

The Beginning of the Word

“**I**N THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD . . .” It is a familiar and seemingly simple assertion; consequently, its profundity in a largely oral cultural environment can be overlooked. In an ancient culture the living word, the living voice, always had a certain precedence over a written word.¹ And of all the voices of antiquity, none had more power or authority than those who could speak for God or, in a pagan culture, for the gods. Indeed, those who could proffer a late word from God might well be the most important members of an ancient society.

Surprisingly, a study of prophecy in antiquity reveals that almost all ancient cultures had those who exercised roles one would call prophetic. Prophecy did not begin with the period of the Israelite monarchy, nor did it end when that monarchy was eclipsed, for even in Israel forms of prophecy carried on beyond that period of time. Nor were the prophets of Israel, any more than the NT prophets, operating in a cultural vacuum. A Balaam or a Jonah or a Paul could step over cultural boundaries and still be recognized as a sort of prophetic figure, because the social functions and roles, and to a degree even the forms and contents of the messages of prophets, were the same throughout antiquity at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

Whether one is talking about the period of the Babylonian Empire or the Roman Empire, certain traits marked out prophetic figures such that they could be recognized throughout the region as spokesmen or spokeswoman for the divine. These individuals could

¹ See S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

cross cultural and ethnic boundaries and still function. Indeed, prophecy was such a cross-cultural phenomenon that Babylonian kings could have Jewish prophets serving in their court, and Roman emperors might well listen to the word of an eastern and Jewish prophet before making a major decision. If one wants to understand biblical prophecy, one must be prepared to fish with a large net.

Though some cross-cultural and diachronic studies of prophecy have been undertaken in the past for at least part of the source material, it appears that no studies really take into consideration ancient Near Eastern, OT, NT, and Greco-Roman prophecy at one time. Some of the cross-cultural studies, undertaken largely by sociologists or those using sociological paradigms,² tend to roam too far afield and end up comparing phenomena that are too dissimilar culturally and temporally (e.g., comparing Melanesian cargo cults or Native American tribes with Israelite prophets!) to really shed much light on the ancient Mediterranean phenomenon of prophecy. Other studies analyze ancient prophecy exclusively in theological terms, with the result that cross-cultural factors and examples that could illuminate the subject are omitted.

The present study assumes that proximity in time and culture is important if we are to have enough data and cultural overlap to make sense of our subject matter. Of necessity, we must draw some temporal as well as geographical parameters for our study. The temporal parameters will be from approximately the Middle Bronze Age until the end of the third century AD, or from about the time of the Mari texts until the end of the Montanist movement. This, of course, means that this investigation will not be dealing directly with the real beginnings of prophetic phenomena in the ancient Near East, and only in a cursory way with the time when the ancestors of Israel—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—were thought to have lived (the Middle Bronze Period). Almost certainly, numerous prophets existed prior to the Mari prophets; furthermore, various biblical writers saw figures such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in a prophetic light. The problem is that one does not possess oracles from these biblical figures, much less prophetic books, and there is only precious little other evidence that they were intermediaries for a group of people.³ There are, of course, narratives about them, but most of these

²See, e.g., Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*; or R. R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

³The story of Abraham interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 18–19 could fall into the category of prophetic activity, as could the story of the healing of Abimelech through Abraham's prayer in Gen 20:1–18 (the only reference to Abraham as a *nabi* is in Gen 20:7), but little else in the Abrahamic material seems to suggest such activity. Or again, Jacob's dream-vision in Gen 28 might place him in the prophetic category, but this occurrence seems to be atypical of his life experiences and, in any event, is portrayed as largely a private matter that did not lead to his proclaiming things to God's people. Most any of the major figures in the Bible could be called prophets if we include any and all contact or conversation with the deity as prophetic phenomena. But such a definition is too broad. Prophets are those who manifest prophetic activity with some regularity for some period of their life. The case of Joseph is different from that of the earlier patriarchs, but

do not suggest prophetic activity on their part. Even in the case of Joseph, the having and interpreting of dreams, while a regular prophetic phenomenon, do not lead to an oracular function. Joseph could be seen as a “diviner of dreams.” A similar problem exists with some of the narratives about Moses, but more will be said about him, as he does fall within the parameters of this study and manifests enough prophetic traits to make a discussion worthwhile. Yet such a study must be undertaken carefully, with a full recognition of the historical problems and of later editing, for even the most optimistic of scholarly surveys of the early history of Israelite prophets begins not with Moses but with Saul and Samuel.⁴ This study must begin with the remarkable findings at Mari.⁵ One of the major purposes of this chapter is to make clear both the value and the urgency of taking a cross-cultural approach to the analysis of biblical prophecy. Before doing so, however, it is important to make certain critical distinctions.

First, there is a marked difference between a mediator or an intermediary and a prophet. There are times and places at which a prophet is simply a mouth-piece for the deity and in fact does not intercede with the deity on anyone’s behalf. The communication flows in one direction and is not prompted by any attempts at consultation by a human party. On the other hand, there are obviously also times when a prophet does beseech the deity or inquire of the deity on behalf of some human person or group. What needs to be emphasized about the latter is that this may be a role that a prophet plays but it is not specifically a prophetic role. Priests or kings or sages might also play such a role for a person or group of persons. Petitionary prayer or discourse is not a distinctively prophetic function. It is for this reason that I am somewhat leery of calling a prophet an intermediary, for this term in English suggests an ambassador who exercises shuttle diplomacy between two parties. True, some central or institutional prophets did tend to function this way a good deal of the time, perhaps especially if there were no priests to approach or petition the deity. This, however, does not adequately describe the actual distinctive social function of prophets and prophetesses—namely, to speak oracles, a late word from God, to a person or group. Whether one is talking about the Mari prophets, or Israelite prophets, or the later Christian prophets, their chief and distinctive task was to speak for, or even as the instrument of, the deity.

most scholars think this material has been heavily edited in the light of later interests and concerns, including the interest in portraying Israel’s patriarchs as prophetic figures. Joseph’s dreams could indeed place him in the category of a visionary or seer, and it would appear that “seers” were not uncommon among the Jews prior to the period of classical prophecy during the monarchy.

⁴See R. Rendtorff, “Reflections on the Early History of Prophecy in Israel,” in *History and Hermeneutic* (ed. R. W. Funk; New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 14–34.

⁵While there may, in the future, be sufficient evidence from the Ebla texts to warrant bringing them into the discussion, especially since they come from the third millennium BC, the claim that they provide evidence of prophecy is yet to be substantiated. See H. B. Huffmon, “Prophecy (ANE),” *IDB* 5:477–82.

Second, one must distinguish carefully between the prophetic experience, the prophetic expression, the prophetic tradition, and the prophetic corpus. Obviously, when one is talking about ancient prophets, there is no direct access to any of the first three of these items but only to the literary residue, whether in the form of the tablets at Mari, the Israelite prophetic books, the quotations of oracles in the NT, or the records of the pronouncements at Delphi. It is important to keep this point squarely in view because sometimes confusion has been created by treating these items together.

For example, only a few direct transcripts of prophetic experience have survived, although later reflections on what happened do exist. A good example of this phenomenon occurs in the book of Revelation. John of Patmos relates things he saw and heard, however, not as a transcript of an experience but, rather, as a form of exhortation and consolation to a remote group of Christian disciples. In other words, the literary residue is not a transcript but, rather, a later reflection on, and presentation of, the content of an earlier experience. What is also intriguing about this particular case is that apparently the prophetic oral expression and the period of transmission of tradition stages are skipped altogether. This material was not delivered orally by the prophet to anyone, for he was marooned—indeed, probably exiled—at the penal colony on Patmos. Rather, he put the material into an epistolary framework and sent it off as a circular letter to some churches in western Asia Minor with which he was associated. In other cases there may have been an initial proclamation followed by a long period of oral transmission of specific prophetic traditions before they became part of a prophetic corpus.

We must be sensitive to what is actually being dealt with when we approach the final form of the prophetic materials. Whether creative later editing and expansions on prophetic tradition can be called *prophecy* is debatable. For example, some of the creative exegesis of prophetic texts at Qumran does not necessarily qualify as prophecy itself but, rather, as attempts to contemporize, or apply former prophecies to a later audience. It is more a matter of hermeneutics than of new revelation from God, more a matter of creative reinterpretation or *relecture* than of inspiration. Prophets also should not be confused with their scribes or recorders, when they had them. Baruch was not Jeremiah. At its core, prophecy is a living word from the deity, and a prophet delivers that message. Figure 1-1 perhaps will illustrate some of the complexities of this matter.⁶

First, note in this schematic the difference between the solid line and the dashed lines. The revelation from God to the prophet is the fundamental and invariable component of the social situation. This may be the only component if the revelation is simply to and about the prophet himself (or herself)—for example, when God first calls the prophet or when he instructs him about something he must do. The dashed lines indicate other frequent components,

⁶I am here adopting and adapting a model offered by Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 23.

It will be seen that the suggestions about a prophet's role above distinguish a prophet from a diviner. Here one must agree with some of the distinctions suggested by H. Huffmon, for example, when he says a prophet is "a person who through non-technical means receives a clear and immediate message from a deity for transmission," which is to be contrasted "with learned, technical divination and the use of interpretive skills."⁹ This is why, in what follows, I begin the discussion with the Mari prophets and not with the Babylonian *barum*, or diviners.

Something also must be said here in a preliminary way about prophets and prophetic signs, as well as about prophets and miracles. In regard to the latter, miracles are sometimes predicated of prophets, indeed sometimes even emphasized (cf. the Elijah and Elisha cycles). Yet it is clear enough that miracle working is not required (cf. John the Baptist); and indeed, there were healers or those with whom miracles were associated in ancient religious history who were not prophets (cf., e.g., the Jewish Hasidim at the turn of the era). This means that while a miracle may suggest the presence of a prophet, it does not necessarily do so. A Jewish sage might pray for and obtain a cure, or a messianic figure might be involved in miracle working. Finally, in regard to prophetic signs and the reading of their significance, both can occur apart from the activity of a prophet (cf., e.g., a meteorological omen and the work of a diviner), but it is fair to say that prophetic signs do often characterize the activity of prophets. They were often more than just wordsmiths.

Prophetic signs were a way to make the word visible. I agree with the recent study of Morna Hooker, who suggests that a prophetic sign is "not a visual aid intended to assist in teaching—rather, the dramatic equivalent of the spoken oracle; not an efficacious act which causes something to happen—rather, the dramatic embodiment of the divine purpose, which otherwise might well be at present hidden."¹⁰ Such activities were engaged in by prophets with enough regularity that we are able to say that they were a normal function of prophets. What one can not say, is that the prophet *had* to perform such signs, authenticating or otherwise, in order to be a prophet. The primary and necessary task was always the spoken oracle. It will be important to keep various of these considerations in mind throughout our examination of the prophetic tradition.

I. FROM MARI TO MOSES AND BEYOND¹¹

A. A *Mari Old Time*. It is perhaps fair to date the real beginning of cross-cultural studies of ancient Near Eastern prophecy to 1899, when the Egyptian

⁹H. B. Huffmon, "The Origins of Prophecy in Israel," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God* (ed. F. Cross et al.; Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 172–86, here 172.

¹⁰M. D. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity, 1997), 38–39.

¹¹I borrow here in part a title from R. P. Gordon, "From Mari to Moses: Prophecy at Mari and in Ancient Israel," in *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages* (ed. H. A. McKay and D. J. A. Clines; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 63–79.