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Covenant, Kingship, Grace, Sacrifice, and Prophetism in the Old Testament

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COVENANT, KINGSHIP, GRACE, SACRIFICE, AND PROPHETISM
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament conveys the expansive and intricate theological history of God's plan for his chosen people prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ. Although the Old Testament presents a vast array of fundamental information and ideas, many people misunderstand or simply gloss over the major themes detailed throughout the text. In order to better comprehend the literature of the Old Testament, one must grasp the themes of covenant, kingship, grace, sacrifice, and prophetism, which embody much of the biblical text. Understand

Covenant

The concept of covenant is one of the most important themes of the Old Testament. The term means "a formal agreement or treaty between two parties in which each assumes some obligation" (Unterman 2011, 158). Common forms of covenant in the Old Testament are a pact of mutuality between two individuals, such as David and Jonathan; a covenant between a husband and wife, or more commonly between political entities, such as Abraham and the Amorites. However, the term "covenant" was also used to describe agreements between God and his people, the most referenced being the covenant between God and Israel at Sinai (159). Whether the covenant is divine or human, a covenant relationship is not merely a mutual acquaintance, but "a commitment to 'faithfulness,' acted out in a context of abiding friendship" (Craigie 1988, 531). Through divine-human covenants, "God has conveyed to humanity the meaning of human life and salvation" (531). Although in the Old Testament the purpose of the covenant was to convey divine meaning to the Israelites, it also applies to the modern church through the stipulations of the New Covenant.

While humans could not initiate the divine-human covenants with God, they could create covenants among each other. Although covenant is most closely associated with God's promises to his people, there are many examples of covenants found interpersonally in the Old Testament. In fact, "the same basic characteristics of a strictly human covenant are present in a divine covenant" (531). These characteristics include a relationship between two parties and mutual obligations between the covenant partners. To the Old Testament believer, religion meant covenant; they associated the word with religious responsibilities to God and to others (531). Therefore, covenant relationships between humans contained essential similarities with the divine-human covenants. The religion in the Old Testament is centered on faithfulness to God and adherence to His covenant responsibilities. In turn, God uses his covenants with mankind as an instrument to cause self-revelation. He not only reveals what He is like through the covenants, but also binds Himself to a particular course of action. The Israelites are required to respond with obedience, and while God's covenants are acts of mercy, they are also just, which ensures a certain amount of accountability to the Hebrew people.

The fundamental character of covenants remains the same throughout the Old Testament, but the specific form and nature of the covenants change throughout Israel's history. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament focuses on the initial covenant with Adam, the Noachian Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant. Most scholars agree that the first covenant begins with Adam, yet in his case "the technical meaning of an agreement with signs and pledges is more conspicuous" (Moss 1989, 162). Although the creation account in Genesis does not specifically state that God made a covenant with Adam, it is clear that the essence of covenant is present in the Genesis account. The description of the fall of mankind in Genesis 3 details the separation of man from God, or

the human predicament. Due to the nature of sin, which entered the world when Adam and Eve sinned against God by eating the forbidden fruit, humankind could no longer intimately relate to its Creator. From that circumstance “emerges a distinctive feature of divine-human covenants; namely, that God alone can initiate the relationship of covenant” (Craigie 1988, 532). The biblical truth of God as initiator of covenants establishes a precedent for all the following covenants.

The next covenant is the Noachian covenant. In fact, the first explicit mention of the term “covenant” is in the flood account, and “refers to the initiative taken by God to bind himself again to human beings” (532). The sinfulness of humankind continues through the time of the flood, whereby God decides to punish the earth and renew His covenant with the sign of a rainbow. It follows that the “climax of the flood narrative is best understood in terms of a re-creation – a restoration of the divine order that had been established at creation” (Williamson 2003, 139). The Noachian Covenant was preceded by bloody sacrifice, which was a foreshadowing of Christ’s coming. In addition, there is a focus on preserving seed (Genesis 9:9), which conveys its redemptive significance in that woman will deliver and repopulate mankind through childbirth. The testament, moreover, “demonstrates more clearly than any other OT revelation the essential priority of the objective features of the covenant over the subjective” (Payne 2009, 1068). God clearly reveals Himself as a God who judges but also keeps his promises and commitment to his plan.

In the Abrahamic Covenant, God promises Abraham land, progeny, kingship, and blessing. The Lord blesses Abraham and Sarah with a miraculous child, even though Sarah was too old to conceive. The theme of the “seed” therefore continues throughout Genesis; “his use of key words such as ‘seed’ (i.e., ‘offspring,’ ‘descendants’) and ‘blessing’ (‘making fertile and

victorious’) reinforces the book’s theme that God elected the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” to bless the earth (Waltke 2007, 306). They act as heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant, which serves as a calling on a nation to form a new nation that carries out God’s commands and sovereign plan. The covenant with Abraham “ensured a blessing through their seed to all nations, circumcision being adopted as the token” (Moss 1989, 162). In addition to promising seed, “the Abrahamic Covenant promises that God will...give his seed the land the Canaanites defiled” (Waltke 2007, 306). Although the Israelites had many struggles entering and keeping the Promised Land, God never broke his covenant; God always rescues his plan and keeps his promise.

The ancestral covenants previously mentioned act as “the theological backbone supporting the national covenants and against which they must be understood” (Williamson 2003, 149). The Mosaic Covenant at Sinai in Egypt is a national covenant that is frequently referred to in the Old Testament. Many scholars believe that “the covenant established between God and Israel at Mount Sinai is the focal point of the covenant tradition” (Craigie 1988, 533). After the miraculous exodus from Egypt, God gave Moses and the Hebrew people a covenant while they were at Mount Sinai. Interestingly, the framework of the Mosaic Covenant shares many similarities with suzerain-vassal treaties from the ancient Near East, specifically Hittite and Assyrian treaties (Unterman 2011, 158). The covenant was also a constitution, but given to Israel “by God, with appointed promise and penalty, duly inscribed on the tables of the covenant, which were deposited in the ark” (Moss 1989, 162). Rather than focusing on a family, the Mosaic Covenant addressed the whole nation with a set of governing rules. The resulting Ten Commandments, as well as other Mosaic legislation, follow the revelation of the covenant and produce new laws that detail how the Hebrews should live and honor God. The legislation

contained “both the moral requirements of the testament and the forms of ceremonial obedience that make up the ritual of the tabernacle, which became the testamental sanctuary” (Payne 2009, 1060). Due to the sin nature of humankind, the Israelites had trouble keeping the stipulations of the covenant. Although Retribution Theology, which states that there were consequences for disobedience of equal gravity to the sin committed, is present in the Mosaic covenant, that “does not mean that it is a ‘conditional covenant’; in fact, “the punishment that disobedience brings presumes that the relationship between the parties is still intact” (Unterman 2011, 159).

The next major covenant is the Davidic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was still active, but the covenant tradition underwent modification during the time of David because an additional element was added: “God entered a covenant with David as king...that was to be an everlasting covenant with David’s royal lineage” (Craigie 1988, 535). Many scholars argue that the Davidic Covenant is more unilateral than the Mosaic Covenant because it “speak[s] of what God offers, but not of what God requires in return” (Unterman 2011, 159). Unterman writes about the similarities of the Davidic Covenant with the promissory royal grants, which were common throughout the ancient Near East. According to the grants, “land was given to loyal servants by the king, and the grant required no further action on behalf of the grantee” (159). Likewise, the Davidic Covenant assures David of a permanent dynasty in which “the Davidic king is depicted metaphorically as the Son of God” (159). The Davidic Covenant is generally known as a Messianic covenant. For several centuries, David’s dynasty ruled a united Israel, but after the Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BC, a descendant of David was no longer ruling; however, “the everlasting nature of the covenant with David was brought out...not in the pages of ancient history but in the expectation of a Messiah who would be born of David’s

descendants” (Craigie 1988, 535). The New Testament, therefore, extends the Davidic Covenant into the new era and person of Jesus, which leads directly into the New Covenant.

The final major covenant is the New Covenant. The Davidic Covenant was eternal, and the Mosaic Covenant was, in essence, temporal, including conditional clauses “stated in the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy” (Craigie 1988, 535). Due to Israel’s continual disobedience of the law, Hebrew prophets often foresaw a dangerous end to the covenant relationship; however, some prophets, such as Hosea and Jeremiah, also saw that the covenant “was rooted in divine love and that therefore even the curse of God could not be final” (535). The concept of the New Covenant is conveyed through the parable of Hosea and his wife. The prophet Hosea divorces his wife, Gomer, who is unfaithful to him, and God later commands him to remarry Gomer and reconcile. Hosea’s marriage story is a parable that reflects Israel’s relationship with God: “Israel’s sin would inevitably culminate in a divorce from God,” (535) but God accepts Israel back into the relationship through the New Covenant. Craigie purports that after the exile from the Promised Land into Babylon, Jeremiah understood that there was a truth beyond his contemporary realities at work (535). In Jeremiah 31:31, he writes of a new covenant that God would bring into effect: “The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah,” which according to Jeremiah 31:33, would be marked by a fundamental act of God within human hearts. In Luke 22:20, during the last supper, Jesus refers to his blood as “the new covenant.” The New Covenant is essential to an understanding of the Old and New Testaments. Through the initial, Noachian, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenants, God reveals himself and his plan for his people in the Old Testament.

Kingship

The theme of kingship is very important in the Old Testament. The Hebrew name for “king,” *melek*, is “connected with an Assyrian root meaning ‘advise,’ ‘counsel,’ ‘rule,’ and it seems to have first signified ‘the wise man,’ the ‘counselor,’ and then ‘the ruler’” (Boyd 1989, 515). In the Old Testament, as the etymology of the name suggests, the Hebrew people knew that God valued counsel and wisdom for his officials. The title ‘King’ is first attributed to rulers of the ancient city-states during the time of Abraham (515). The concept of kingship was popularized in the Abrahamic Covenant, and later defined as an office in 1 Samuel. In the Old Testament, kingship could either be “God’s gift to Israel and/or a concession to their unbelief” (Waltke 2007, 680). While kings can be a form of “divine election,” they can also be extremely displeasing to God (680). For example, Israel’s elders tell Samuel, “Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:5). Their request for a king is not necessarily wrong, but “their sin lay in wanting a king like all the nations” (690). Not only does God disapprove of Israel’s kings being like the others, He also gives specific instructions for kings in Deuteronomy 17. Deuteronomy 17:15 indicates that the Israelites are to appoint a king that God chooses. Furthermore, Deuteronomy 17:15-18 clearly states:

He must be from among your fellow Israelites. Do not place a foreigner over you... The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt... He must not take many wives... He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests.

Through Deuteronomy 17, God reveals that Israel’s king must not be a foreigner, a militarist, a materialist, or an internationalist. He recognizes that these qualities lead to destruction, and therefore provides very specific guidelines. The king is instructed to read the law so that “he may learn to revere the Lord his God” (19) and keep the covenant commands. Additionally, the Lord promises that the king and his descendants will reign a long time over the

kingdom in Israel, if the king observes the law and does not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites. The office of kingship was divinely appointed, and God valued humility within that role. Interestingly, the term “shepherd” was often used as a royal term to describe kingship in the Old Testament. One of Pharaoh’s common titles was “Good Shepherd,” and Moses was also referred to as a shepherd. In fact, “the Lord is my Shepherd,” actually means, “Yahweh is my King” (Fowler 2014). While many attribute the term “shepherd” to humility, it is also a symbol of power.

The history of kingship within Israel is complex. Old Testament patriarchs such as Abraham, Joseph, and Moses were divinely appointed leaders; however, the actual office of kingship did not take hold until after the period of the judges. Kingship was promised to Abraham in his covenant, reiterated to Jacob, predicted for the tribe of Judah, personified in Moses, incorporated into Mosaic law in Deuteronomy, passed onto Joshua, nonexistent during Judges, and established in Samuel. God chooses to use kingship as a means to continue his divine plan for humankind. During the time of the Judges, and Israel’s occupation of the Promised Land, the Israelites were assembled in tribes and vulnerable to foreign invasion; “in order to preserve the nation from extermination, it became necessary that a closer connection and a more intimate bond of union should exist,” calling for the office of a king (Boyd 1989, 515). Many of Israel’s ‘kings’ as a young nation were “little more than local or tribal heroes, carrying on guerilla warfare against their neighbors” (515). Traditionally, kings in the Old Testament were leaders in war and supreme judges (515). Succession was also an important historical factor. For example, the succession in Judah remained into the house of David, and the father always succeeded the son in the kingdom of the Ten Tribes, “unless violence and revolution destroyed the royal house and brought a new adventurer to the throne” (516). The Israelites did

mostly observe the office of kingship as a positive position for the nation's good, and "law and ancient custom were, in the people's minds, placed before the kingly authority" (516).

The main Hebrew kings were Saul, David, and Solomon. During the reign of David and Solomon, the Israelite kingdom reached its Zenith; however, after the death of Solomon, "the northern ten tribes broke away, refusing to give allegiance to the dynasty of David, and thereafter had their own kings" (Payne 1986, 21). Saul, David, and Solomon were all flawed kings. Saul, though he started out as clearly the divinely appointed king, was shown to be rather superficial, and "when Saul and his sons fell on Mt. Gilboa, it was not long till David the outlaw chief of Judah was invited to fill his place" (Boyd 1989, 516). Saul committed a serious disobedience to the law by using divination to gain information prior to battle in 1 Samuel 28. Although this does not seem like a lofty crime, "Saul neither had nor acquired the theological sophistication to see and perform his role in proper perspective or to function in it successfully" (Hill and Walton 1991, 273). After his initial mistakes, the text says that Yahweh's Spirit was then replaced by an evil spirit (1 Samuel 16:14). Christians often shed a poor light on Saul, and then contrast his failures with the appearance of King David, the seemingly perfect leader. Although David was a powerful, smart, and spiritual king, he was also flawed. His fibs cost people their lives (1 Samuel 21); his anger caused him to execute civilians (1 Samuel 27); his lust led him to murder and commit adultery (2 Samuel 11); his pride led to a devastating pestilence upon the land (2 Samuel 24); and yet, "David was loyal to the Lord and recognized when he had committed sin" (Hill and Walton 1991, 274). When David passed the kingship to his son Solomon, "the transition from the system of judges to that of monarchy was complete" (Logan and Clendenen 2003, 986). While Solomon was accredited wisdom, success, and riches, he also possessed serious folly. After ascertaining a firm control on the kingdom, he "turned his attention to taking foreign wives and

to building projects” (Logan and Clendenen 2003, 986). Solomon’s lust for power and worship of foreign idols led to his destruction, and ultimately God’s judgment through the loss of the kingdom.

The theme of kingship is intertwined all throughout the Hebrew text. While it takes different forms and connotations, it is clear that God used kingship as a means to continue his divine plan in the Old Testament.

Grace

The theme of grace is prevalent throughout the Old Testament, although many people incorrectly assume it is specific to the New Testament. The contrast people draw between Old Testament law and grace “would have puzzled the ancient Israelite for whom there was hardly any greater display of God’s grace than that demonstrated in his giving of the law” (Hill and Walton 1991, 175). Two Hebrew words are used often in the Old Testament in relation to the idea of grace: *hanan* and *hesed*. The verb *hanan* is “found more than sixty times in the OT” and “denotes kindness or graciousness in action, often expressed as a gift” (Heath 2003, 372). Throughout the Old Testament, the word *hanan* is used to describe God’s graciousness to a needy people. The related noun *hen* denotes “favor,” and the “emphasis shifts to the disposition of the one who shows favor rather than the experience of the recipient of grace” (372). In many verses, *hen* will be followed by the words “in the eyes of Yahweh,” conveying the idea that certain humans can find favor in the eyes of the Lord.

In Exodus 34:6 God tells Moses, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” Grace and mercy together connote God’s kindness and faithfulness to his people. The word that most often substitutes for grace is *hesed* (372). Although the word is found nearly 250 times in the Old Testament, it cannot be translated by a

single English word, and most closely translates as a composite of grace, mercy, compassion, and steadfast love; *hesed* is defined as “the disposition of one person toward another that surpasses ordinary kindness and friendship” and “the inclination of the heart to express ‘amazing grace’ to the one who is loved” (372). Heath continues to describe *hesed* as a term used in covenant, for a committed, familial love that is “deeper than social expectations, duties, shifting emotions or what is deserved or earned by the recipient” (372). God’s grace for humankind in the form of *hanan* and *hesed* is hard to fathom, but it is meant to express God’s faithfulness to his divine plan and chosen people, as well as to incite worship.

Themes of grace are stated or implied in almost every narrative of the Old Testament. The grace of God is displayed through God’s faithfulness and commitment to his covenant promises by the redemption of mankind through the flood, blessing of Abraham’s descendants, deliverance from Egypt, and establishment of his presence and law among the Israelites. The grace of God that is revealed in the Old Testament narratives is “seen in conjunction with God’s judgment of sin” (375). Many readers focus on the judgment present in the Old Testament, and miss the grace that God continually extends to the sinful Israel. Seeing as the term connotes “unmerited divine favor,” (Weber 2009, 840) judgment and grace actually work together in the Old Testament to bring about God’s will.

Generally, the doctrine of grace in the Old Testament “pertains to God’s activity rather than to his nature,” and is “the dimension of divine activity that enables God to confront human indifference and rebellion with an inexhaustible capacity to forgive and to bless” (Bilezikian 1988, 898). Therefore, grace is not simply a characteristic of a loving God, but it is a means through which God expresses his unmerited forgiveness. In Exodus 34:6, God reveals himself as a God “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

The word mercy is written in conjunction with grace often in the Hebrew text. Through Isaiah 60:10, which states, “For in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you,” God pours his mercy upon the unfaithful Israelites. Joshua 11:20 states: “For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts...in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed.” These verses convey that “grace brings mercy, and the withholding of it brings judgment” (Millikin 2003, 678). The following list of narratives are examples of God’s grace in the Old Testament: God’s deliverance of Noah’s family during the flood, His rescue of Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah’s demise, His gift of divine revelation to Moses, His assurance of divine presence, His selection of Israel for inheritance, His giving of the Promised Land, His choice of David for kingship, His protection of the Israelite people in captivity, and His prophecy of the coming Messiah (678).

An important aspect of grace in the Old Testament is its connection with the Law. God demonstrates more grace by giving the Israelites law, “for [it] provide[s] practical, ethical and spiritual guidance for reclaiming their lives in the Promised Land” (Heath 2003, 374). The Israelites were in captivity for years prior to their deliverance into the Promised Land, and God knew that they needed a set of instructions to guide their actions and attitudes. The book of Leviticus details the change in thinking that occurred after the institution of the Law, whereby the Israelites began to view the world, and everything in it, through the lens of holiness. God graciously gave the gift of the Law so that the Israelites would know how to come into His presence and how to relate to Him. The Law was not able to make them righteous, but in recognition of the attitude of their hearts, God extended his grace.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice in the Old Testament is conveyed mostly through the system of sacrifices and offerings brought into the tabernacle, and later the temple, of the Lord. Many years passed prior to and during the Hebrews' enslavement in Egypt before Yahweh reestablished his presence among his people. Exodus 40:34 states: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle"; in Leviticus 1:1, the Lord "call[s] to Moses and [speaks] to him from the tent of meeting." These verses illustrate the establishment of Yahweh's divine presence in the temple and among the people after their deliverance from Egypt. The resulting Law placed a crucial emphasis on the sacrificial system, which "consisted of the five major kinds of sacrifices and offerings, the basic regulations...and the foundational applications" (Averbeck 2003, 706). The purpose of the sacrificial system was "to provide a means of approaching the Lord in his place of manifest presence in Israel and to maintain that presence by preserving the purity and holiness of the sanctuary" (706). Therefore, sacrifice in the Old Testament denoted an act of worship and purification, as a way to relate to Yahweh.

Burnt offerings existed long before the Mosaic Law, and were used in cultures throughout the ancient Near East. In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel made alters and presented sacrifices to God. Noah presented a burnt offering after the flood in Genesis 8:20, and Abraham and the other Patriarchs built alters throughout Genesis. Moses "ratified the covenant at Sinai by means of burnt and peace offerings offered on a solitary alter constructed there" (706). Furthermore, the presence of a sacrificial system was not unique to the Israelites. Many other tribes and peoples used sacrifices in an attempt to honor their gods. The "sacrifices and offerings were designed to serve the gods by meeting any physical need that they might have had...Faithfulness to the preparation and presentation of them was an act of devotion" (Langston and Charleston 2003, 1428). Therefore, sacrifice was always a part of ancient history. However,

God desired for the Israelites to be set apart, and consequently gave them specific instructions for their sacrifices through the Law.

There were five major types of sacrifices: burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. According to Langston and Charleston, burnt offerings were offered in the morning and evening, as well as on special days. Animals common to these sacrifices were young bulls, lambs, goats, turtledoves, or pigeons, and they had to be perfectly complete (1429). Most often, the animal depended on the wealth and ability of the person making the sacrifice. Leviticus 5:7 declares, “But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering.” Leviticus 5:7 stresses the importance of the sacrificial system as an act of obedience and a posture of the heart, rather than simply a religious ritual. When Araunah offered David his threshing floor to make sacrifices on, David refused and said, “I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24). David knew that the underlying principle of sacrifice was to give up something of value in order to honor and glorify Yahweh.

Grain offerings were from the harvest of the land. These offerings were the only type that did not require bloodshed, and they were “composed of fine flour mixed with oil and frankincense” and were sometimes “cooked into cakes prior to taking it to the priest” (Langston and Charleston 2003, 1430). There is no reason given for the grain offerings in the Old Testament; however, “it may have symbolized the recognition of God’s blessing in the harvest by a society based to a large degree on agriculture” (1430). Therefore, the grain offering was an expression of devotion and thankfulness for Yahweh’s provision.

Peace offerings consisted of the sacrifice of a perfect bull, cow, lamb, or goat, during which time the individual laid a hand on the animal before killing it, and afterwards partook in a “meal of celebration” from certain parts of the meat that were leftover (1430). These peace offerings were in response to unexpected blessings or answers to prayer. They were also welcome as a general sign of thankfulness to Yahweh, and were performed at many religious festivals. Contrary to popular opinion that sacrificial offerings in the Old Testament were impersonal and harsh, the Israelites saw the peace offerings as a way to rejoice in thankfulness to Yahweh and display their adoration.

Sin offerings were “designed to purify the sanctuary from sin that was committed unintentionally, and thereby allow God to continue dwelling with His people” (1430). In a culture that saw the world through the lens of what was holy, it was imperative for them to reconcile themselves after sinning. In other words, “the violator of the law could gain forgiveness before God, while the unclean person could be brought back into the condition of being ritually clean” (Averbeck 2003, 719). The guilt offering, which was very similar to, and almost overlapped, the sin offering, “was concerned supremely with restitution,” and most often, guilt offerings were performed to cleanse a leper, an adulterer, or one who had broken a vow (719).

While sacrifice was an integral part of the religious law in the Old Testament, it represented Israel’s heart for and devotion to Yahweh. The sacrifices were carried out individually and corporately, conveying their unity as Yahweh’s people. Ultimately, sacrifice “demonstrated that God had provided a way for dealing with sin” and for dwelling among his people (719).

Prophetism

Prophecy is defined as “reception and declaration of a word from the Lord through a direct prompting of the Holy Spirit and the human instrument thereof” (Songer 2003, 1333). According to Songer, there are three key Hebrew terms that are used to describe the prophet: *ro’eh* and *hozeh* mean “seer,” and the most important term, *navi*, usually means “prophet,” which denotes “one who is called to speak” (1333). Kings and priests usually inherited their positions in society, whereas God specifically elected prophets. God used prophets for long or short periods of time throughout the Old Testament, and there is no biblical distinction between the prophetic office and the prophetic gift; while it is tempting to view prophets as titles, such as those of kings, “the work of a prophet is not the fulfilling of an office, but the performance of a function” (MacRae 2009, 994). Although the term prophet may falsely seem to be relative, all true prophets share certain God-given traits and abilities.

In order to be classified as a prophet, the prophets of the Old Testament needed to share several key characteristics, the first being a call from the Lord, for “attempting to prophesy without such a commission was false prophecy” (Songer 2003, 1334). In Jeremiah 14:14, the Lord says: “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.” God makes it very clear that prophets must receive word directly from Him, and often they were “allowed to see into the throne room and heavenly court” (1334). However, their word from the Lord usually came in many different ways and forms, such as dreams, visions, or direct communication. Whatever the means by which the word was communicated to them, all prophets spoke the word of God – they were “primarily spokespersons who called His people to obedience by appealing to Israel’s past and future” (1334). For example, through Israel’s past blessings and future judgment, God places emphasis

on social justice and mercy for those in need. Prophets did not just speak the Word, they also acted out much of what they communicated. Hosea's reconciliation with his wife was a parable of God's restored relationship with Israel. Many prophets performed miracles, or at least saw "a miraculous fulfillment of God's word" (1334). Prophets were also rather like ministers, in that they were to watch the people, test them, and ensure that they were following the will of God. In Jeremiah 6:27 God claims that he has made his prophet "a tester of metals among my people, that [he] may know and test their ways." Finally, an especially important role of the prophet was that of an intercessor. In 1 Kings 17:17-24, the prophet Elijah sojourns with a widow, whose son dies during the stay. Elijah prays to the Lord to save the boy, and is able to present the widow with her resurrected son. She then praises the Lord and exclaims that Elijah is truly a man of God. Elijah was able to successfully intercede on behalf of the woman.

While all of the previously stated qualities are characteristics of prophets, there are also signs of false prophets. The first example of a false prophet in the Old Testament is Baal. Jeremiah 2:8 and 23:13 both speak of people who prophesied by Baal. When Jezebel "introduced Baal worship into Israel, groups of men appeared who were called 'prophets of Baal,'" although there is no biblical evidence to assume that they ever claimed to receive word directly from Baal (MacRae 2009, 1005). 1 Kings 22 reveals an incident that neatly describes the issue of false prophecy within the Old Testament. When Ahab invited Jehoshaphat to attack Ramoth Gilead, he sought the counsel of his men that claimed to be prophets. All of his prophets declared that he would triumph in battle, but Jehoshaphat asked whether there was not one more prophet that could advise him. Ahab reluctantly brought a prophet named Micaiah, who usually prophesied distressing messages. Micaiah revealed that Ahab and his men would be destroyed in battle, and angrily Ahab threw him in prison; yet, just as Micaiah prophesied, Ahab died in battle and the

hypocrisy of the false prophets was revealed. However, it is important to note that even true prophets were “fallible and sinful” and in their human capacity “apt to err”; it was only “when directly presenting a message that God chose to give them that their words were free from error” (1006). Due to the confusing nature of prophesy in the Old Testament, Moses recorded certain tests in answer to the Israelites’ question, “How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken” (Deuteronomy 18:21)? Moses’ instructions can be summarized as: a true prophet must speak in the name of the Lord; a true prophet may produce a sign or a wonder; a prediction given by a true prophet may be visibly fulfilled; and the most important test of all – a prophet’s word will agree with previous revelations (MacRae 2009, 1006-1007).

Prophets played a major role in Israel’s history. The first prophet in the Old Testament is generally considered to be Moses. He was a prophetic prototype, and in Deuteronomy 34:10 Israel looks for a prophet like Moses, claiming, “There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.” Deborah, the prophetess, assisted the Israelites in securing the Promised Land by predicting victory and the right time to attack, as detailed in Judges. God used Samuel, who transitioned the Israelites into a period of monarchy, and was identified as a “prophet, priest, and judge” (Songer 2003, 1333) to anoint Saul as king and defeat the Philistines in battle. Gad, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha all advised the kings on God’s word. These early prophets “did more than predict the future; their messages called Israel to honor God,” and “their prophecies were not general principles but specific words corresponding to Israel’s historical context” (1333). The writing prophets arose amongst the political turmoil around 750 BC, when the Assyrians rose to power. Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah all prophesied during this difficult time period. Jeremiah and Ezekiel responded to the threat of the Babylonians with their prophecies, and the beginning of the Persian Empire brought about

prophets such as Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (1333). The prophets underwent much persecution and critique, but they were all committed to conveying God's messages for his people and continually ensuring that the Israelites turned back to God's plan.

The Old Testament can be easily misunderstood, and a basic understanding of the themes of covenant, kingship, grace, sacrifice, and prophetism is crucial. Through covenant, Yahweh reveals aspects of his divine nature and relates to his people; through kingship, Yahweh discloses his plan for Israel as a nation; through grace, Yahweh extends unmerited mercy and loving-kindness upon his chosen people; through sacrifice, Yahweh allows the Israelites to be cleansed and sanctified in His presence; and through prophetism, Yahweh aids Israel in understanding His divine calling for their lives. God uses each of these themes as a powerful means of effecting self-revelation throughout the Old Testament and a beautiful promise of the coming Messiah.

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