

Theophany and Prophecy

1. Introduction
2. Theophany and Prophecy in the OT
 - a. Encounters with God
 - b. The Academic Debate
 - c. True and False Prophets
3. Prophecy in the OT and Today
 - a. Dispensations and the Canon
 - b. God's Grace and Sovereignty
4. Conclusions

1. Introduction

The present work covers a wide range of topics that are gathered under the overall headline of ‘theophany and prophecy’. Theophanies are, in simple terms, visible encounters with God. We will list and classify many of them as they are recorded in the Old Testament, before going deeper into the academic question of interpretation. Slightly beyond the subject of theophany lies the subject of prophecy, since God in his encounters spoke his Holy Word to the people and insofar also entrusted them with the prophetic office. Then, we will contrast true prophecy with false prophecy that is not of divine origin. The whole subject of ‘theophany and prophecy’ in regard to the Old Testament will be discussed in chapter two. The third chapter adds to the work by relating it to the debate about ‘prophecy today’.

2. Theophany and Prophecy in the OT

a. Encounters with God

The term “theophany” is a Greek expression derived from θεος (*theos*) meaning “God” and φαίνω (*phaino*) meaning “to appear”. It is “a manifestation of God in visible and bodily form before the incarnation.”¹ Not every record of “appearance” clearly describes a theophany in this sense. Some texts tell us that the Lord somehow

¹ John M. Baze Jr., “The Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament (Part 1),” *Conservative Theological Journal* 1 (December 1997): 272.

“appeared” to people without providing further textual details about the nature of the appearance (Abraham – Gen 12:7; 17:1; Isaac – Gen 26:2.24; Jacob – Gen 35:1.9; 48:3; cf. Ex 6:3; David – 2 Chr 3:1).² To the Israel nation, in some way the “glory of the Lord” appeared (Lev 9:23f.; Numb 14:10; 16:19; cf. 20:6), possibly in the form of a cloud as in other instances where the Lord’s glory is also in focus. The list below contains Old Testament records about supernatural, visible appearances of various kinds that can be designated likely as a theophany.

Person	Bible Passage	Description of Encounter
<i>Hagar</i>	Genesis 16:7-13	The Angel of the Lord comforted Hagar in the desert and promised a son.
	Genesis 21:17-19	The Angel of God called to her from heaven and opened her eyes to see a well.
<i>Abraham</i>	Genesis 18:1ff.	“The Lord appeared to Abraham” – he saw “three men” – to promise a son and to tell him about Sodom and Gomorrah.
	Genesis 22:11	The Angel of the Lord called from heaven not to sacrifice Isaac. (cf. 22:15)

² Ibid., 273.

<i>Jacob</i>	Genesis 31:11-13	The Angel of the Lord spoke to Jacob in a dream to go back to his native land.
	Genesis 32:24-30	Jacob wrestled with God. (cf. Hos 12:4)
<i>Moses</i>	Exodus 3:2	“The Angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.”
	Exodus 34:6-8	The Lord passed in front of Moses, proclaiming about Himself.
	Numbers 11:25	The Lord appeared to Moses in a (pillar of) cloud and spoke with him (“face to face”, Numb 12:8; cf. Ex 33:9; Deut 31:15ff.).
<i>Israel</i>	Exodus 13:21f.	The Lord went ahead of Israel in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. (cf. 14:19)
	Exodus 16:10	The glory of the Lord appeared to the people of Israel “in the cloud.” (cf. Numb 16:42)
	Exodus 19:16-19	Theophany upon Mount Sinai with thunder and lightning, a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast. (cf. 24:15-18)
	Exodus 40:34-38	“The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” Fire was

		in the cloud by night.
	Judges 2:1-3	The Angel of the Lord spoke to them at Bokim.
	1 Kings 8:10-11	“The cloud filled the temple of the Lord”, and “the glory of the Lord filled his temple.”
<i>Balaam</i>	Numbers 22:22-35	The Angel of the Lord confronted Balaam and warned him to prophesy truthfully.
<i>Joshua</i>	Joshua 5:13-6:5	The angelic “commander of the Lord’s army” spoke about the war against Jericho.
<i>Gideon</i>	Judges 6:11-21	The Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and told him to save Israel from the Midianites.
<i>Manoah & his wife</i>	Judges 13:2-23	The Angel of the Lord appears to them and promises a son, Samson the Nazirite.
<i>Samuel</i>	1 Samuel 3:1-21	The Lord appeared to Samuel in a vision and spoke against Eli the priest.
<i>David</i>	2 Samuel 24:16-17	The Angel of the Lord appeared to strike Israel but then relented. (cf. 1 Chr 21:15ff.)
<i>Solomon</i>	1 Kings 3:5; 9:2	The Lord appeared to him twice in a dream.
<i>Elijah</i>	1 Kings 19:5-7	The Angel of the Lord touched Elijah and brought him bread and water.

	2 Kings 1:3.15	The Angel of the Lord spoke to Elijah.
<i>Micaiah</i>	1 Kings 22:19-23	Micaiah saw the Lord sitting on his throne and prophesies about this against King Ahab.
<i>Job</i>	Job 38:1 (?)	“The Lord answered Job out of the storm.” Job writes in 42:5 that his eyes have also <i>seen</i> God.
<i>Isaiah</i>	Isaiah 6:1-5	Isaiah “saw the Lord seated on a throne”, and flying seraphs above Him.
	2 Kings 19:35	The Angel of the Lord struck the Assyrians. (cf. 2 Chr 32:21; Is 37:36)
<i>Ezekiel</i>	Ezekiel 1:1-28	The prophet Ezekiel saw “visions of God.”
<i>Daniel</i>	Daniel 6:22 (?)	The angel protected him from the lions. (cf. 3:28)
	Daniel 7:13	Daniel saw in his vision “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.”
<i>Zechariah</i>	Zechariah 1:1ff.	He saw the Angel of the Lord in a vision. (cf. 3:1ff.)

Among all these theophanies, most prominent was an encounter with the “Angel of the Lord.” The messenger appeared to Hagar, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, whole Israel, Balaam, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel’s parents, David and Elijah. Finestone says “it will be observed that without exception the appearances of the Angel of Jehovah are

always in connection with Israel's destiny."³ One may add that in rare cases the encounters were personal rather than corporate. It is noteworthy that the first appearance of the Angel of the Lord was to Hagar "who is not even included in major features of the Abrahamic covenant."⁴ Like in Elijah's case, she was comforted and cared for by the angel. But certainly the future of whole Israel was at stake when, for example, the angel spoke to Abraham and saved the promised son Isaac.

Israel was led out of Egypt by a cloud at daytime and a pillar of fire in the night. Other references show that it was the Angel of the Lord who was sent to guide them. (Ex 23:20-23; 32:34; 33:2; Numb 20:16; Judg 2:1-4) Similarly the Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses "in flames of fire from within a bush." The natural phenomena were most awesome at the height of Israel's history when God appeared upon Mt. Sinai to establish the Mosaic covenant. About Job it is recorded that the Lord spoke to him out of the storm. It remains unclear in which sense he also saw the Lord.⁵

Less spectacular were the descriptions of God when he appeared as mere man. As such he came to Abraham, Jacob, Gideon and Samuel's parents. Manoah and

³ Daniel Finestone, "Is the Angel of Jehovah in the Old Testament the Lord Jesus Christ?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 95 (July 1938): 373.

⁴ John F. Walvoord, "Series in Christology – The Preincarnate Son of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 104 (1947): 416.

⁵ Williams outlines some interpretations of the "Theophany of Job", see James G. Williams, "Deciphering the Unspoken: the Theophany of Job," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 49 (1978): 61-63; his own view that Job is a 'comedy' is unworthy of discussion – Williams himself admits that he does not comprehend it; *ibid.*, 72.

possibly Gideon, too, recognized the man as the Angel of the Lord only later. Rather different are the vivid descriptions of the Lord who appeared to the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah in visions. Micaiah and Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a throne, and Daniel saw “one like a son of man.” Samuel had a vision or dream, possibly like Jacob and Solomon. The Old Testament passes down to us a variety of theophanies and the genre is passionately studied and debated among scholars.

b. The Academic Debate

It is indeed vital and of great value to search the books, articles and commentaries to get some insight into the difficult field of theophanies. For the sake of clarity the student divides the subject roughly into five categories:

- (1) The Angel of the Lord
- (2) The Pillar of Cloud
- (3) Man Theophanies
- (4) Dream Theophanies
- (5) Prophetic Visions

(1) The discussion about the first type of theophany starts with the question whether the “Angel of the Lord” is merely an angelic being or indeed God himself. Whereas some may deny any claims of divinity, the juxtaposition of God and the

Angel compels others to debate in which sense the angel could be God. In the spirit of the “history-of-religion-school”, some investigate the phrase in light of the religious beliefs of ancient Jewish circles. Margaret Barker presupposes that ancient Judaism was actually not monotheistic, and that deep within the Jewish traditions can be found a belief in more than one god. She concludes that on this basis Jesus Christ was identified as the Angel of the Lord, Israel’s second God (but not the Second Person of the Trinity). Thus Barker reads the Angel of the Lord as a god but not as Yahweh.⁶

Stephen L. White also stumbles on the doctrine of the Trinity. He concludes that the Angel of the Lord is God, but only in the sense that it is merely a euphemism for God edited later into the biblical text to emphasize his transcendence.⁷ He resides with Newsom who teaches an ‘unresolved ambiguity’ in the records which say the people saw God but only an angel appeared. White’s presupposition and attitude towards the texts is further revealed when he says: “But when we think of a literary work with complex and varied sources like the OT, inconsistencies should not really trouble us too much.”⁸ It is important to recognize how such criticism downgrades the Bible, the very basis for biblical studies.

⁶ David W. Deakle, review of *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God*, by Margaret Barker, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 22 (Spring 1995): 95-97.

⁷ Stephen L. White, “Angel of the Lord: Messenger or Euphemism?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 50 (1999), 305.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Scholars from the conservative camp demonstrate by way of exegesis that the Angel of the Lord is no other than the preincarnate Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. Walvoord even says “It is safe to assume that every visible manifestation of God in bodily form in the Old Testament is to be identified with the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁹ Some critics follow Heidt who “dismisses this theory on two grounds: (a) there is no evidence in the text of the OT that there was any awareness of a plurality of the persons of God; and (b) there is positive emphasis throughout the OT on the unicity of God.”¹⁰ His way of reasoning appears to be superficial and stands in opposition to the following four points which provide a conclusive line of argument, based on exegesis of the relevant biblical passages:

(a) The Angel of the Lord is distinct from other angels

John M. Baze emphasized on the etymology of the term “Angel” [mal'āk (מלאך)] and its construct relationship with YHWH [הוה; מלאך] in all 56 occurrences of the phrase. The prefix ׀ before אֱלֹהִים designates the Angel as *the* official representative commissioned to deliver the divine message. The grammatical arrangement forbids translating “*an* Angel of the Lord” instead of “*the* Angel of the Lord.”¹¹ There is only one Angel of the Lord possessing all attributes of personality.

⁹ John F. Walvoord, “The Preincarnate Son of God,” 418.

¹⁰ Stephen L. White, “Angel of the Lord”, 303f.; he refers to W.G. Heidt, *Angelology of the Old Testament: A Study in Biblical Theology*.

¹¹ John M. Baze Jr., “The Angel of the Lord,” 269-271.

(b) The Angel of the Lord claims Deity

Twice the Angel of the Lord explicitly reveals about himself that he is God. To Jacob he proclaimed, “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me.” (Gen 31:13) To Moses the Angel said “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” (Ex 3:6; cf. 3:14)

Moreover, the Angel of the Lord told Manoah and his wife at their request that his name is ‘secret’ or ‘wonderful’. (Judg 13:18) In biblical times, a person’s name was closely associated with his character or reputation.¹² Finestone relates the answer to the name of the Messiah in Isaiah 9:6 (“He will be called Wonderful”) and so takes the verse as an “appellation of deity.”¹³ Hawthorne ties the term to the New Testament concept of ‘mystery’, that is now revealed in the incarnate Jesus Christ.¹⁴ (cf. Rom 16:25; Col 1:26)

(c) The Angel of the Lord is revered as Deity

Most persons who saw the Angel of the Lord reacted with reverence or even worship. Hagar honoured the Angel calling him “You are the God who sees me.” (Gen 16:13) Moses had to pay divine honours by taking off his shoes to step on the holy ground,

¹² J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (January 2001): 40.

¹³ Daniel Finestone, “Is the Angel of Jehovah the Lord Jesus Christ?”, 374.

¹⁴ Ralph Rogers Hawthorne, “The Significance of the Name of Christ,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 103 (July 1946): 351.

and he hid his face in the fear of God. (Ex 3:5f.) Joshua likewise took off his sandals, and he “fell face down to the ground in reverence.” (Josh 5:14f.) At Bokim, Israel offered sacrifices after the Angel of the Lord appeared to them. (Judg 2:4f.) Gideon cried out in fear and built an altar to the Lord. (Judg 6:22,24; cf. 13:22) Also David and the elders fell face down when they saw the Angel. (1 Chr 16:21)

(d) The Angel of the Lord is neither the Father nor the Spirit

The last point highlights the bodily appearance of the – divine – Angel of the Lord. Among the three Persons of the Trinity, only the Son of God is qualified to appear in this physical manner.¹⁵ Also Walvoord argues that (i) the Second Person is the visible God of the New Testament, (ii) the Angel of the Lord no longer appears after the incarnation of Christ, and (iii) both the Angel of the Lord and Jesus Christ are sent by God the Father.¹⁶ Walvoord rounds up his argument with point (d) in reference to John 1:18. When it says that “no-one has ever seen God,” the Father is in view but not the Son who makes him known. (cf. Jn 6:46) Young makes the same distinction:

The Angel is a real Being, and He is to be identified with God. Inasmuch as He is sent from the Lord, He is not God the Father Himself but distinct from the Father. If we would do justice to the Scriptural data, we must insist therefore both upon the distinguishableness of the Angel from the Father and also upon the identity of essence with the Father. Christian theologians have rightly seen in this strange Figure a preincarnate appearance of the One....¹⁷ (Jesus Christ).

¹⁵ John M. Baze Jr., “The Angel of the Lord,” 273f.

¹⁶ John F. Walvoord, “The Preincarnate Son of God,” 167.

¹⁷ Edward J. Young, “The Call of Moses – Part II,” *Westminster Theological*

To sum up, we agree with Baze who says “it is logical that the same Person of the Trinity should appear in bodily form in both Testaments.”¹⁸

(2) As listed in the table above, the Lord also appeared to Moses and Israel in a (pillar of) cloud, often accompanied by other natural phenomena. Significantly the people encountered God in visible and bodily form, again. Israel saw and followed the cloud through the desert, and so they followed God, indeed the Angel of the Lord. (cf. Ex 20:20-23; 32:34; 33:2; Numb 20:16; Judg 2:1-4) The Angel of the Lord appeared also to Moses not in the cloud but “from within a bush.” (Ex 3:2) In Ex 33:9, the pillar of cloud came down to the tent and spoke with Moses.¹⁹ When the people saw the cloud, they worshipped. Allen comes to the conclusion that the cloud is God in visible and bodily form, and consequently, that “the cloud was Jesus.”²⁰

Another descent of the cloud that appeared to Moses is recorded in Ex 34:5. Before, Moses asked God to reveal his glory and God replied: “You cannot see my face, for no-one may see me and live.” (Ex 33:20; cf. Jn 1:18) Moses was not able to see the Father’s glory, but “by a variety of advance prefigurements and representations of Jesus ... Moses could experience in a grand manner who God is

Journal 30 (November 1967): 4f.

¹⁸ John M. Baze Jr., “The Angel of the Lord,” 278.

¹⁹ In regard to the Hebrew grammar see Ronald B. Allen, “The Pillar of the Cloud,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (October 1996): 392.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 393.

and what God is.”²¹ Again, for Allen the appearance in/of the cloud was Jesus. More carefully Laney states: “In its many uses in Exodus and Numbers, the word ‘cloud’ (נֶבֶל) is associated with and represents God’s presence.”²² Either way, God visibly appeared while the doctrine of the Trinity remains untouched. And in response, also “Moses bowed down to the ground at once and worshipped.” (Ex 34:8)

(3) Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad – in harmony with mainstream liberal criticism – propose that the Angel of the Lord is God in *human* form. Von Rad writes, “Der Engel des Herrn ist ... eine Erscheinungsform Jahwes. Er ist Gott selbst in menschlicher Gestalt.”²³ And as a mediator the Angel is a type and shadow of Christ. In result von Rad says that the Angel is God but not Christ himself, and when he speaks of the “Zweinaturenlehre” he comes close to the incarnation doctrine.

On the contrary we demonstrated that the Angel of the Lord *is* Christ himself, but in his *pre*-incarnate state and *not* yet incarnate! The same must be uphold for the appearances that we call “man theophanies.” God appeared also as mere man, but he became real flesh not before the incarnation in Bethlehem. His appearance was rather something that Allen calls a “fleshen-envelope” of a spirit being.²⁴ For the same reasons as already outlined in (1) this being must have been Christ.

²¹ Ibid., 395.

²² J. Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation,” 40.

²³ Cited by Edward J. Young, “The Call of Moses,” 3, n. 8.

²⁴ Ronald B. Allen, “The Pillar of the Cloud,” 391.

(4) The “dream theophanies” happened to Jacob, Solomon and possibly Samuel. Concerning the latter the Bible actually does not say that Samuel was sleeping but only that he lay down. Whereas Gnuse sets forth his view that 1 Samuel 3 is a “literary creation cast in the form of a dream theophany” that shows all characteristics of an “auditory message dream” theophany, Long counters that it is rather unlikely, taken the account at face value, that Samuel fell asleep, woke up, fell asleep, woke up, fell asleep, woke up and fell asleep again.²⁵ On the other hand we have to admit that the inexperienced is simply ignorant about the exact nature of such supernatural phenomena. Even Paul could not say about his experience whether he was “in the body or out of the body” when he was “caught up to the third heaven.” (2 Cor 12:1ff.) Meeting God always involves crossing the borders of the ordinary.

Besides it remains unclear if Samuel actually *saw* God while hearing his voice. At least, the author records ‘visions’ and tells us that the Lord continued to ‘appear’. (1 Sam 3:1.15.21) Likewise in 1 Kings it is written that the Lord ‘appeared’ to Solomon in a dream. Jacob tells us that it was the Angel of the Lord who spoke to him. Overall, the similar language indicates that the theophanic appearances to Samuel, Solomon and Jacob are comparable in nature.

²⁵ V. Philips Long, review of *The Dream Theophany of Samuel: Its Structure to Ancient Near Eastern Dreams and Its Theological Significance*, by R. K. Gnuse. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28 (June 1985): 231.

(5) Edward J. Young has aptly expressed the difficulty to comprehend the true and real nature of a vision when he comments on Isaiah 6:1-5:

It is not the essence of God which Isaiah sees, for, inasmuch as God is spiritual and invisible, that essence cannot be seen by the physical eye of the creature. At the same time it was a true seeing; a manifestation of the glory of God in human form, adapted to the capabilities of the finite creature, which the prophet beheld! ... In mysterious manner the power of God came over the prophet, so that he became unconscious to the outside, external world, and yet with the inner eye saw what God revealed to him.²⁶

Such supernatural encounters with God are beyond our understanding, yet they were real experiences of the prophets. Only the critics deny such position and advocate that the passages are literary creations of the author (or editors), not divine inspirations. Watts regards the book of Isaiah as a drama (which he titles “Isaiah’s Vision”) that presents and characterizes God – by way of historical retrospect, not future prophecy. He concludes “that the ‘Yahweh’ of Isaiah’s Vision is indeed a rounded, open character, ambiguous enough to have satisfied Aristotle, and quite appropriate for the portrayal of God’s character.”²⁷ His words sound like a book review.

Barrick refers to the “complex redactional history” of the Ezekiel vision text.²⁸

²⁶ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1, *Chapters 1-18* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 235f.

²⁷ John D. W. Watts, “The Characterization of Yahweh in the Vision of Isaiah,” *Review and Expositor* 83 (1986): 448.

²⁸ W. Boyd Barrick, “The Straight-Legged Cherubim of Ezekiel’s Inaugural Vision,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982): 545.

Wilson sides with Zimmerli: “By making a careful form-criticism and tradition-historical analysis of the book, Zimmerli has clearly demonstrated the links between Ezekiel and earlier Israelite theological and literary traditions.”²⁹ Apart from his criticism, however, Wilson aptly contributes with his stress on the mysterious nature of a vision, the limitations of human language including images and the resulting difficulties in regard to interpretation. “The prophet seeks to describe the divine world, which is ultimately indescribable.”³⁰ Eventually Ezekiel’s vivid record of his vision forcefully highlights the supernatural dimension of Ezekiel’s theophany.

Here Launderville sets in and comments that Ezekiel’s vision spiritualizes the divine rule of Yahweh from the earthly to the heavenly realms. Though Yahweh’s rule is no more apparent in Judah in face of the Babylonian empire, he remains in power over the nations from his heavenly throne that Ezekiel depicts. Launderville’s weak point is that he places Ezekiel deep down into the thought world of the Greeks.³¹

While framed by real history, Ezekiel’s vision was, above all, distinct revelation.

Based on source criticism also Beasley-Murray concludes about Daniel’s vision:

²⁹ Wilson, Robert R. “Prophecy in Crisis: The Call of Ezekiel.” *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 119; cf. *ibid.*, 130; contra Block who defends Ezekiel as the primary editor of the work as we have it; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, vol. 1, *Chapters 1-24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

³¹ Dale Launderville, “Ezekiel’s Throne-Chariot Vision: Spiritualizing the Model of Divine Royal Rule,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004): 361-377.

“The coming on the clouds of one like a man is to be interpreted in terms of theophany... This accords with the form of the *myth adapted* in the chapter and the use to which it is *put in the vision*”³² (emphasis mine).

It is noteworthy that Jesus Christ himself refers back to Daniel’s vision and in particular to the appearance of the ‘Son of man’. The peculiar idea that Jesus actually referred back to a myth that never really happened cannot be followed. Also Archer points out that v. 13 “is the verse from Daniel that the NT quotes most frequently.”³³ In the New Testament Jesus teaches that his Second Coming will be again with the clouds of heaven. (Mt 24:30; 26:64; Mk 13:26) The judgment theme was introduced before, when the Angel of the Lord punished David’s sin and conquered the Assyrians. One of the central themes crucial for understanding theophanies is the portrayal of God as King.³⁴ Yahweh also appeared as Warrior-King at Sinai and “claimed the allegiance of the people He had delivered.”³⁵

In summary, while liberal scholars generally question the historical nature of the theophany accounts, conservative scholars usually agree “that the events portrayed ...

³² G. R. Beasley-Murray, “The Interpretation of Daniel 7,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1983): 58.

³³ Gleason L. Archer Jr., “Daniel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, *Daniel and the Minor Prophets*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 90.

³⁴ Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 84.

³⁵ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “The Polemic against Baalism in Israel’s Early History and Literature,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (July 1994): 274.

took place as described.”³⁶ The liberal argument that records of the supernatural cannot be historical is mere presupposition. At least, the same methodology for studying and interpreting the biblical data should be applied as done to any other ancient Near Eastern texts.³⁷ It is significant to recognize that so far no evidence was found which disproves the historicity of any of the recorded biblical theophanies. Prophets like Isaiah indeed saw God on his throne, the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ.³⁸

c. True and False Prophets

Most theophanies were accompanied by prophetic words. Even more, one can say that “God appears *in order* to speak.”³⁹ Below some of the prophecies are listed.

Genesis 16:10f.; 21:18	Hagar will have a son. Her descendants will be numerous.
Genesis 18:10	Sarah, Abraham’s wife, will have a son.
Genesis 22:17f.	Abraham’s descendants will be numerous.
Exodus 3:8.17	God will bring Israel out of Egypt into Palestine.
Deuteronomy 31:16	Israel will forsake God and break the covenant.
Exodus 16:12	The Israelites will have meat and bread to eat.

³⁶ Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁸ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 237.

³⁹ Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), 28 (emphasis added).

Judges 2:3	The indigenous people of Palestine will not be driven out.
Joshua 6:5	The walls of Jericho will collapse.
Judges 6:16	Gideon will strike down the Midianites.
Judges 13:3	Manoah's wife will have a son.
1 Samuel 3:12	God will judge the house of Eli the priest.
1 Kings 3:12f.	God will give Solomon wisdom, riches and honour.
1 Kings 22:19-23	God has decreed disaster for King Ahab.

Significant to recognize is that all these prophecies indeed came true. Deuteronomy 18:22 provides the main criterion for knowing “when a message has not been spoken by the Lord. If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken.” Thus the question of ‘prediction and fulfillment’ is one crucial point to distinguish between true and false prophecy. Insofar the theophanies indeed provided true prophecy from God. Benware argues that such prophetic records also prove the doctrine of inerrancy.⁴⁰

On a deeper level, the message of the prophet has to be in accordance with previous (covenantal) revelation. Deuteronomy 13 states that the prophet who leads the people to the worship of other gods should be put to death, no matter if the sign or wonder of which the prophet has spoken takes place or not. This point was of special

⁴⁰ Paul Benware, “Inerrancy in the Old Testament Historical Books,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 2 (1998): 286-303.

importance for the prophet Jeremiah. He not only predicted captivity in Babylon based on Deuteronomy 30:17f. but, even more, he also preached loyalty to the foreign power Babylon. (Jer 21:9; 38:2) Davidson says that “viewed in light of Deut. xiii 1-6 Jeremiah was a false prophet inviting his people to ‘go after other gods’.”⁴¹ Though Davidson in fact overshoots the mark, the Israelites may have agreed. Van Gemeren notes that only the true prophets were open to (Jeremiah’s) new revelation whereas the false prophets opposed him.⁴² Furthermore, Jeremiah was not vindicated until the actual fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and so for decades he was at pains to uphold his message and to expose false prophecy. Records about the theophanic experiences underlined the divine origin of the true prophets’ words. They have seen and heard God, who put his words into their mouths. They even ate them.⁴³

Jeremiah taught much about the nature of false prophecy. The prophet pinpoints in chapter 5:31: “The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way.” False prophets proclaimed the wrong but popular message of comfort and peace even for material gain (Jer 6:13f.) and so they scattered the flock and destroyed the vineyard. (Jer 12:10; 23:1; 50:6)

⁴¹ R. Davidson, “Orthodoxy and the Prophetic Word,” *Vetus Testamentum* 14 (October 1964): 412.

⁴² Willem A. van Gemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 60ff.

⁴³ Wilson, Robert R. “Prophecy in Crisis,” 126; cf. Jer 15:16, Ezk 3:1f.

Thus in summary, five common criteria of false prophets can be emphasized:

- their predictions did not come true
- their content opposed earlier revelation
- their messages did not bring new revelation
- they prophesied for status and gain
- in result they destroyed the community

The bottom line is that false prophecy was not of divine origin. God spoke to the true prophets who passed on the prophetic word, and he appeared to them in theophanies.

3. Prophecy in the OT and Today

a. Dispensations and the Canon

The subject matter of ‘prophecy today’ raises the first and most important question whether any kind of ‘prophecy’ actually still exists today at all. Moreover, discussion remains impractical as long as a definition of the term ‘prophecy’ is lacking. With the previous chapter two in mind, we may follow Elliott who says “Prophecy is a revelation by inspiration with words directly from God.”⁴⁴ We saw that the Old Testament prophets, at times even by way of theophanies, got their

⁴⁴ David Vaughn Elliott, “Does God speak to us today?” *Insight into Bible Prophecy* [home page on-line]; available from <<http://insight2bp.homestead.com/149.html>>; Internet (accessed 27 March 2008).

prophetic words directly from God. Their prophecy was of divine origin, it was inspired and therefore inerrant and infallible. Representing the view of dispensationalists (or ‘cessationists’), Elliott concludes contra ‘prophecy today’:

If someone today has a new vision or prophecy from God, let him add it to the Bible. If he does not dare add it to the Bible, let him admit it is not a revelation from God. The Bible is complete.⁴⁵

The point is that the biblical canon is now closed and, in contrast to Jeremiah’s case in the past, no-one can add more, new revelation. The argument is supported by revelation itself: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book.” (Rev 22:18) In view of the plagues, we should not take this verse lightly.

The counterpoint is given by the verse that follows: “If anyone takes away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share...” (Rev 22:19) Regarding the Bible as a whole, the reader faces a dilemma: The New Testament itself apparently teaches about ‘prophecy today’. Shall we take away from the book? In particular, Paul wrote the Corinthians to desire the ‘gift of prophecy’. (1 Cor 14:1) Shall we dismiss the verse? Since when shall we do so, and, more importantly, what else shall we dismiss? (cf. Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Thess 5:20) Following such an approach, what are the implications for biblical hermeneutics in general?

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Besides, the New Testament tells us about many prophets who also did not add to the Bible, nonetheless they prophesied. (cf. Acts 21:9) At another point Jesus comforts the persecuted: “For I will give you words and wisdom...” (Lk 21:15) Since their words will be of divine origin, why not in the form of prophecy? Questions such as these lead the student to a second thought.

b. God’s Grace and Sovereignty

The discussion about ‘prophecy today’ reminds the student of the book of Job. His friends maintained the orthodox view, but Job experienced God. The orthodox view always confines the acts of God to the human thought world. In contrast, God is sovereign and acts according to his will, not according to ours. Much of the discussion about ‘prophecy today’ revolves around people’s experiences. Like Job, people maintain that they have experienced God, sometimes even by way of prophecy.⁴⁶ Missionaries tell about God’s revelations, especially in the Muslim world. Some have meaningful dreams, while others speak words ‘directly from God’ in tongues.

It is the student’s conviction that by the sovereign grace of the Spirit believers may prophesy even today. Besides, who draws the exact line between Spirit-filled preaching and prophecy? Even the prophets of the Old Testament prophesied in

⁴⁶ The student admits that he experienced some kind of prophecy, too.

accordance with covenantal, scriptural revelation.⁴⁷ Regardless the comparison with the Old Testament, we simply cannot confine the work of the Spirit. We cannot put the Holy Spirit into a box, and neither did he put himself in a box, as Gaffin argues.⁴⁸ God's grace is sovereign. The student is reluctant to define how God deals with the gift of prophecy today. God may have 'ceased', at some points he may not.

More importantly, we have to recall that Jesus warned against *false* prophecy.⁴⁹ (cf. Mt 24:11,24) The total denial of 'prophecy today' may be an overreaction in defence against the many false prophets who appear today and about whom Jesus himself prophesied. Crouse points out that some people say the gift of prophecy 'should be revived' as it was in the First Century Church.⁵⁰ Like the cessationists, they try to tell God how to deal with prophecy. They want to 'revive' but not 'receive'. Prophecy – in the Old Testament often in tandem with theophany – was always grace that happens to man, not something that man can pull down from heaven.

⁴⁷ 'Prophecy' is closer to preaching rather than 'prediction'; cf. Willem A. van Gemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, 44ff.

⁴⁸ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "What about Prophecy and Tongues today?" *Orthodox Presbyterian Church* [home page on-line]; available from <http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH02/01d.html>; Internet (accessed 27 March 2008).

⁴⁹ If there is no longer *true* 'prophecy today', is all 'prophecy today' *false*?

⁵⁰ Bill Crouse, "The Gift of Prophecy: Is it for Today?" *Rapid Response Report* [home page on-line]; available from <<http://www.rapidresponsereport.com/briefingpapers/PROPHECY.pdf>>; Internet (accessed 27 March 2008); he refers to "Why Christians can still Prophesy," *Christianity Today*, Sept. 16, 1988; in a similar spirit the much debated book was written by Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester: Crossway, 1988).

4. Conclusions

God needs no advocate, neither pro nor contra – his own – ‘prophecy today’.

More important than a discussion about (true) ‘prophecy today’ is the warning against ‘false prophecy’ (today). And more important than the study of ‘prophetic words’ is the study of the Bible. *Sola Scriptura* – the Bible is sufficient for all Christian life.

Interestingly, the Bible itself points to the chief focus of true prophecy and even provides some kind of definition:

“The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” (Rev 19:10b)

Appendix

Even today false prophecy can be identified as in the Old Testament:

- false prophecy opposes earlier revelation, that is the Scriptures
- false prophecy is spoken for personal status and material gain
- the fruit of false prophecy is not edification but destruction

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