says, "Remember the Lord your God is your king. Why are you asking for a king?" "Well," they say, "we want to be like the nations." But Samuel says, "You're rejecting the Lord, who is your king." Then the Lord tells Samuel to give the people what they want. So we go through that whole sequence of events and God grants them a king. He defines the role of a king in a way that would be consistent with the covenant. Then he inaugurates kingship in the context of renewal of allegiance to the Lord. Saul becomes king, but very quickly turns away from his role and twice doesn't obey the word of Samuel, in chapter 13 and chapter 15. So the Lord then tells Samuel, "Go and tell Saul, 'As you've rejected me, so I've rejected you. You're not going to be king anymore.'" Look at 1 Samuel 15:10 or 11, "The word of the Lord came to Samuel." Samuel is the prophet here, and the Lord says, "I am grieved that I have made Saul king because he's turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." What's Samuel's response to that? We read that Samuel was troubled. He cried out to the Lord all that night. It wasn't a pleasant task for Samuel to go and confront Saul and tell him that the Lord had rejected him. That's not the kind of thing that you enjoy doing. Samuel didn't enjoy doing it, but the Lord sent him to confront Saul and announce to him that the Lord had rejected him as king. If you go over to 16:1, notice what the Lord says there; "The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul? Since I have rejected him as king over Israel, fill your horn with oil, I'm sending you on your way, I'm sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. One of his sons is to be king.'" So the prophets do declare the message of God regardless of whether that's pleasant to them. This was not a pleasant task for Samuel, but he goes and he does it. I'm going to come back to this later in another connection, under the next section.

b. Balaam

Think about Balaam. We've already talked about him in Numbers 22-25. The message he was proclaiming was not the message he wanted to proclaim, but he had to proclaim it. It was the word of the Lord. Think of Jonah. He didn't want to go to Nineveh and proclaim repentance for the Ninevites. He tried to avoid it, but he couldn't, and he had to go and preach that message. Even at the end of the book, he didn't like the message and the response of the Ninevites. Ezekiel had to eat that scroll that was inscribed with judgments from God. They were required to go and proclaim it even if it's not something they wanted to do. So the prophet is to declare the message of God regardless of whether or not it's something that is pleasant to him.

3. There is a Distinction between the Prophet's Own Word and the Word of God that He Spoke; and the Prophets Were Aware of the Distinction

Then thirdly: "There is a distinction between the prophet's own word and the word of God that he spoke; and the prophets were aware of that distinction." In other words, the prophet would know in his own heart and mind and conscience when he was speaking God's Word, and when he was speaking his own words. Next time I'm going to give you some illustrations of that because I think that's an important distinction. I'm going to look at some examples. But let's break for now.

Transcribed by: Hope Johnson
 Edited by Ted Hildebrandt
 Re-narrated by