Introduction to the Motif: The Rejection of the Prophets and the Deuteronomistic Perspective

The phrase “rejection of the prophets” describes Israel’s negative response to the messengers whom God sends to the nation to remind it of its obligations to the Torah. Instead of listening to these messengers and turning back to God in renewed covenantal relationship, Israel all too often refuses to believe the prophets and at times goes so far as to violently reject them. Ultimately, such rejection reaches the point of no return, and there is no remedy. God sends Assyria and Babylon to destroy, respectively, the northern and southern kingdoms, and Israel ceases to exist as a political entity. This motif of prophetic rejection is part of the story of Israel from what has been called the “Deuteronomistic” theological perspective.¹ Israel

prospered or suffered in relation to its obedience or its disobedience to the law. As went Israel’s covenantal loyalty, so went its national prosperity (cf. Jth. 5:17–19; 11Q19–20 [Temple Scroll] 59:2–20).

The rejection of the prophets presumes their linkage in general to the Torah of Moses, and in particular to the blessings and curses of the book of Deuteronomy. In modern scholarship, the “Deuteronomistic” approach to the biblical narrative of Israel’s history may be traced to Martin Noth’s *Deuteronomistic History*, which focused on Deuteronomy to 2 Kings as a single work that stressed Israel’s disobedience as the reason for the destruction of the Davidic monarchy and the exile to Babylon. Despite Israel’s recalcitrance, God patiently sent them messenger after messenger who pleaded with them to repent. But Israel did not listen and in some cases went so far as to wreak violence on God’s messengers. In Noth’s understanding of Deuteronomism, there was no hope for Israel in this situation, but others such as H. W. Wolff saw in the biblical texts the possibility of deliverance if Israel repented.²

This study is primarily directed toward situations where the rejection of the prophets escalated into violence. Previous works, mostly in German, have addressed this theme, but a fresh study is appropriate, given recent advances in the study of Second Temple Judaism. O. Steck’s 1967 study of the violent fate (gewaltsame

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the prophetic history is the most recent comprehensive discussion of the matter. Previous treatments included works by H. J. Schoeps, O. Michel, and A. Schlatter.

According to Steck, the Deuteronomistic narrative of the history of Israel takes on a characteristic structure (*deuteronomistische Geschichtsbild*) that can be summarized as follows:

1. Israel’s history is portrayed as one of habitual disobedience.
2. God patiently sent Israel prophet after prophet to urge them to repent.
3. Israel rejected these prophets, often killing them.
4. Thus God punished Israel through the Assyrians and Babylonians.
5. But God promises restoration to exiled Israel and judgment on Israel’s enemies if Israel will repent.

Steck believed that the earliest tradition of this structure was found in Neh. 9:26–30. Priestly editors perpetuated the tradition into the Second Temple period, with such success that almost all of the Jewish writings from the late Second Temple period contain the motif.


New Testament scholars have attempted to demonstrate the linkage of Deuteronomistic motifs in general and of the rejection of the prophets in particular with the story of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. J. Kloppenborg notes the influence of Deuteronomism on the theology of Q. The 2002 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature Q section featured three papers that applied Steck’s thought to the theology of Q. M. Knowles’s work on Jeremiah in Matthew includes a discussion of the rejected prophet motif. D. Moessner attempts to demonstrate that Luke’s travel narrative is constructed to present Jesus as a rejected prophet who is similar to Moses. J. McWhirter argues that the rejected prophet motif is prominent in Luke–Acts. In her view Luke uses the motif as an apologetic that demonstrates the reliability of Luke’s account (Luke 1:4) by aligning the ministries of Jesus and the apostles with key prophetic figures from the Hebrew Bible, demonstrating that opposition to God’s prophetic message is actually part of God’s historic plan.

According to M. McAffee, the warnings of the book of Hebrews against apostasy are best understood as flowing from the blessing and curse format of covenant loyalty/disloyalty in Deuteronomistic thinking. Among the helpful insights of McAffee’s study are the linkage of the “ground drinking the rain” phraseology of Heb. 6:7 to

Deut. 11:11 and “the good word” of Heb. 6:5 to Josh. 21:45; 23:14–15 and 1 Kgs. 8:56.  

Penitential prayer based on a Deuteronomistic worldview is another area of ongoing research that is relevant to this study. R. A. Werline probes the impact of penitential prayer on New Testament theology in general and on the putative Gospels source Q in particular. He argues that the early followers of Jesus did not see themselves as “Christians” so much as penitent Jews who were calling their own people to follow them in a previously existing religious model. That model is penitential theology, as expressed in prayer, which developed from such biblical texts as Deuteronomy 4, Deuteronomy 30, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9, and flourished in the ministry of John the Baptist. John the Baptist and Jesus, among others in Second Temple Judaism, viewed themselves as standing in the line of beleaguered Jewish prophets sent by God to challenge Israel’s lack of loyalty to the covenant.

The Rejection of the Prophets in Ancient Literature

The notion that Israel has rejected its prophets is found in the Hebrew Bible, in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, in the New Testament, and in subsequent Jewish and Christian literature. Chapter 2 will survey relevant texts and summarize the evidence that demonstrates how widespread the motif is.

The survey found in chapter 2 will show that there are three interwoven aspects of the prophetic rejection motif. The first (1) is the “Deuteronomistic” formulation of Israel’s relationship to God. In this formulation Israel’s national prosperity depends on its obedience to the law of Moses. Moses the archetypal prophet and lawgiver is succeeded by other prophets who continue to call on Israel to obey the law. Deuteronomism sets out the covenantal foundation and context for the role of Israel’s prophets and Israel’s accountability to prophetic warnings. The second aspect of the motif (2) is simple unbelief leading to passive resistance to the covenantal urgings of the prophets. Such passive resistance is found in the worsening of idolatrous worship and disobedience to the law as the divided monarchy declines. The third aspect of the motif (3) is prophetic rejection proper, animosity leading to the active persecution of the prophets, taking the forms of threats, imprisonment, physical harm, and even murder.

These three aspects of the motif of prophetic rejection are found throughout the Hebrew Bible, Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, and the New Testament. The motif is found in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Torah sets out the basic Deuteronomistic interpretation of Israel’s history (1) and takes note of instances of Israel’s unbelief and rebellion against Moses (2). The Prophets, both former and latter, allude to Deuteronomism (1) and speak of occasions of both unbelief (2) and persecution (3). The Writings allude to Deuteronomism (1) and occasions of unbelief (2), but contain the most egregious examples of the persecution of the prophets (3).

Jewish literature of the Second Temple period contains instances of all three aspects of the rejected prophet motif. Although generalizations are risky, it seems that the three aspects of the motif are found in a sort of pyramid pattern. This is to say that references
to Deuteronomism (1) are most numerous, references to unbelief (2) are numerous, and references to persecution (3) are least numerous, although hardly rare.

The New Testament references to the motif are roughly the reverse of the pattern found in Second Temple literature. This is to say that the New Testament stresses the persecution of the prophets (3) more than the unbelief (2) from which the persecution flowed, or the Deuteronomistic interpretation of Israel’s history (1). This prevalence of references to persecution (3) would seem to be due to the nascent church’s viewing itself as a remnant called out by the prophetic ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. This remnant mindset is not altogether unlike that of the Qumran community. The crucifixion of Jesus as well as subsequent Jewish resistance to the message of Jesus’ followers is understood against the Deuteronomistic scheme.

The Importance of the Rejection of the Prophets for Matthew

Broadly stated, the appearance of the rejected prophet motif in Matthew is important because Matthew is viewed by many if not most scholars as the most “Jewish” of the Gospels. Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and prophets (e.g., Matt. 5:17) cannot be missed. Thus it would not be surprising that Jesus is portrayed not only as fulfilling individual prophetic texts but also as fulfilling the recurring textual motif of prophetic rejection.

It is well known that Matthew’s Gospel was of great importance to the early church. There are more patristic commentaries on Matthew and patristic allusions to Matthew than to any other Gospel. This was evidently due to the church’s belief in the apostolic authorship of this Gospel as well as to this Gospel’s unique portrayal of the teaching

of Jesus. Matthew’s influence through the centuries remained strong, due in large part to the emphasis on Matthew in church lectionaries. In recent centuries Matthew’s impact has declined somewhat due to the emphasis on Mark in critical scholarship. Despite this, Matthew’s Gospel is still prominent in the life of the church, and its portrayal of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders is still influential. Such Matthean texts as 21:43; 23:1–39; and 27:25 are regularly cited as instances of clear religious anti-Judaism, if not blatant examples of antisemitism as ethnic hatred.\(^\text{15}\)

The Thesis and Procedure of this Study

For the reasons just cited (and perhaps others), a thorough study of Matt. 23:32 in light of the rejected prophet motif is warranted. This study argues that Matthew’s narrative presents Jesus as the ultimate rejected prophet and Jesus’ disciples as a remnant community of persecuted prophets. This understanding places the severe polemical language of Matthew 23 into an intramural Jewish context where different voices contend for the mantle of authentic biblical religion during turbulent times. If this is the case, the dominant supersessionist understanding of Matthew 23 in the history of Christian exegesis is blatantly mistaken. The approach to Matthew 23 advocated here holds greater promise for Jewish-Christian relations.

The argument of this study proceeds centripetally toward the central text, Matt. 23:32. Part 1 sets the stage, beginning with scholarly discussion of the broad biblical theme of Deuteronomism, the biblical context in which the rejected prophet motif is found. Chapter 2 surveys the rejected prophet motif in the Bible and Second Temple literature. Chapter 3 sketches the motif in the New Testament generally.

Part 2 details how the motif is portrayed in Matthew. Chapter 4 narrows the focus and increases the detail as Matthew’s understanding of the Bible is presented. Chapters 5 and 6 show how Matthew presents John the Baptist and Jesus as the penultimate and ultimate rejected prophets. Chapter 7 argues that Matthew portrays Jesus’ disciples as an ongoing community of rejected prophets. Chapter 8 makes the case that the parable of the tenant farmers in Matthew 21

utilizes the rejected prophet motif to present Jesus’ disciples as new fruitful leaders for Israel. Chapter 9 deals with the notorious ‘blood libel” text, Matt. 27:25, concluding that this text is rightly understood as the rash words of a mob incited by the religious leaders. The text in no way inculpates the Jewish people for the death of Jesus.

Part 3 narrows the focus to Matthew 23. Chapter 10 provides an introduction to Matthew 23, addressing its place in the contextual flow of Matthew as narrative, its genre as prophetic critique, its putative synoptic relations, and three relatively recent major studies. Chapter 11 presents an exegetical commentary on Matthew 23, laying the foundation for the discussion of Matt. 23:32, the central passage of this study. Chapter 12 discusses the text of Matt. 23:32, the genre of the ironic imperative πληρώσατε, and how Matthew’s characteristic emphasis on biblical fulfillment informs the passage. Matthew presents Jesus as the ultimate rejected prophet, and Jesus’ disciples as a persecuted eschatological remnant identified with him and in continuity with the persecuted biblical prophets.

The conclusion summarizes the research and its implications for understanding Matthew and for Jewish-Christian relations.