

Prophets

When I teach a course on prophets, we spend some time on the whole prophetic office. I will just make a few introductory comments now to show how the prophetic office fits within the setting of biblical theology. We start with Elijah today; then we will go to Joel and then Amos and Hosea. I will read to you first of all about Elijah: “I have been very zealous for the LORD, our God almighty; the Israelites have rejected your covenant.” That is the complaint. But at the same time Malachi refers to him as quite a hero. Malachi 4:5 says, “See, I will send you the prophet, Elijah, before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes, and he will be turning the hearts of children to their fathers and fathers to the children,” and Jesus said of John the Baptist, “If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come; he who has ears let him hear.” Elijah has quite a role in the Scriptures. We turn to James 5:17: “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops.”

As I said, we will begin with Elijah after a few introductory comments and then we will finish up with Amos and Hosea. Peter quoted Amos in Acts 15 when they had their first council meeting in Jerusalem. Peter quoted the Messianic prophecy, the prophecy concerning the mediator, in Acts 15:16, “After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name.”

So as we look at these early prophets in the prophetic order, we have very definitely a message that is relevant and meaningful for the New Testament age, too. We read that in James. We hear that from Peter. We hear that from Jesus. Shall we pray?

*Lord, as we spend a brief time here now reviewing what You have done through the prophets of old and what they have meant for the people then and what they still mean for us today, we pray for Your Spirit’s guidance and blessing. Thank You for the work we can do here together, in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

I recall when we started this course that someone said to me, “I have a problem fitting the whole prophetic order into what we refer to as the *mitte*, the kingdom-covenant-mediator concept. Just how do the prophets fit into that?” I hope that is becoming clearer to you. Because of that question sticking in my mind, I thought I would briefly review what you have been reading in Vos’ *Biblical Theology*; Dumbrell makes some reference to it as well. The prophets were spokesmen for God. How did they receive the message from God? Recently, I have been reading what some of the critics have been writing; I was struck again that they said that the prophets had such a tender conscience. There was a prophetic consciousness that sometimes they could just feel what was coming. That is as close as some of the anti-supernatural critics will come to allowing the prophets to be able to speak about things before they took place. Others, of course, suggest that they did this by means of divination; they particularly appeal to Balaam, who is called the diviner, a magician. He spoke the Word of God, but you may recall we said that we ought not to make a close connection between his divining efforts and how the Lord came to him and spoke directly to him. How did the prophets receive the Word? God spoke and they heard. Yahweh showed things to the prophets. They received visions; God showed them and they saw. There are some classic examples of that. Amos had visions when he saw what God was going to do. Ezekiel had visions. Zechariah had visions. Isaiah had visions. They saw, and what they saw was often accompanied by what they heard.

Then there is what Vos would also refer to as that intramental state—that is something different than what the critics call a “tender conscience.” The intramental state means that the Spirit worked within the people without verbal communication or an outward demonstration by vision. God laid it on their hearts.

We must be very careful to keep a distinction between spiritual illumination and spiritual inspiration. These men were inspired as they received these messages from God through an intramental means. We are getting into the supernatural again here and we must not be in any way apologetic about that. God works in mysterious ways, and God dealt with these prophets in a unique and powerful way.

How did these prophets communicate? They usually spoke and many of them wrote, but they also had physical demonstrations. Jeremiah buried a rather expensive piece of clothing and it rotted; he gave the message in that way. Ezekiel gave many demonstrations also. Then there were the miracles, and Elijah particularly is known as the great miracle-working prophet.

Here we enter into a whole area of discussion. Today there is even so much discussion about whether miracles are still being worked. Is it possible to expect a miracle? Some are absolutely convinced that some people do receive miraculous healing today. Others have a difficulty with that. You know that B.B. Warfield wrote that miracles have ceased. They were for the early ages. So the debate goes on about miracles, but that the Bible and that the prophets actually were agents of miraculous activity cannot be denied. It is recorded. They worked miracles.

What are miracles? Even among conservative theologians, there is quite a debate as to what the biblical idea of miracles is. Essentially, three ideas are set forth in the Scriptures. Miracles are signs of divine omnipotence. They are signs of the sovereign power of God over all of life—spiritual, physical, natural. Closely allied with that is the idea that miracles are definite indications of supernatural presence. They are signs of God's presence within this world that has been affected by the parasite kingdom. Finally, miracles have to be seen as eschatological pointers. They reflect the past—what the world would be like without sin. There would be no miracles if sin had never entered this world, but what is it going to be like when the devil and his whole parasite kingdom has been wiped out? Then we are going to have fully and completely all the things that miracles brought about here and there. So there is that eschatological aspect of miracles.

We may want to add some additional points about miracles. Do miracles happen? What are miracles? Is a miracle an injection of God into the natural order? Many people don't like that idea at all, because it makes sin part of the natural order and sin is an abnormality. Is a miracle basically a return to the normal? That is where the eschatological aspect comes in. Can we expect God to do things out of the ordinary? Yes. My oldest son was knocked down by a car when he was five years old. He fell on the roadway and moved a little bit. I was teaching a Bible class and one of the kids from the neighborhood come running in—"Your son has been hit by a car!" I couldn't get him to respond, but he would move just a little bit and raise his hand to the back of his head. He had basal skull fracture. Within two hours, the doctor took me for a little walk through the hospital and said, "Are you ready to part with your son? A hematoma, a body of blood, is building up at the base of the skull. When it presses a nerve, there is no way that I could stop that from affecting the heart." A good friend of mine from the seminary had had a little boy die because he had been hit by a car when he was on his little tricycle. The boy fell backward, had a basal skull fracture, and died of a hematoma. I remember trying to comfort my friend, my colleague; now would I have to walk through that, too? I felt how weak my knees became as I walked. "Doctor, does this have to happen?" He said, "I'll do my best."

I was scheduled to go out for a lecture that evening far out of town. The doctor said, "You stay here, because I want you here in case we decide to drill into the base of the skull to see if we can release the pressure of the hematoma. By 11 o'clock tonight we will know." Every half hour the nurse would come in and look in my boy's eyes while my wife and I stood around the bed. We prayed and it seemed that at about 9:30 or 10:00—I was praying and we had both gotten up from our chairs—and all of a sudden I

talked to someone at the foot of the bed. I said, “Who are you?” “I am the Lord.” “What are you here for?” “I’m coming to get your boy.” “Do you have to?” “Well, I may want to.” “But we want to keep him.” “Why do you want to keep him?” “Well, You gave him to us. We want to train him; we want to have him serve You.” “I’ll leave him if you promise to keep your word. Go on.” I turned to my wife: “Honey, did you hear that?” She said, “Hear what?” I said, “That conversation.” She never heard a thing. That was so real to me. Fifteen minutes later the nurse came in and opened my son’s eyes. She dashed out. Half an hour later the doctor came in. “Hey, no cloud in his eyes! His eyes cleared up, they’re straightened.” They took an X-ray the next morning. The first X-ray showed that very obvious crack. The second X-ray showed nothing. He was eating doughnuts for breakfast.

Is that a miracle? Was that my faith? No, when we prayed, the Lord did a most unexpected thing in our family. That is my testimony. That is unbelievable from the human point of view of what God can do and will do, but we can never bind God. We have this promise that when we pray, the Lord will hear and He will answer and He will do according to His sovereign pleasure. It was a tremendous testimony in our life. Does God still work miracles? If that is what you want to call a miracle, then yes. If you don’t want to call it a miracle, all right. That doctor died of a heart attack not long ago, but whenever he saw our son, he would say, “my miracle patient.” There were miracles in the Old Testament times. Jesus performed them. They were signs of the kingdom, eschatological pointers, evidence of divine presence and omnipotence, and a way of communication. The Word was by far the clearest way. Miracles supported, confirmed, and authenticated that Word. “I am with you. I will never leave you. Have good courage. I am a covenant God; I will make all things well with you and for you.” Miracles were a means of communication.

Prophets were called to serve in Yahweh’s kingdom. When I speak of kingdom, I mean they had to speak to the nation of Israel. They had to speak to the nation of Judah. They were kingdom servants, servants of God the King. They spoke to the individual kings, but they also had to speak to the foreign nations and the foreign kingdoms. We know what Jonah, Obadiah, and Nahum did. All three of the major prophets have a word for various nations. They were kingdom agents, and as such they were often maligned. Now and again the prophets say that the prophets were killed, they were tortured, they were torn, cut asunder; you read about this also in Hebrews 11. The Old Testament does not give us near the full history of the prophets. We know very little of their personal experience. We just have a few indications. Jeremiah gives us the closest and the clearest picture of what it would be like to be persecuted as a kingdom agent, but I also want to point out that the prophets were very definitely covenant mediators as spokesmen for God, agents in the kingdom. They were covenant mediators, and remember we spoke of the covenant as that relationship and that bond that God established between Himself and His people. At the same time, that bond had stipulations; it had ways and means and methods. There is a covenant message and there is a covenant method and there is covenant motivation. The covenant had its methods and the prophets fit into that. The prophets were covenant mediators preaching concerning that covenant.

I stress this because Wellhausen is still alive in the hearts and minds of many critical scholars. Do you know what Wellhausen said? Wellhausen said that this whole idea of covenant did not arise until the very late prophets; as proof, he says the early century prophets do not refer to the covenant. They didn’t know about the covenant. Joel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah—they did not know anything about a covenant until Jeremiah and then they started working the idea back into Moses. By contrast, I want to emphasize that these prophets were not only mediators of the covenant, they also proclaimed it. They proclaimed the very basic idea of it. As covenant mediators, we have to remember, they always stood between God and His appointed kings. Young refers to them as “the guardians of the theocracy.” Vos

refers to them as God's appointed support for the kings. The prophets stood between God and the kings and they stood between God and the kingdom.

We go on to the pre-eighth-century prophets. There had been prophets before—Samuel, David, Solomon, Nathan. Some of these wrote. I am sure Samuel wrote, David wrote, and Solomon wrote. We don't know that Nathan wrote. They were preaching people, writing people, singing people, but Elijah is often seen as the first of the active prophets. In 1 Kings 17, Elijah the Tishbite is suddenly introduced. We read of Elisha dying in 2 Kings 13:20, and that entire section of the book of 1 and 2 Kings deals with Elijah and Elisha in the setting of the powerful influence of the parasite kingdom. The devil was at work in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and this parasite kingdom, the satanic kingdom, was particularly obvious in three ways: Baal worship, a series of apostate kings, and the power of false prophets. Baalism had taken over the kingdom, with Jezebel and her prophets being by far the main representatives of this abominable idol worship. Baal was the great sun god, the god of fire, the god of Canaanite power. Secondly, the kings were so apostate in the northern kingdom that not one, as we mentioned before, was faithful to Yahweh. Six dynasties came one after the other. Jehu is the only one who claims some acknowledgment of God, but yet he was an idol worshiper himself, even though he rooted out Baalism. The apostasy in the royal house was sure evidence of the parasite kingdom, the kingdom of Satan. Thirdly, there was that powerful influence that was exerted by the Baal prophets. The queen, Jezebel, exercised tremendous influence through her prophets. The power of religion is amazing, even false religion. As you read the stories of Elijah and Elisha, you can just feel the throbbing satanic power that these prophets had to face as it came to expression in the false prophets, the apostate kings, idol worship, and the priests. It certainly seemed as though Satan had been able to take over, the parasite kingdom seemed so strong. In the midst of that, Elijah the Tishbite had to explain the power of God; then he had to go out and be fed by ravens. Then he had to face Ahab, after he had prayed that there would be no rain and there was no rain. That man needed great courage, and God gave him the courage. Then we see him having more power than the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel in the way he brought down the fire that consumed the altar soaked with water. Then Elijah fled, and we see the human Elijah, as we read from that passage: "Why are you so downhearted, Elijah?"

Many people have made more of Elijah's despondency than of Elijah's power. Elijah became despondent when he heard that there was no place for him to live. The queen, in her vengeance, had all kinds of spies and people out to catch him, so he runs and then we hear him say, "I have been on the offensive for You, Lord, because I love You and I love Your kingdom." The word that we have in the Hebrew is same verb and adjective and noun that is used to describe God's care for His people. Elijah says, "God, I have been like You. I have been imitating You. I have been representing You, but the Israelites have rejected Your covenant." We read this in 1 Kings 19:10. Elijah knew what had happened at Sinai, what had happened a second time at Sinai, what had happened on the banks of the Jordan, how Joshua had had two renewals and how there had been renewal under Samuel. The covenant had been renewed again and again, but the Israelites rejected it. They rejected the love of God. They rejected the promises of God. They rejected the sure future that God had for them, and that in a way is a theme of many of the prophets.

The evidence of their having broken the covenant is that they have broken down God's altar. It does not say, "They have erected altars." They have broken down the altars. Deuteronomy 16 had permitted the people to have altars here, there and other places. "They have broken down your altars." Not only had they rejected the covenant, but they had rejected the way of having fellowship with God. Then thirdly, "they put your prophets to death with the sword." They are killing the prophets. There was evidently a record and a history of prophet-killing. Again, we do not know the details of this, but we believe what he says. God's prophets were being killed and how was Elijah to know that he would not be killed? So he

had run for his life. But Elijah, nevertheless, stands as a tremendous man of God, which is why I read to you from Malachi, “Elijah will come,” and James, who says that Elijah was a man who could pray for rain and it did not rain and when he prayed again, it would rain. He was a man just like you and me, human like all of us, but he was a man who placed himself at the service of God.

Elisha is known as the great miracle worker. I have said enough about miracles before; these various points that I have mentioned about miracles are surely true in the case of Elisha. Elisha surely did prove the covenantal promise, “I am with you, I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be of good courage.” If there is one thing that Elisha did in a unique way, it was that he was able to show God’s sovereignty over the nations. Think particularly of the incident when the armies of the surrounding nations came to attack. Elisha was able to give the word of courage and to give guidance and direction. In fact, the subordinates of the enemy kings were able to say, “They have Elisha and he is able to tell these people what is talked about in our secret chambers.” Elisha was not a clairvoyant. Elisha was a servant of the sovereign God, and Elisha, in varied ways, again and again, demonstrated that Yahweh was sovereign over creation. He performed miracles within creation (he could make an axe-head float), but he was also able to show that the covenant of creation, God’s administrative means within the cosmos, was alive and well.

These two men stand as tremendous testimonies of what the prophetic order could do and did do. They were agents in the kingdom, servants within the covenant, ministering to kings and ministering to the people. Every prophet must be seen as a type of Christ because from Moses right on through to Christ, everyone who was a true prophet, a spokesman for God, an agent in the kingdom, a mediator of the covenant pointed forward to the great prophet to come of whom Moses spoke in Deuteronomy 18: “After me, a prophet like me will come.” That is a prophecy concerning the Christ, and all these prophets who stand between Moses and Christ are reminders of the great prophet, Christ, to come. Christ was the real revealer of the Father, the real demonstrator of sovereign omnipotence. He came as the king; He came as the mediator of the covenant, and He made the covenant such a blessed reality, not only in God saying, “I am with you,” but in the way He carried out all the promises and stipulations. So all the prophets—including Samuel, Moses, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha—stand tall and strong as dominant types of Christ. That does not mean, however, that we have to see Elijah and Malachi as specifically a prophecy of the Christ. Jesus says, “You have to see Elijah,” who in a way was the first of the active prophets within the nation. Elijah was the first, John the Baptist is the second. But in a real sense, John the Baptist, a forerunner to Christ, was also not just a forerunner, but he was indeed a type of Christ also. Remember that.

Now we must go on to the other three prophets and say just a word about them. First of all, there is the prophet Joel. Many people place Joel in the post-exilic era; you will find conservative writers doing that as well as liberal writers. Joel does not identify his time. Many people attempt to date Joel by his reference to the locust plagues. We ask, “When were these severe locust plagues?” but as far as archaeologists and biologists can determine, these plagues were a rather common occurrence, taking place perhaps about every 10 or 15 years.

When I was a boy on the farm in California, we had not locusts, but grasshoppers. I remember when I was a kid and a teenager, we heard about the grasshopper plagues in the midwestern United States. They would eat up the corn and the fields; the grasshoppers would come and it would be like a mowing machine that had moved across the field. In California, we had army worms. They were little green worms and there were so many of them that we called them army worms. When they came, they would strip the alfalfa fields and the bean fields. They ate everything. If they got into the orchard, they would go up the trees and eat anything that was soft on the trees. This was before aerial spraying of pesticides.

A few times, we had quite a battle with that army, and every couple years, we had a scourge of army worms. I can remember my father sending me out with the horses in a 16" shear plough and I had to plough a big deep furrow all around our farm, right along the edge of the road, and I had to go through the second time so the furrow would be deep. This is the honest truth: within 24 hours, that furrow was completely full of dying, rotting worms. Then the other worms would crawl over the dead ones. They would go right over the top and we had only delayed devastation for about a day.

In Joel's day, they had plagues of locusts. It is very difficult to determine the dating of Joel because of that. They still have problems with locusts in that region. But when I look at Joel—and I know Dr. Hendrickson and his book is ready to say that Joel could be post-exilic—but when I look at Joel, I see him as setting the agenda for the canonical prophets. The first chapter and a half, he speaks of the judgment, the curse, particularly through these plagues of locusts. God is angry with His people, but then He also calls for repentance and there is that graphic little statement when he calls the people to repentance. He says, "Rend your hearts and not your garments." The Old Testament way was that they would tear their clothes, put on sackcloth, and pour ashes on their heads, as a sign of repentance. Joel says, "Save your coats; keep the sackcloth in the shed. Let the ashes stay in a heap. Deal with your heart. Your heart has to be torn. Repentance is what is needed." That is a message that came from the prophets repeatedly.

Vos points out that the early prophets would preach repentance and restoration. Once Manasseh has come to the throne, then the emphasis of the prophets is, "Repent and expect regeneration, a whole new order," but the earlier prophets said, "A restoration is possible; the Davidic house can continue according to God's promise." Through Nathan, God's Word had been, "And if your sons become disobedient, great judgment will fall." That judgment could be averted, the early prophets said, and Joel is so eloquent: "Repent, tear your hearts, break your hearts." Psalm 51: "Not sacrifice, but a broken and a contrite heart is what the Lord wants."

Joel goes on and in Joel 2:18, we read this statement: "Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people." The covenant love of God came through, and how was that covenant love of God shown? By His love and compassion. God continues not only to look on His people with love, but He suffers with them. Then Joel speaks of the natural gifts which will come again, because God is a faithful creation-covenant-keeper: "And there will be grain and there will be corn and there will be wine and there will be all kinds of food." The Spirit will come and the Spirit will work mightily, as we read in Joel 2:28-31. Peter says that Joel's prophecy was particularly fulfilled at Pentecost. Then we read of the day of the Lord, that great day of the Lord. Here Joel is obviously speaking about everything from Pentecost forward—that is the way I interpret this, please understand. I like anybody to challenge me on this. Joel write of the compassion, the gifts, and then the day of the Lord—the whole New Testament era ushering, coming in when Christ returns.

What are the characteristic aspects of the day of the Lord? Salvation—"and whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." That is exactly what the apostles said when they went preaching. It was the gathering of the nations. Others had spoken of it, and look how the apostles immediately went amongst the nations and started bringing in the nations. That is what Act 15, the Jerusalem council meeting was all about. Amos had said that the nations would come in and that universal peace is to come. There you have the agenda for the prophets. Those are the major themes you will find in them, and every one of them are covenant realities, covenant sureties that you will find when God speaks to Noah, to Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob, through Moses, through Joshua. Therefore I say that I believe Joel sets the agenda for the prophets. Others would say he sums up the prophets.

There were also the two prophets that spoke to Israel: Amos and Hosea. Wellhausen claims that neither Amos nor Hosea reflects the covenant at all. To counter that claim, I would like to point out that there are three things that Amos very specifically did. He spoke of Israel's election: "You only have I chosen, therefore I will visit my punishment, my judgment upon you." "You only, you are the glory, the excellence of the Lord," he says in chapter 7. In addition to election, Amos also preached Israel's judgment to come. Do you remember how he begins? He speaks about how God's judgment will come on the different nations around, then he goes to Judah, and finally he comes to Israel. He has chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 dealing with God's judgment, the curse of the covenant that is going to come to expression. Is that the end of the curse? Not at all. For the northern 10 tribes (remember Amos is preaching to the northern 10 tribes) there is a great future. The fallen tent of David will be restored and not only will Israel go back to Jerusalem, but the remnants of the nations will all come together. Here then Amos makes definite reference to the Abrahamic covenant: "You only have I known," because God spoke to Israel specifically. Here you find the reflection of the Mosaic covenant, especially as it was repeated on the banks of the Jordan in Deuteronomy. And here Amos makes reference to the Davidic covenant. God will not forget His covenant with Abram through Moses or through David. When some Jewish Christians accused Peter at the first Jerusalem council of breaking the covenant by going to the Gentiles with the Gospel, Peter appeals to this passage saying, "Amos said I had to do this. This is God's will. Now, in the New Testament age, the nations are to come in."

Finally, we have Hosea, the great covenant prophet to the northern 10 tribes. God did not reject the northern 10 tribes when they rebelled from under the rule of the Davidic house. Hosea has five basic covenant themes. First, the covenant is God's marriage. "Hosea, go and marry a lady from the circles of prostitution and when she is unfaithful take her back because the marriage stands and the covenant is enviable."

In Hosea 4:1-6, God has a controversy. There is no knowledge of God in the land. There is killing and swearing and stealing and the priests are unfaithful, so God has this covenant lawsuit: "You have broken your side of the covenant. The curse will surely come. It is inescapable." If you break the marriage, you will hear God's accusation. There will be a curse, but there is grace as well. Hosea proclaims God's grace in the way that Hosea took Gomer back, but Hosea 6:1-3, is for me, one of the most precious passages that we have in the Bible:

Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us; he has injured us, but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in His presence. Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.

There is the proclamation of grace. There is the proclamation of God's love for the unworthy. The text goes on to say in verse 4, of Ephraim: "What can I do with you? Come back." Ephraim was apostate. Ephraim resisted. Ephraim was like a pancake that was burnt on one side and raw on the other; he was fit to be thrown out. God graciously says through Hosea, "Come back, come back, come back. God will heal. God will restore. God will continue His covenant. His Word stands. He will never, never fail us." Hosea preached to the northern 10 tribes. When the exile was finished and Ezra took a record of who came back, there were representatives in that return from the northern 10 tribes. God had kept a remnant from the north, and God kept the word that He spoke through Amos and Hosea. God is faithful.