Structural Aspects in the Old Testament Prophets' Work and Message

by G. Herbert Livingston

During the past three decades, much research has been done in the area of analysis of the books of the major and minor prophets. This research has been sparked partially by the form-critical methods proposed by Hermann Gunkel and by a comparative study of the Biblical text with the mass of non-Biblical inscriptions of the ancient Near East made available by archaeological work.

Much of the research done has been fragmentary, that is, concerned with limited passages, or selected passages, in the prophetic books. The research also has been influenced by a growth concept of literary types undergirded by a humanistic evolutionary way of thinking, and a preoccupation with a psychological basis for the prophet's spiritual life. The result has often been a confused and misleading explanation of the prophet's work and message. Yet, solid work has been done which can be helpful for a fruitful study of Old Testament prophecy.

The purpose of this essay is to glean from this research insights which can help us to see more clearly important structural aspects of the prophets' work and message. These structural aspects will be concerned mainly with the covenant, the lawsuit, and the function of the messenger as they relate to the actual text of the books of the prophets.

An effort will be made to show how the covenant structure, the lawsuit structure and the messenger structure relate to each other and how they find expression in the Scriptural text. In effect, this shapes up as a method of studying the books of the prophets in their parts and in their totality. But the suggestions in this paper will not be limited to literary matters. An effort will be made, also, to show how the structural elements and the literary expressions give us an underlying structure of inter-personal dynamics between God, prophet and other

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people, whether individuals or groups. The implications of this kind of study will then be summarized.

The Covenant Structure

Students of the Old Testament have long recognized that the covenant was important in God's revelation to man, but until recent years, it has been regarded, basically, as a theological concept. At various times during the first half of this century, newly discovered inscriptions alerted scholars that the covenant had a much more practical function in the ancient Near East, but it was not until George Mendenhall published his article, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition"1 in 1954 that, English speaking people at least, were made aware of the implications that the non-Biblical treaties, especially Hittite, had for Old Testament studies.

Since that time, a flurry of articles and books on the covenant have appeared and as a result our understanding of the Old Testament has been broadened, deepened and enriched. Primarily, these new studies of the covenant have centered about the Pentateuch, the work of Joshua and the kingship of David, but the prophetic books have not been overlooked. This is true in spite of the fact that the word covenant (berit) occurs only 12 times in Isaiah, 23 times in Jeremiah, 18 times in Ezekiel, six times in Daniel and ten times in all the Minor Prophets, half of these in Hosea.

As understood now, the covenants of the ancient Near East were basically political in nature and would be better called treaties. These treaties were of two types: the parity treaties between equals or nearly equal nations, and the suzerainty treaties between an emperor and the vassal kings of his empire. Dennis J. McCarthy2 has given us ten such treaties in English translation. Analysis of ancient Near Eastern treaties has indicated that the following components occur in them. In some treaties all of them are found; in others, most of the components are found.

The components are: (1) titles of the Great King, (2) a list of stipulations or laws, (3) history of previous treaty relations, (4) a document clause, (5) a god list, (6) a list of curses and blessings.

Attempts to apply these components to the covenant between God and the patriarchs, between God and Israel at Sinai, between God and Israel at Shechem, and between God and David have been both fruitful and frustrating. The attempts have been frustrating because, in the in-
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stances just mentioned, accounts of covenant-making events are preserved, but not the actual covenant documents. Hence, the covenant components are scattered with no strict order of sequence. When the covenant components have been applied to the book of Deuteronomy, there has been more success. Meredith Kline\(^3\) has done us great service by analyzing this book in terms of the covenant.

One fact is clear, in utilizing the covenant form as a framework for the newly revealed faith of the patriarchs, Moses and Israel, God saw to it that all references to pagan deities were removed and relegated to the status of mortal enemies of the faith.

Efforts to apply the new understanding of the covenant form and its formulations to the major and minor prophets have been fruitful but even more frustrating. As mentioned earlier, the word covenant does occur in the writings of the major prophets, more in Jeremiah than in Isaiah or in Ezekiel. The word does appear a few times in Hosea but rarely in any of the other minor prophets. None of the covenant components, as such, are explicitly mentioned. In spite of these handicaps, research has made it clear that the covenant certainly undergirds the themes and vocabulary of these prophets. The covenant serves somewhat like a “hidden agenda” in their messages.

The first component of the covenant, the titles, has parallels in the phrase, “I am Yahweh,” which, with some variations, occurs in covenant sections of all the books of the Pentateuch. The phrase is frequent in Isaiah and Ezekiel, less frequent in Jeremiah and the minor prophets. The covenant statement, “You are my people, I am your God,” or variations of it, begins in Exodus 6:7 and can be found in both the major and minor prophets. Descriptions of and reference to the mighty acts of God in the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings, and the conquest shows up in the original covenant events in the Pentateuch and in most of the prophetic writings.

An important component in the covenant was the list of stipulations, the do’s and don’ts of covenant relationships. Many apodictic and casuistic laws — the Rabbis count 613 — are scattered through the Pentateuch. Taking Mendenhall’s\(^4\) guidelines, other scholars have found many parallels in the prophetic writings to the Mosaic laws. Many of the prophets’ accusations center on violations of Mosaic law. James Muilenberg closes one of his discussions of Old Testament prophecy with these words, “So today we no longer speak of Moses or the prophets, or of the law or prophecy, but rather of Moses and the prophets.”\(^5\)

The book of Deuteronomy has a number of conditional sentences
tied to the keeping or breaking of the law. Many similar conditional sentences can be found in the writings of both the major and the minor prophets.

A covenant component containing curses and blessings can be found in several of the books of the Pentateuch. They are most clearly presented in Deuteronomy 27 and 28. Delbert Hillers has gathered a number of curse or malediction statements found in various ancient Near East inscriptions which parallel statements in the Pentateuch covenant passages and in pronouncements of the Old Testament prophets. He lists them under 20 categories.

The Hittite treaties have a document clause which insists that copies of the treaty be placed in the vassal's temple and read periodically. This procedure is like that recorded in Exodus 24:4-7; 34:1-4; Deuteronomy 27:1-3; 28:58 and can be seen also in Isaiah 34:16; Jeremiah 36 and possibly Habakkuk 2:2-3.

In addition to covenant components, there is a significant vocabulary carry over from ancient Near Eastern treaties and from Pentateuchal covenants to the writing prophets. W. L. Moran has given us basic information about the word love (‘ahav) as a treaty and a covenant word. And D. R. Hillers has provided ties between older covenants and the prophets with a study of good (tob) and goodness (tobah).

Much the same kind of correlation could be done with such words as steadfast love (hesed) and mercy (hen), righteousness (sedeqah) and uprightness (ya’sar), justice (mishpat) and peace (shalom). On the negative side, words like guilt (asham) and iniquity (aven), sin (hattat) and err (‘avon), rebel (pesha’) and wicked (rasha’) could yield profitable comparisons between the Sinaitic covenant and prophetic proclamation.

In summary one may say that the covenant provides the framework for other structures that have more unity and continuity. One of these structures is . . .

The Judicial or Lawsuit Structure

The "controversy" passages in the writing prophets have their background in the scenes at the gate of the city where complaints and accusations were made against offenders of person and property, or even quarrels outside of court (Gen. 26:17ff.; Gen. 31:26, 30; Judges 6:30ff.; 8:1; Neh. 5:6f., 13:11, 17; Job 13:6). Quarrels between heads of state also form part of the background; a good example is Judges 10:17-12:6.
G. E. Wright says the controversy pattern is based on the suzerainty treaty and makes an analysis of Deuteronomy 32 to illustrate his point.10

The personnel of the lawsuit are the judge, perhaps an advocate for the covenant, the accused, and sometimes those who witness the proceedings. The several phases of the trial would be the summons to court, the declaration of charges or indictment, the rebuttal of the accused, the pronouncement of the sentence, conditions of life during judgment, and possible conditions for pardon. It could be expected that a recorded description of a lawsuit procedure would reflect these phases of trial and judgment; and this is indeed the case.

The simplest format of a lawsuit account may be given as (1) a summons to hear, (2) an accusation, (3) therefore . . . , and (4) an announcement. But the writing prophets were not inclined to follow simple patterns; so we have variation of components in the lawsuits portrayed by them. The best examples are Isaiah 1:1-31 (some would limit it to 1:1-3; 10-20); 3:13-17; possibly 5:1-7; 41:21-29; 57:3-21; 58:1-14; Hosea 2:1-23; 4:1-19; 5:1-12:1; 12:1-14:9; Amos 3:1-4:13; 5:1-6:14; Micah 1:2-2:13; 3:1-8; 3:9-5:15; 6:1-7:20; (Jer. 2:1-4:4 and Ezek. 17:1-24).

Since Micah 6:1ff. is a classic, we may begin with it to see its components: 6:1a an appeal to listen; 6:1b the prophet ordered to plead the case; 6:2a appeal to mountains and hills to listen; 6:2b announcement of lawsuit; 6:3 the accused questioned; 6:4 God’s acts at Exodus, 6:5a His acts at Conquest; 6:5b goal of the trial; 6:6-7 rebuttal of accused; 6:8 You know! 6:9-12 accusation; 13-16 sentence; 7:1-7 soliloquy of sorrow; 7:8-10 confession of accused; 7:11-17 Hope given; 7:18-20 exaltation of the divine judge.

Now let us go back and look at the other lawsuits in Micah. In regard to Micah 1:2-2:13, we may make this analysis: 1:2a appeal to listen; 1:2b announcement of lawsuit; 1:3-4 majesty of judge; 1:5 accusatory questions; 1:6a therefore . . . ; 1:6b-7a announcement of sentence “I will”; 1:7b reason; 1:8a therefore . . . ; 1:8b-16 lamentation (by prophet?); 2:1-2 accusation; 2:3a therefore . . . ; 2:3b identification of judge; 2:3c-5a announcement of sentence, “I devise”; 2:5b-6 result of judgment; 2:7-9 accusatory questions and charges; 2:10-11 announcement of sentence; 2:12-13 announcement of restoration, “I will.”

Micah 3:1-8 may be analyzed in this manner: 3:1a appeal to listen; 3:1b announcement of lawsuit; 3:2-3 accusation; 3:4 announcement of sentence; 3:5a identification of deity; 3:5b accusation; 3:6a there-
fore . . .; 3:6b-7 announcement of sentence; 3:8 authority and qualification of the advocate.


The book of Hosea is also basically comprised of lawsuits. This sensitive eighth century prophet is even more creative than Micah in mixing the lawsuit components. In effect he interweaves them so that they take on a fabric pattern. Hosea 2:1-23 is more of a family quarrel than a formal lawsuit, though its components are present, and 5:1-12:1 is too long to analyze here, so we will concentrate on 4:1-19 and 12:2-14:9.

First let us look at 4:1-19: 4:1a appeal to listen; 4:1b announcement of lawsuit; 4:1c reason; 4:2 accusation; 4:3a therefore . . .; 4:3b announcement of sentence; 4:4a warning; 4:4b reason; 4:5a therefore . . .; 4:5b-6a sentence “I will”; 4:6b reason; 4:6c sentence “I will”; 4:6d reason; 4:6e sentence “I will”; 4:7a accusation; 4:7b sentence “I will”; 4:8-9a accusation; 4:9b-10a sentence “I will”; 4:10b reason; 4:11-13 accusation; 4:14 sentence; 4:15 warning; 4:16a reason; 4:16b-19 sentence.


For the purpose of this article, we will examine only one more lawsuit, namely in Isaiah 1. It may be divided as follows: 1:1a appeal to

On the basis of the analysis, several observations may be made. (1) As in the covenant formulations, care is taken to stress the authority and identity of God and this feature tends to tie the covenant and the lawsuit together. The lawsuit proceeds from the covenant, but the Lord God is in charge of both. (2) The lawsuit tends to refer to the covenant acts of God, in the Exodus and later, as the basis of the court action. (3) The accusations brought against the people and leaders are that the covenant laws, especially the Ten Commandments, had been violated. (4) The sentences proclaimed against Israel are parallel to the curses of the covenant. (5) The announcements of restoration are parallel to the blessings of the covenant.

There is one feature of the lawsuit content which points in a different direction than the covenant for its origin. Now and then in the lawsuits the phrase, “Thus says the Lord,” with varying additions, designates the authority and identity of the judge/plaintiff. This phrase has its home in the ancient Near Eastern system of sending communications via messengers. The messenger system was not limited to non-Hebrew people; the Israelites used this method too.

**The Messenger Structure**

It is remarkable that in the many studies made of the books of the prophets very little literary correlation has been made between the prophetic messages and the messenger system, except in the last few decades. Orthodox scholars have been primarily engrossed in the important prophecy/fulfillment and eschatological thrust of prophecy. Nineteenth century liberals were concerned about showing that the Old Testament prophets were historically human and that their ideas were of prime value. Gunkel and his immediate disciples were attracted to short oracles of "threat" and "reproach" and their origins. Holscher and his followers saw mainly the psychological traits of the prophet's experience.
In the opening chapter of his important book, Claus Westermann notes that L. Kohler (1923) seems to be the first to tie the greater amount of the work and message of the prophets with the work and messages formula of messengers. During the 1930's and 40's, an occasional article appeared in European journals discussing this or that passage as a messenger speech. Even J. Lindblom has this one sentence paragraph, "... there is in the giving and formulation of the oracles an intimate connection between the earlier and the later prophets." But Lindblom was not interested in "the formulation of the oracles" as messenger speeches; he was looking for phenomena that would help him in his overall history of religions' approach to prophecy.

Claus Westermann's book has been the primary vehicle which has brought the importance of the ancient messenger structure to the fore, as a fundamental structure for Old Testament prophecy.

One could take time to analyze a few of the mass of ancient Near Eastern letters, mostly written in cuneiform script on clay tablets, and correlate their standard formula with those found in the narratives of the Old Testament. A few of those who have done some of this correlation are James Ross and J. S. Holliday.

We will turn rather to a few of the several dozen accounts of messenger communication in the Old Testament for guidance. This material, too, has been examined by various scholars, among whom are Claus Westermann, and Klaus Koch.

The earliest account of sending messengers with a message is found in Genesis 32:3-5. For the moment we will only highlight these phrases: "... Jacob sent ... he commanded them saying, 'Thus shall you speak to my lord Esau; Your servant Jacob says thus ... .' " We would note these items: (a) Jacob's decision to send a message, (b) his authoritative words to the messengers, (c) the identity of the addressee, (d) the identity of the sender, and (3) the authoritative, "says thus."

The next incident is found in Genesis 45:9-13. The important words are, "... go to my father, and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph.' " Note the commissioning verbs "go," "say," the identity of the addressee, the identity of the sender, and the authoritative words, "Thus says."

Numbers 22:15ff. gives a glimpse of the delivery of a message. Observe these phrases, "... Balak sent ... they came to Baalam and said to him, 'Thus says Balak the son of Zippor, ... .' " It should be noted that Balak made a decision to send a message, that the messengers transmitted the message orally, the addressee is identified, there is the
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authoritative phrase, “Thus says ...” and the identification of the sender.

There is a similar situation in Judges 11:12ff. In verses 14 and 15 note these phrases, “And Jephthah sent messengers again to the king of the children of Ammon and said to him, Thus says Jephthah . . . .” The same components are in this sentence as in those mentioned above. There are many other illustrations of these standard phrases or formula. We draw attention especially to II Kings 18:28-35 and 19:2-4.

Turn back now to Exodus 3:14ff. and note these words, “And God said to Moses, ‘I AM THAT I AM:’ and he said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, I AM has sent me unto you . . . .’”; and in verse 16 underline the verbs, “God . . . say to them.” Now move on to chapter five, verse one, “And afterward Moses and Aaron went in and told Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord God of Israel.’ ” In these sentences we have the selection of Moses as a messenger, the identity of the sender, the command to carry the message, the verbs, send, go and say. We also have the transmission of the message orally, the identity of the addressee, as well as the messengers, the authoritative words, “Thus says . . . .” and the identity of the sender. A large amount of the narrative material in Exodus and Numbers is framed in this messenger structure (see pp. 253-258 of my book).17

In the book of Exodus, we see Moses commissioned by God to fill three roles for Him. He was called to be His messenger to the Israelites (Ex. 3 and 6). In chapters 19-24 he was commissioned to serve as mediator of the covenant which was established between God and Israel at Sinai. In chapters 32 through 34, Moses was God’s messenger, mediator and advocate in a judicial proceeding against a people who had broken the covenant. The same could be said of Samuel in the event of king-making in I Samuel 8 and 12; so also Elijah on Mt. Carmel (I Kgs. 18). Not all of the earlier prophets are portrayed as filling all three tasks, but whether the prophet was Nathan (II Sam. 12), or Ahijah (I Kgs. 14), Micaiah (I Kgs. 22), or Elisha (II Kgs. 7:1), they were all messengers of God.

The messenger speeches of the pre-classical prophets are primarily preserved for us in narrative frameworks. This feature is somewhat true of the writing prophets, but in the books of the major and minor prophets we have many messenger speeches apart from a narrative. We need to look more closely at these messenger speeches.

First, let us ask, who was involved in the messenger system? It is fairly easy to answer that God, the Lord, the prophet himself, and the
addressee(s). Next we may ask, what are the phases of this system of communication? Phase one is the decision of the sender to send a message; phase two is the giving of the message to a selected messenger(s); phase three is the transmission of the message in either oral or written form; phase four is the delivery of the message. The process may be reversed so that there would be phase five in which the addressee(s) respond to the message; phase six the transmission of the new message back to the sender, or at least a report is made; phase seven would be the messenger reporting to the original sender. Communication could continue by passing through these several phases.

The phases could be grouped into two distinct contact events, the revelatory contact and the proclamation contact. Phases one, two, and possibly seven could be tied to the revelatory contact; whereas, phases four and five would be aspects of the delivery contact. These phases may serve as a framework within which we can analyze the literary expressions of the messenger structure.

We usually label the initial revelatory contact as the prophet’s call experience. In the writings of the prophets, we have Amos’ personal testimony to a previous call, “. . . the Lord took me . . . and . . . said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’ ” (7:15). Note the identity of the sender, the selecting and commissioning verbs, took, go, prophesy, and the identity of the addressee. The account in the book of Jonah (1:1-2) is similar, “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it . . . .’” The same components are present; the identity of the sender; the selecting verb, came; the identity of the messenger; the commissioning verbs, arise, go, cry against; and the identity of the addressee.

There are longer accounts of Isaiah’s call in chapter six, of Jeremiah’s in 1:4-10, and of Ezekiel’s in chapters 1-3. In Isaiah we find the identity and majesty of the sender (6:1-4); the selecting verb, send (6:8); the commissioning verbs, “go, tell . . .” (6:9a); and the identity of the addressee, this people (6:9b). Dialogue between the sender and the messenger is a feature of this account.

Allow me to point out similar traits in Jeremiah chapter one. The identity of the sender (1:4a) “The word of the Lord came . . .”; the identity of the messenger (1:4b) “me . . . (Jeremiah); the selecting verb, send (1:7); the commissioning verbs, go, speak (1:7); the identity of the addressees, . . . “to all” (1:7, cf. 1:10). Again, dialogue between sender and messenger is a feature of this initial revelatory contact.

Unusual imagery is found in the call experience of Ezekiel, but the
basic traits are there. The majesty and identity of the sender is found in 1:4-28; the statement of selection is found in 2:1-3a and it has the verb, send, in it (also 3:6); the identity of the messenger is in the phrase, “Son of man” (Ezek. 2:1a, 3a) etc.; the commissioning verbs, “eat this roll, go, speak,” are in 3:1b, 4, 11; the identity of the addressee is found in 2:3, etc., (Israel). Dialogue is not a feature of Ezekiel’s call, but unlike Isaiah’s and Jeremiah’s calls, the words of authority, “Thus says . . .” are joined with the identity of the sender, “the Lord God” and are found in 2:4 and 3:11.

In the books of each of these prophets, reference is made to repeated instances when revelatory contact occurred between God and the prophet. It is striking that in these other incidents the verb, send (shalah) is largely missing.

Apart from the book of Daniel, all of the major and minor prophetic books have superscriptions which designate the office of the prophet as a vision, or burden. Not in every superscription is the sender identified, but where this element is missing the content of the book makes it clear that the sender was the Lord God. And even when the noun, “vision,” or the verb, “saw,” occurs, there is no doubt the message is to be words, with visual aids (symbolic acts) as supplements to the message.

An examination of the messenger speeches shows that they either are announcements of judgment or of salvation. Both announcements are similar in format and content with the accusations and announcements of sentence and the announcements of restoration found in the lawsuits. Many times they can be distinguished only by the introductory sentences which precede each one.

In regard to the units dealing with judgment, both in the lawsuits and in the messenger speeches, there are these common elements: (a) the words of authority and identity, “Thus says the Lord . . .”; (b) the accusations; (c) reasons; (d) the connective “therefore . . .”; (e) the announcement of sentence, “I will”; (f) the results of judgment. Many examples could be brought forward to illustrate similarities and differences.

In regard to the units dealing with restoration and salvation, both in lawsuits and in the messenger speeches, there are these common elements: (a) the words of authority and identity, “Thus says the Lord . . .”; (b) often an exhortation; (c) resume of the situation, (d) announcement of restoration, “I will”, (e) results of restoration, (f) often an affirmation of the majesty of Savior. Again, if time and space permitted, many examples could be given to illustrate similarities and differences.
In the prophetic writings, we find a range of variety in the arrangement of these messages, the sequence of their internal components and their length. Often, it would seem, the placement of messages of judgment and salvation has no logical basis; rather they seem to be laid out to give a theme or an impression of movement, such as is done in modern visual media.

Turning to the delivery contact phases of messenger communication, we find that a narrative frame or, at least, introductory sentences alert the reader that the messenger is speaking to the addressee(s). The messages are virtually the same type and the same format as in the lawsuit and in the revelatory contact.

Here and there in the prophetic writings we pick up some of the responses of the addressees indirectly in such phrases as “you say . . .” or “they say . . . .” In Amos 7, in Jonah 3, in Isaiah 7 and 36-39 we find accounts of the actual verbal and action responses of leaders and populace. The book of Jeremiah provides us with the most extensive accounts of how leaders and people responded to his messages. Some, like Zedekiah, requested more information from the Lord, but most, unfortunately, were negative, even violent, endangering the life of the prophet.

This same prophet, Jeremiah, is the one who left us with complaints and prayers of agony which reveal to us a bit of the inner struggles when he reported back to God the results of his message delivery.

You may ask, how does a knowledge of these structures and their literary expressions really help me to know the prophets?

I can do no more than summarize with a few suggestions on how to proceed further.

(1) A keen awareness of the covenant, lawsuit and messenger structures and their literary expressions should help a student to evaluate more accurately the prophets' experience in the presence of God. Were they ecstatic trip experiences as some have tried to maintain? The data that I have laid out would point in a different direction. God revealed Himself as a Person and honored the integrity of the prophet's own selfhood. Hence, what happened between them was on the level of interpersonal relationships; not as peer to peer, but as Sovereign to servant. The presence of God was overwhelming and glorious, His words were freighted with authority, and His commission utterly changed and dominated the prophets' lives. Yet, the prophet could talk back to God, could pour out his complaints, even accuse God. And in those occasions, the prophet received rebuke, advice and challenge. He also re-
When one examines these revelatory contacts, one finds that almost every emotion except fear is anthropomorphically attributed to God. The negative emotions are directed against idolatry and the people's involvement in it; the positive emotions directed toward the repentant, the remnant of Israel who would return to the covenant relationship. Obviously, one would find the former in announcements of judgment and sentence, and the latter in the announcements of salvation.

It would appear that beneath these anthropopathisms is a basic dilemma which may be stated thus: the Chosen People, Israel, have joined themselves to idols; therefore, if God follows through the strict letter of the covenant curses, the Chosen People will be wiped out and God will lose His "beachhead" in a pagan world; if God does not bring judgment on His Chosen People He will violate His attributes of justice and holiness. The result is suffering. Cannot you hear the sobs of God in this passage from Hosea, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." God's only remedy was the salvation of a remnant.

Probing into the data, one finds that in regard to the revelatory contact, the prophet neither sought nor induced the experience, he was not manipulating God, he did not lose his self-awareness. But the call experience brought a factor into his life that was to goad his soul to the end of his days. The prophet, too, faced a basic dilemma. If he faithfully proclaimed the judgments of God, he would be in serious trouble with the people and their leaders. If he refused to proclaim God's sentence on the people, as Jeremiah almost did (Jer. 20:9), he would come under God's displeasure and judgment. For clear statements of this dilemma see Jeremiah 1:17 and 19; Ezekiel 3:16-21, and a not quite so clear statement in Isaiah 6:6, 9-13. One sees this dilemma lurking in Amos, in Hosea, in Jonah, in Micah, even in Habakkuk.

This basic dilemma in itself is enough to account for the "strange" behavior of the prophets and one does not have to bring in the phenomena of ecstasy to help out. An adequate exegesis of passages dealing with the revelatory contact would take all these factors into account.

(2) A keen awareness of the covenant, lawsuit and messenger structures and their literary expressions should help a student of the
prophetic writings as he seeks to find in them source material for preaching. He should quickly realize that picking here and there for sermon texts, or drawing together a series of proof-texts for a topical sermon is inadequate. One should look at units as wholes, at units as related to each other, at the books as wholes. Then and only then can the impact of these great men of God and their messages sink deeply into the mind and heart of the listener. These prophets are difficult to study, they are difficult to live with, but when taken seriously they will change peoples’ lives for the better.

(3) A keen awareness of the covenant, lawsuit and messenger structures and their literary expressions should help a pastor to understand better his vocational calling, his social responsibilities and his practice of pastoral care.

A preacher without a call is an anomaly; He is a living contradiction. Like the messenger of old, a true preacher must experience a call to preach; he/she must receive a commission and strength from the Holy Spirit to perform the preacher’s task. Authority and power go together, and they must be joined in the preacher’s life. The preacher must be a real person. He/she must be open before God and man, and be willing to pay the price of faithful proclamation of the Word of God. The preacher must be a person of integrity, must be honest, pure of motive, permeated with love, and outgoing in concern for others. Priorities must be fixed on service to God and man rather than on such peripheral matters as salary or status.

A preacher without a strong sense of social responsibility is also an anomaly. Those who would say that to preach the Word is enough, that corrupt social and governmental structures and practices are peripheral, are not in the fellowship of the prophets. Those great men were not ascetics; they did not run from social evils; they faced them head on. They did not regard justice as simply abstract sets of laws. To them justice was compassion put into practice. Corruption must be denounced but a call to change was also stressed. True they did not lead street demonstrations or armed revolution, but they did press the issues of corruption and injustice home to populace and leader with biting clarity and laid out a positive program of justice that would create a just and harmonious society.

Perhaps the prophets could be scored for not being very good listeners, but I imagine that they had already listened to the complaints and the schemes of the great and the small. Most important of all, they had listened to God. What we have in their books is the straight-forward
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talk of brother to brother, of friend to friend. They were dealing with neighbors and did not need to be briefed by long case histories. They knew those people from childhood. The crisis was severe and issues had to be faced. God taught the prophets to deal with the people first at the point of their delusions, their false estimate of their own power and wisdom, the quality of their love. When this falsity was stripped away, then, next the prophets faced the leaders and the populace with the basic dilemma in which their sins had entrapped them. Briefly, their basic dilemma was this: if they would be Chosen People they must radically sever themselves from their much loved sex-worship. If they chose to be pagans under the guise of being Chosen People, they must suffer punishment at the hand of their God. To bring this issue to focus many of the prophets called their listeners to immediate decision. Their verbal pictures of ultimate doom were frightful, but they never failed to exalt the power of the Savior God and to glory in the benefits of salvation. And it is not hard to find here and there the intercessory sobs of a broken heart.

Viewed in terms of the events of the eighth and seventh centuries, the prophets might be labeled as failures, for Israel did not respond to their shepherding concern. But the events of history have vindicated them and through the mercies of God the words of those prophets still haunt us and prod us to be true shepherds of the flock.

FOOTNOTES


4 Mendenhall, George, op. cit., pp. 25-53.

5 James Muilenberg, “The ‘Office’ of the Prophet in Ancient Is-


