In the last twenty years three major issues have surfaced in the interpretation of the prophetic word. First, the distinction between true and false prophets has been blurred. Second, the problems arising from the nature of fulfillment have opened up a reevaluation of the hermeneutics of the prophets. Third, the connection between prophetic and apocalyptic literature has raised the question of continuity. In this article I explore these three developments as they relate to the matter of interpreting the prophetic word.

I. Who Is a Prophet of God?

Who is a prophet of God and who is not? The biblical criteria for the true prophet are clear and specific. According to Deut 13:1-3 and 18:14-22 the prophet of God (1) is called by the Lord; (2) speaks the word of God as God’s spokesperson; (3) speaks in the name of the Lord; (4) is an Israelite who addresses himself primarily to Israel; (5) stands in the tradition of the Mosaic covenant; (6) encourages loyalty to the Lord and to his revelation and condemns apostasy; and (7) authenticates his mission with “signs.”

The validation of a true prophet was often difficult. The godly had to discern between the true and the false, between Scripture and tradition, between the “old” revelation and the “new” revelation, between claim and counterclaim. The prophets of God rooted their message in God’s revelation to Moses and called on God’s people to respond anew by living in full accord with divine revelation. The deterioration of revelation to religion in Israel encouraged the rise of the popular prophets. The people looked for those religious leaders whose values did not significantly differ from their own. The people in Israel and Judah were complacent, syncretistic, and readily abandoned the way of revelation for the way of popularity with its lack of distinctiveness. The false prophets encouraged a selective lifestyle that combined elements of continuity with God’s revelation and an ability to adapt to the cultural changes.

The ministry of the “true” prophet is best seen in contrast with that of the “false.” The study of the false prophets is complicated by the relatively few recorded incidents in which the prophets of God encountered the false prophets (1 Kings 22; Jeremiah 28). In the confrontation between the true prophets (Micaiah and Jeremiah) with the false prophets (Zedekiah and Hananiah) both sets of prophets speak in the name of the Lord. But the false prophets enjoyed a social position, whereas Micaiah and Jeremiah were alone. They stood their ground, even though they were maltreated. Their final appeal lay in their confidence that the word of the Lord spoken through them would come true. They could not vindicate themselves, but believed that Yahweh would vindicate them through his presence in history.

1. Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28)

Hananiah represented the false prophets in Jerusalem. They were ideologists who operated from the conviction that Moses was true and would always be true. They believed the people of Judah were the legitimate heirs of the covenant, temple, theocracy, and Davidic monarchy. They could not conceive of the destruction of the temple. To them Jeremiah’s radical words of the destruction of the temple and the cessation of the Davidic monarchy were blasphemy. They were zealous for the preservation of the “old” way and closed to the “new” way of the Lord.

They believed that Jerusalem, “as the city of God,” was invincible. Had not Isaiah proclaimed that Yahweh would be with his people (Immanuel = “God is with us,” cf. Isa 8:8, 10)? In their zeal for Jerusalem, they disagreed with Jeremiah’s message as being inconsistent with their understanding of God’s promises. Jeremiah proclaimed that the temple in Jerusalem was no magic symbol that could restrict Yahweh. He is free and in his freedom he may destroy his own “house,” as he had done at Shiloh (Jer 26:6). Jeremiah’s theology angered the priests and the prophets, who asked him, “Why do you prophesy in the Lord’s name that this house will be like Shiloh

[p.82]
2. True and False Prophets

The message of the false prophet created serious damage to the credibility of the true prophet of God. The true prophet proclaimed a message that over a long period of time would be vindicated. Often he did not witness the fulfillment of the word of God. But he left a record of his oracles as a witness to generations to come that God's word is true.

The false prophets posed a great challenge to the veracity of the prophets of God. How could the godly distinguish the "true" from the "false"? The proposed solutions to the phenomenon of false prophets have been many and diverse. Von Rad assumed that false prophets always spoke a message of salvation and were connected with Israel's cult. R. P. Carroll explained it psychologically by the criterion of lack of fulfillment (or cognitive dissonance). According to him the dilemma of the prophets' contemporaries was in the delay in fulfillment of the prophetic words, whether true or false. The gap between prophecy and fulfillment created a problem for the godly.

[p.83]

These false prophets were dependent on traditional values and had a closed theological system. They claimed to be in continuity with God's word to Moses (Sinai theology) and to David (Zion theology), but did not properly apply the revelation of God to a new and concrete situation. James L. Crenshaw proposes that the rise of false prophets was "inevitable" because of the expectations of popular theology (vox populi). The vox populi binds the conscience of people, restricts their vision, and closes them to new and fresh interpretations and applications of God's word. The vox populi represents the collective conscious and subconscious common denominator of faith and its response to divine revelation. The vox populi determines what the prophet could or could not say, based on their theological assumptions and traditions. The true prophets stretched the "old" revelation by the "new" revelation. While the false prophets enjoyed a large support base by their appeal to Moses, by their zeal to perpetuate divinely ordained institutions, and by their affirmation of popular theology, the prophets of the Lord challenged the people to receive the word of the Lord, regardless of how it might transform their preconceptions and their lives.

3. Criteria for Validation

Were there objective criteria for validating the true prophets? Yes and no! The answer is "yes," when we reflect again on the seven criteria given by Moses. But the answer is also "no," because of the human corruption of revelation. The prophetic "institution" became affected by the teaching of the false prophets and by the popular response to their ministry. Crenshaw concludes that the prophets could not and did not find adequate ways of "self-validation" or authentication. Blenkinsopp modifies Crenshaw's radical thesis by explaining that the sociopolitical conditions of the late seventh century were so complex that "the criterion of historical falsification does not do justice to the complex nature of prophecy." He further concludes that this explains the failure of prophetism to keep itself alive in the postexilic era.

Both Crenshaw and Blenkinsopp explain the phenomenon of prophetism concretely and realistically, as prophet faced people and as prophet faced prophet. Wilson correctly observes that "it is likely that the problem is even more complex than even the most perceptive interpreters have realized." I shall give seven criteria that may help in discerning the true from the false. I do this with some hesitation, because it is much easier to discern the true from the false from our perspective, having the advantage of the historical validation of God's word through the events of the exile, postexilic restoration, intertestamental period, the coming of our Lord, the apostolic age, and the present church age.

(1) Revelation. The false prophets bring together revelation and religion. Instead of being completely transformed by the Mosaic revelation, they allowed for syncretism of popular beliefs and practices (religion) and the revelation of God. This syncretistic way of life (vox populi) helped them in gaining popular recognition.

The true prophets built on the foundation of the Mosaic law. As the guardians of the theocracy, they operated solely from the framework of revelation. They remained true to the foci of the Mosaic legislation: exclusive loyalty to Yahweh the covenant-Lord (suzerain), strict adherence to
the ethics of Sinai (regulations pertaining to holiness, righteousness and justice, love and fidelity, and a concern with peace), a sensitivity to social issues (justice and care for the rights of the poor, aliens, orphans, and widows), and a hope that the Lord would grant to Israel the privilege of his presence in blessing and protection, resulting in rest.

(2) Holistic proclamation. The false prophets selected themes from the revelation of God to comfort the people of God. They believed in God's promises: the election of Israel, the covenant, the inviolability of the temple, the promises regarding David, the election of Zion, and the divine blessings. But they did not for a moment apply God's warnings, judgments, and conditions to the people of God.[20] They did not consider what Motyer calls the "Exodus Quadrilateral" of "Holiness (obedience), Peace, Sin, Judgment."[21] They also did not recognize God, the Creator of everything, as free in his rule over his creation. They bound God to Israel and could not conceive of his abandoning his people to pagan nations. Hence, the false prophets were selective in their preaching.

In Israel the prophets, priests, and wise men gave spiritual leadership each in his own tradition. The perennial danger existed in "closing" the revelation of God by interpretation and by institutionalization, which left no room for new revelation from God.[22] This happened in the days of Jeremiah, when the leaders counselled together, "Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost,

[p.85]

nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says" (Jer 18:18).

The true prophets, however, affirmed the whole counsel of God. They taught that the Lord is free in his mercy and in his judgment. They also taught that the Creator-King is sovereign over all creation and that the clay cannot challenge the potter. The true prophets were not opposed to the cult, wisdom, or law as originally derived from Moses, but they were antagonistic to the institutionalization, restriction, and perversion of God's revelation. They opposed any human restriction on the freedom of God, whether in the temple, law, or monarchy. At the heart of the prophetic heritage lies the true worship of God "in spirit." The true prophets insisted on worship of the Lord from the heart and said that true worship always begins with an openness to God's freedom. Zimmerli writes, "Prophetic proclamation thus shatters and transforms tradition in order to announce the approach of the Living One."[23]

(3) Independence from power structures. The false prophets fostered illusions by advocating a Realpolitik. Realpolitik is a complex, human response to any dilemma. It is a reflex to fix whatever goes wrong, so as to perpetuate the human power, social structures, economic structures, and values. But Realpolitik also closes man's world to God, to the supernatural, and to God's freedom. Israel and Judah were open to a "religion" that kept open the possibilities of Realpolitik, but they were closed to the radical dimension of submission to revelation. The false prophets provided solutions for the problems at hand, whether social, political, or economic. The false prophets desired nothing better than a good name and the popular recognition that goes with it. They were anxious to be consulted, but they were not zealous for the prosperity of God's kingdom. At this point the kingdom of God and the kingdom of humans collide. Whereas the false prophets loved success, power, popularity, and prosperity, the true prophets were often "loners," serving God independently of the power structures, whether cultic or political. But their lives, message, and suffering still witness to the power of the living God.

(4) Divine and human institution. The false prophets lived and worked for a human ideal, a dream, a vision, or institution.[24] They were great promoters of programs. The true prophets, however, did not primarily consider their social standing or the wishes of their audience. They were by divine appointment social and religious critics, with whose message the people would be in little agreement. The true prophets persevered, because they were not first and foremost members of a socially defined institution, but because they were God's spokespersons. They were men of God who

[p.86]
lived for the sake of serving their Lord faithfully. The prophetic institution was by this definition a divine and a social institution. As a divine institution the Lord commissioned his prophet with a word from above. As a social institution the prophet was expected to speak God's word to a people whose expectations were determined by Realpolitik, social pressures, and popular beliefs and practices.

(5) Vision of the kingdom of God. The false prophets were taken by God's present kingdom, as understood by them. They were guardians of the status quo. The covenant, the Davidic monarch, the temple, and the priesthood were "sacred" symbols of God's kingdom among his people. Their vision of the kingdom ruled out a change in God's relation with his people. Their vision of the kingdom provided them with a platform for change, as dictated by Realpolitik.

The true prophets operated from the transforming vision of the coming kingdom of God. The Lord had revealed to them that his kingdom would come in the power of the Spirit. Since this kingdom is so much grander than reality, people must prepare themselves for the coming of his kingdom. The true prophets taught that this kingdom will come by the work of the Spirit and not by power or by might.

The true prophets operated from the conviction that God's kingdom was present and that Yahweh must also transform all things to establish his kingdom. They did not know how or when he would accomplish this transformation, but they condemned the people for having rejected the kingdom of God in exchange for human kingdoms.

The true prophets were God's spokesmen, raised up in a particular time. Through them he exhorted, suited, judged, and explained what was about to happen and why. The prophet was not first and foremost a man of the future. His primary significance lay in his witness to his own time and to Yahweh's involvement in the temporal order. God's order had been adversely affected by man's transgression of Yahweh's laws. Society in Israel and Judah no longer reflected the order
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disconfirmation must occur; and (5) a social support group must exist in case of disconfirmation.

The prophets suffered disgrace from their contemporaries, who challenged their authority, role,
message, and often physically abused them. While suffering the prophets awaited Yahweh's
vindication of their message (Acts 7:52; Heb 11:36-37). [26] Childs rightly insists that the biblical
books vindicate God's prophets. Micaiah was vindicated by the death of Ahab, end Jeremiah
was vindicated in the fall of Jerusalem. [27] The acts of God in the history of his people bear out the
veracity of his word and justify his prophets as his spokesmen. More than that, the historical
pattern of proclamation and fulfillment extends the canonical significance of the prophetic word to
subsequent generations. They, too, are responsible for hearing God's word, for heeding it, and
for discerning the true from the false.

The community at large rejected the radical message of the prophet, but the "remnant" listened and treasured his words as the word of God. They witnessed the veracity of the true prophets in
the near-fulfillment and believed that the eschatological message of the true prophets would also
come true.

The false prophets never developed a lasting tradition. Their false hopes were shattered in the
fall of Samaria and of Jerusalem. Their interpreta-

p.88
tions were proved wrong. The true prophets shared a common tradition. The prophetic tradition
comprised various emphases, distinct contributions, and watershed-like developments. Each
prophet was an individual with a distinctive call and a distinct message from God, but the
concern for distinctive characteristics should not mislead us to pay exclusive attention to the
differences. The true prophets formed a part of a tradition and that tradition was founded on the
covenantal structure. "For the prophets and the psalmists the covenant tradition formed the
differences. The true prophets formed a part of a tradition and that tradition was founded on the
heart of their religion." [28] The prophetic tradition reveals variety and unity. [29]

II. Prophecy and Dissonance

In critical circles it is axiomatic that there is an element of "failure" in the prophetic word. [30]
Robert P. Carroll applies the cognitive dissonance theory to explain the crisis arising from the
anticlimactic failure and the subsequent failure in the postexilic community, he set up five such conditions: (1) conviction; (2) a commitment to that conviction; (3)
the conviction must be sufficiently strongly held to withstand disconfirmation; (4) a
disconfirmation must occur; and (5) a social support group must exist in case of disconfirmation.
[32] From the outset he admits the problems inherent in the model, as it does not take into
account the possibility of repentance (e.g., Jonah at Nineveh), [33] of reduction of the prophetic
oracles, and of the prophetic self-awareness of the dissonance created by the prophetic word
and lack of fulfillment. [34] Nevertheless Carroll concludes that God's people experienced
dissonance and that this sense of dissonance set into motion a complex hermeneutic: "the
hermeneutic process of rationalization and explanation." [35]

He concludes that prophecy had to fail in the postexilic era, because the prophets could not
account for the lack of fulfillment and because the social support could not sustain the
momentum of hope. This explains the rise of apocalyptic as a form of hermeneutic and of a
programmatic approach of socioreligious expression. He refers positively to the studies on
apocalyptic by Hanson as one form of hermeneutic that attempts "to get around the

[p.89]
basic failure of the prophetic expectation...by grounding such hopes in a transcendent act of
God imposed upon mankind." [36]

He further explains the lack of fulfillment in the NT. According to him the early church did not
III. Apocalyptic and Prophetic

The basic issue in the study of apocalyptic is its relation to the prophetic. Is the apocalyptic rooted in the prophetic or is it of foreign origin? In a seminal study Otto Plöger distinguished between two developments in the postexilic era: theocratic and apocalyptic. The former concerned itself with the temple, Torah, and priesthood (cf. Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah) and the latter developed in reaction to the Zadokite priesthood, being a movement of disillusionment. He posits that apocalyptic arose as an ideology or hermeneutic in the context of pessimism. Paul Hanson further refined the definition by restricting the term apocalyptic to a literary genre, apocalypticism to a socioreligious movement, and apocalyptic eschatology to a religious perspective. He operates from the basic position that the prophets functioned as "translators" of the divine vision into a sociopolitical milieu and contrasts their contribution with the apocalyptic eschatologists. The latter had little or no interest in translating "vision" into political, historical, and social realities. Because both prophets and visionaries share in the vision of restoration, Hanson concludes that there is "one unbroken strand extending throughout the history of prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology."

Apocalyptic eschatology may express itself in dualism, pessimism, and futurism. It is dualistic in its sharp vision of right and wrong; the evil of this age without any recognition of common grace and the goodness of God's reign over his creation. It is pessimistic in its rejection of man's involvement with the plan of God in bringing in a new era of salvation and restoration. It is futuristic in its living 6r and with the vision of the splendor of the new age with little regard for the impact of the vision on present realities. However, all apocalyptic elements do not fall into this categorization. The prophets anticipate a radical transformation, have a clearly developed eschatology, and even incorporate apocalyptic forms. The process of interpretation, of relating prophetic and apocalyptic, promise and fulfillment, reality and eschatology is a complex hermeneutic task.

Hanson's study on the rise of "apocalyptic" and the distinction between the prophetic vision in concrete historical, sociopolitical realities and the apocalyptic eschatology with its preoccupation with the heavenly visions is a sober warning for the twentieth-century Christian. The prophets maintain the dialectic tension between hope and reality, whereas the successive generations after the prophets, as we are prone to do, departed from what Hanson calls "the firm mooring of the prophetic message in history."

Apocalypse has a canonical place, as both the prophets and John the apostle employ apocalyptic imagery. The apocalyptic genre, much like the prophetic, presents the truth of God not consecutively or logically, but multidimensionally. The eschatology of the prophetic word and the apocalyptic visions have one common origin: the Spirit of prophecy.

On a historical plane, the community of God's people have to adjust continually to the reality of fulfillment and the vision of the prophets. The resultant tensions between prophecy and vision, vision and reality, present and future, and between creation and redemption must remain. As long as this tension is real in our lives, the prophetic word propels us to action in evangelism, church work, and involvement in society as light-bearers. The light dims when the Christian works out the details of the heavenly vision, which awaits historical fulfillment. The development of schisms and ideologies before the incarnation of our Lord with the consequent rejection of the Messiah of Israel is a vivid reminder of the traps (systematization, rigidity in interpretation, and failure of correlation) that are also around today.

IV. Hermeneutics

The recent discussion on true versus false prophets, cognitive dissonance, and the place of apocalyptic have raised the question as to how we must approach the prophetic word. For example, Carroll encourages the development of a hermeneutics of the prophets that must be "sufficiently complex and sophisticated...to question the text to the point of encountering its meaning."

(1) The prophetic word is eschatologica in nature. The prophets expected the radical transformation of this world, including a new humanity and a new covenant. The prophets challenged and still invite us to interpret the present in the light of the hope of a new age, to which God's revelation witnesses. Though the word eschatology is etymologically related to the Greek word for "last," OT eschatology opens up the plan of God, as revealed through God's servants the prophets. I agree with Thomas M. Raitt in his definition of "eschatology" as "the search for and discovery of a frame of reference to explain events which are not understandable in terms of a previously existing tradition."

This approach involves a careful study of the prophetic word, an openness to the progress of redemption (with its elements of continuity and discontinuity), a vision of God's work in redemption and in creation, and a submission to the freedom of God. Interpretation of the prophets should never close the prophetic word by any system of eschatology, a traditional understanding of the prophetic message, or a hermeneutic that restricts the freedom of God to human interpretation. In other words, the prophets open up the future as a working out of God's plan in human history.
The prophetic proclamations of salvation take the form of “promise” and the enjoyment of his promises is a temporal expression of God's eternal plan. This point is well stated by Beecher: “every fulfilled promise is a fulfilled prediction; but it is exceedingly important to look at it as a promise, and not as a mere prediction.” This means that the benefits of God were greater to the postexilic community than to the preexilic people, and also that the present benefits in Christ are greater than those of the postexilic era of restoration. Nevertheless, we keep Beecher’s caution in mind: “If one affirms that the promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, he ought not to separate that fulfillment from the rest of the eternal fulfilling movement. The idea of a long line of fulfillment is not a hypothesis offered for the solution of difficulties, but a part of the primary conception of a promise that is for eternity.”

Though the promises are eternally operative, the interpreter of the prophetic word must carefully listen to the prophets as God’s witnesses in time and space. Yet, the word invites our listening in to the prophetic speech in a new context.

(3) The prophetic word is God's word to his people before and after Christ. The prophetic message in all its diversity witnesses to the coming of God in salvation and in judgment. Every act of God in the progress of redemption is a foreshadowing of his final judgment and deliverance. The prophets announced that Israel, Judah, and the nations would experience God’s judgment as an intrusion of the Day of the Lord. Similarly, they announced that the enjoyment of covenant renewal and the fulfillment of the promises are nothing less than intrusions of God's blessed presence.

The prophets bore witness in their different ways to the grandeur of God's redemption as well as to the wisdom of God in working out his promises. The sheer vastness in size of the prophetic word should guard against oversimplification. The prophets called on their contemporaries to look to the Lord for the fulfillment of the promises and to submit to the freedom of God in working out his promises. Certainly tensions exist between the full reality and enjoyment of the covenant promises, as Bright writes: “So, like Israel of old, we have to live in tension. It is the tension between grace and obligation: the unconditional grace of Christ, which is proffered to us, his unconditional promises in which we are invited to trust, and the obligation to obey him as the church's sovereign Lord.”

The focus of the hope in the fulfillment of God's promises is Jesus Christ, the midpoint of redemptive history. The work of Christ is continuous with the work of God in the OT, but discontinuous with the religious structures of mankind. Our Lord's message is continuous with that of Moses and the prophets in his insistence on how the kingdom of God is unlike the expectations of humans. The godly who heeded Moses and the prophets and those who follow our Lord Jesus share in a common hope. Moses, the prophets, our Lord, and the apostles witness separately and collectively to the future open to all who persevere in seeking the kingdom of God.

(4) The prophets uniformly and urgently warn against trusting in human structures and interpretation. The contest is between the power of man and the power of the Spirit, the bondage of human structures and the freedom of the Spirit. The faithful before and after Christ live in the tension of the present reality of salvation and the glorious and eternal fulfillment of the promises of God in Christ.

The prophets consistently call on the people of God to be open to the new acts of God and to evaluate the old acts in the light of the new. This way of looking at the world is what Sanders calls “the hermeneutic of prophetic critique.” Sanders writes, “The living God is not an automatic machine. God's truth cannot be systematized... Hananiah was the person who had real knowledge but was a prisoner of that knowledge.”

The danger of closure lies in rigidity and in reductionism. The fixation of the meaning gives coherence to the community and encourages stability. But it is no longer open to fresh interpretation or insight. It closes itself to the variety of meanings and leads to a reductionistic hermeneutics. Reductionistic hermeneutics is unable to bend or to adapt either to new revelation or to new insight. This was the case with the false prophets as well as with the apocalyptic eschatologists. Both groups erred in reducing the correlation of creation and redemption to an ideology of election.

The prophetic proclamation of deliverance announces a new era in which the eschatological salvation breaks into the experience of God's people and his creation. The announcement of the new era is an eschatological message that promises the free involvement of the Creator-Redeemer.

(5) The prophetic message is applicable to a wide variety of historical contexts, as God's people hear the word of God as illumined by the Spirit of God. With the addition of each prophetic book to the canon, the people of God were forced to adapt their view of God. Needless to say, the Gospels and epistles radically altered the understanding of the OT, as the apostles understood the “canon” in the light of Jesus' coming. Hence, the traditional understanding of Moses and the prophets had to undergo a radical transformation in the light of the gospel of our Lord.
Each new event and additional revelation challenged the received traditions of what God has revealed to his people and what he expects of them. God's people lived in the dynamic tension of continuity and discontinuity, stability and adaptability.

Hermeneutics is the "mid-term between canon's stability and adaptability."[63] The very way in which the community adapts to the revelation of God determines how it is willing to evaluate its beliefs and practices in the light of the word of God. The word of God is received as canon, that is the rule of faith and practice within the community of God's people. The community submits itself by searching the Scriptures. The insights and applications derived from this study introduce a stabilizing factor in the belief system and practices of the community.

Fixation of the "meaning" of the canonical writing gives coherency and stability to the community. The danger of stability and tradition lies in closure to new revelation or to a new understanding of that revelation. It is also reductionistic, as tradition picks and chooses certain beliefs and practices from the great variety and riches of meaning and relationships. Stability explains the differences between the Jews and the Samaritans, between the various groups of Pharisees and sects in Jesus' days. It also explains distinctive differences between the eastern and western branches of the Christian church, Catholics and Protestants, Reformed and Arminian, postmillennialist and amillennialist, and between a dispensationalist and a covenant theologian.

The interpretation of God's word naturally forms tradition and tradition "shapes" interpretation. The cyclical pattern of "traditional interpretation" cannot but lead to a reductionistic hermeneutic. This hermeneutic is unable to adapt either to new revelation or to new insights. This was already the situation when the prophets of God encountered the "rigidity" and "systematization" of the false prophets.[64]

But the Spirit of God calls on each generation to adapt anew to God's revelation. He is the power of God who applies the word of God to a new situation. He transforms human beings, interpretations, and traditions. As long as he is operating in and through the community of God's people lives in the tension between stability and adaptability. In other words, each of the prophetic writings challenges the conception of the stability of the canon, as the people of God adapt to the revelation of God.[65] More than that, the prophetic books individually and collectively form a matrix for approaching the NT, as they witness to a new depth of meaning.[66] In the new revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the prophetic canon underwent another challenge to its stability, as the people of God wrestled with the question of what God expected them to believe and how they should live. That is the issue of adaptability.[67]

Danger lies in the OT being reduced to a minor premise.[67] This is done when the tradition encourages reading the OT exclusively in the light of the NT, in using the OT for moralizing principles, as prooftexts, or as a collection of predictions.

The richness of the prophetical word is a salutary reminder of the urgency to permit the prophets to speak also to us.[68] Thus they will force us to adapt to the revelation of God by the power of the Spirit. He will guide us in our interpretation and renew our vision. The writing prophets of the OT contribute to the stream of prophetic traditions, to the NT proclamation, and to the expectation of the fullness and reality of the kingdom of God. The prophets contribute to the panoramic, revelatory perspective of God's acts in history from their own time to eternity.[69] As each generation submits itself to the word of God, it involves itself in hermeneutics.

(p.95)

(6) The interpretation of the prophetic word is not an option for those who are so inclined, but an imperative for the church of Jesus Christ. True discipleship demands that the disciples of Christ long for the consolation of Israel and for the restoration of all things. The NT affirms the place for eschatological hope, the open-ended future, and the freedom of God, as C. K. Barrett writes:

This conviction that God has yet greater things to do than the great things He has already done for us, that He is the God of the future as well as the past, is supplemented in NT eschatology by the equally strong conviction that God is no more confined to the future than He is to the past, and that, being free at all times, He has acted as decisively and as revealingly, in the mid-course of history as He will do at its end; or, in other words, that the end of history, and with it God's unique and conclusive action which declares not only His own character but also the meaning of all history, has already begun.[70]

The prophetic oracles and visions together with the Gospels, epistles, and Apocalypse witness to the transformation. Prophets, whether more or less visionary, and apostles, whether more or less visionary, harmoniously and in great diversity point beyond the present to the future hope of glory. The prophets and apostles are united by a transcendental perspective.[71] but the language of vision is expressed in metaphors.[72] Frederick Ferre has defined the language of metaphor as an expression of man's finitude and God's freedom: "Surely it is meaningful for each man to hope that the metaphors he adopts as his own...are not without a basis of similarity.... The rest he must hold only as a hope and a constant reminder of the finitude of the knower.... The rest... he must be content to 'leave in God's hands.'"[73]

(7) The Holy Spirit keeps alive the tension between creation and redemption, Israel and the church, the present and eternity, ourselves and the world around us.[74] God's revelation cannot be bound by earthen vessels. Torrance rightly posits the "communion" of the Spirit as a way of reaching out into God's world:

[p.97]

The Church does not possess the mystery in and for itself. It shares it in, but the whole of creation shares in it, so that the boundaries of the Church must ever be open toward all men outside and toward the full consummation of the purposes of God for all things. Thus the range of the Communion of the Spirit cannot be limited and bound to the Church, but through the universal range of the Spirit the Church
The prophets remind us that too great a concern with salvation and promise to the exclusion of creation leads to myopia, a restriction of God's freedom and hence of the Spirit of God.[76] The danger of restricting the Holy Spirit to space and time is most real, because Christianity must remain the community of the Spirit and never permit herself to be restricted to temporal and spatial categories.[77] Hendrikus Berkhof portrays the Spirit's work as an ever-widening operation in space and time:

...the work of the Spirit is to be characterized as an event that participates and intervenes in history in an entirely new way.... Participation (with the Spirit) means that the Spirit, from the exclusive center which is Christ, constantly draws new circles in time and space.... The Spirit...touches us, transforms us, and enlists us for service in his ongoing work, a work which in the present world will not be completed, so that whatever he accomplishes here points beyond itself and must always, and anew exceed its own boundaries.[78]

The progression of redemption history includes the people of God, but also creation (cf. Rom 8:19-22). Since the time of the incarnation we cannot but reflect on the Spirit in relationship to the mission and work of our Lord. But we must also relate the Spirit to Jesus' rule over creation.[79] This is an area that needs further thought, as Torrance wrote,

However, with the Incarnation and the finishing of Christ's work, we must think of the whole relation between the Spirit of God and His creation as undergoing a change...but that change has to be interpreted Christologically in relation to Christ the First-born and Head of all Creation, i.e. it has to be interpreted eschatologically in terms of the new creation.... we have still to interpret the presence of the Spirit to creation and nature as involving a measure of distance between it and God, in which he withholds the fullness of His presence until the appointed hour of judgement and recreation.[80]

[p.98]

The principle of tota Scriptura sustains the correlation of the Spirit in the totality of restoration. The NT reveals an interdependence between Christ, the Holy Spirit, the new community, and the eschaton.[81] This correlation grows out of the OT prophetic message which projects a new age externalized by the Messiah of God and internalized by the Spirit of God.[82] It fosters the tension between this age and the age to come, the material and the spiritual, Israel and the church, the powers of this world and the rule of God's Messiah, and the Spirit of restoration and the powers of destruction. In spite of these points of tension, the OT prophets announce the Spirit's involvement in restoration.[83] The Father freely establishes his kingdom on earth by the Messiah and by his Spirit.

V. Conclusions

The prophetic phenomenon in Israel is complex and is complicated by our hermeneutic of the prophets. Concern with the historic referentiality of the prophets easily confuses the historic context of the prophet as God's spokesman with the canonical message. The word of God is verified time and again as God's people discern his voice in the words of men. Those who hear the prophetic voice live in the tension of heavenly and earthly, the material and spiritual, the plans of God and the freedom of God, the now and the not yet. The righteous seek the establishment of God's righteous kingdom as a reality. They discern the ways of the Spirit of God by not localizing or temporalizing the kingdom of God, by not defining the way and the plan of God. Any restriction of God's freedom by human interpretation, tradition, or systematization runs the same risk as that of the false prophets.

The prophetic word itself opens up to all who submit themselves to the Spirit, to the whole Bible (tota Scriptura), and to the progressive fulfillment in the history of redemption. Prophetic interpretation begins and ends with God. He, the Creator-Redeemer-King, is free-unrestricted by human interpretations, traditions, and institutions-and faithful to his promises pertaining to the whole of his creation, as confirmed to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, our Lord, and the apostles. He, the Redeemer-King, progressively works out his promises, but in such a manner that no one may boast of knowing the precise nature of the progression of his plan. He, the Creator-Redeemer-King, awaits man's response to his revelation in the

[p.99]

prophets and the apostles by calling for hope, praise, and commitment to serve our Lord Jesus and the Father in the freedom of the Spirit.

Reference


[4] See the significant study of De Vries, Prophet against Prophet.


[9] De Vries, Prophet against Prophet, 142-44.


[12] Van der Woude, "Micah in Dispute with the Pseudo-Prophets.," 258.


[17] Ibid., 188.

[18] Carroll illustrates the tension between the true and the false in "A Non-Cogent Argument in Jeremiah's Oracles against the Prophets".


[22] Hanson distinguishes between the faith which erects a cult dedicated to the preservation of eternal structures and a faith which endorses deity to be active, creatively and redemptively, in the movement of time ("Prophets and Kings," Humanitas 15 [1979] 28-9).


[31] He derives his model from research done in the 1950s in the field of social psychology by L. Festinger, H. W. Reiken, and S. Schachter, When Prophecy Fails (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

[32] Carroll, "Ancient Israelite Prophecy and Dissonance Theory," 139; reference is made to Festinger et al., When Prophecy Fails, 46.

[33] Ibid., 141-43.


[42] Ibid., 11-12; idem, "Old Testament Apocalyptic Reexamined," 454-79.

[43] Ibid., 12. He disagrees with Plöger's view as too restrictive to a particular sect. Frank M. Cross anticipated Hanson's conclusions in "New Directions in the Study of Apocalyptic".


[45] Hanson, The Dawn of Apocalyptic.


[50] I. Howard Marshall cautions against the loose use of the word eschatology: We cannot abolish the use of the word, but we can at least handle it with the care that we would bestow on any valuable but slippery object ("Slippery Words. I: Eschatology," ExpTim 89 [1977-78] 268).


[53] Ibid., 377.

[54] James A. Sanders reminds us of the adage, "God's Word comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable" (God Has a Story Too [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979] 16-17).

[55] Bright, Covenant and Promise, 198.


[60] Ibid., 215-17.


[64] Knight writes, "An interpretation should not tend to petrify earlier revelations or its interpretation, absolutizing it into a convention that stifles rather than promotes life" (ibid., 175).

[65] T. E Torrance observes, "Since biblical statements indicate more than they can signify at any time, and more than we can express in our interpretation of them, they manifest a predictive quality, for they point above and beyond themselves to the inexhaustible Truth of God" (Reality and Evangelical Theology [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982] 144, emphasis mine).


[70] This is similar to what James H. Othluis posits as an implied vision of the text in the hermeneutic process ("Proposal for a Hermeneutics of Ultimacy," in A Hermeneutics of Ultimacy: Peril or Promise [Lanham: University Press of America, 1987] 28. However, I disagree with his vision and agree with the criticism of Clark H. Pinnock ("Peril with Promise," in ibid., 55-59) that disagreement on the nature of the vision is inevitable.


[73] Ibid., 377.


Hermeneutics: How to Interpret the Bible. “And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation.” [2 Peter 1:19,20 NAS]. Since the Bible teaches that God is not the author of confusion [1 Cor. 14:33], how can the many disagreements today between Christians and the proliferation of the cults be explained since all, or nearly all, claim to use the Bible as the basis of their doctrines? Nearly all false doctrines taught today by Christians and cultists alike can be traced to the distortion of the meaning of Biblical words. Hermeneutics (from the Greek word hermeneuo, which means to explain or interpret) is the branch of theology that focuses on identifying and applying sound principles of biblical interpretation. While the Bible is generally plain in its meaning, proper interpretation requires careful study and is not always an easy task. Another key principle of hermeneutics is that we should use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Known by theologians as the “analogy of faith” or “analogy of Scripture,” this principle is solidly based on the Bible’s own teachings. Since the Bible is the Word of God and God cannot lie or contradict Himself (Numbers 23:19; Hebrews 6:18), then one passage will never contradict another passage. This principle is useful for several reasons.