

# Prophetic Self-Negation: Validating the Divine Origin of the Word

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argued that the human weaknesses of many of the Hebrew prophets recorded in the Old Testament, rather than diminishing the authority of God's message, confirmed the divine origin of the message. Yahweh called and inspired the prophets, and irrespective of their human frailty, Yahweh used them as He willed. Thus, no prophetic 'successes' or 'achievements' were attributed to the prophets' personal proficiency or charisma throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. To illustrate this point, the lives of six prophets were considered, including Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, and Jonah. Each had moments of weakness or instances of prophetic self-negation, thereby confirming that Yahweh was in total control and justifying the prophets' prefacing, concluding, and intermittently punctuating their prophecies with the classical signature: "Thus says Yahweh," or "Oracle of Yahweh." The paper concludes that prophecy is not all about the prophet, but about God and God's word. Additionally, the leadership of God's people is not something to be sought and cannot be accomplished by the skills and strengths of any individual.

**Keywords:** Prophets, Prophecy, Prophetic Self-Negation, Prophetic Calling, Thus says Yahweh.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the ways to describe the Hebrew prophets is by referring to their nearness to Yahweh. As the intermediaries between God and the people, the prophets were regarded as role models of holiness, knowledge, and closeness to God.<sup>1</sup> The Scriptures give instances where the prophets hear God's message and enjoy the privilege of dialoguing with God. As they set the standards for the entire community, they were often the target of persecution and opposition. Because of the high demands of morality from the people at Yahweh's behest, the prophets were often endangered by the hostile resistance of their environment. According to some views, prophecy was not a gift arbitrarily conferred upon people; rather, it was the culmination of a person's spiritual and ethical disposition.<sup>2</sup> However, instances abound in the prophetic texts where we also see the frailty or humanity of the prophets become the obstacle to fulfilling their mission. The prophets were human, not divine. Called and sent by God, the prophet's humanity was never obliterated by his being inspired. Nevertheless, this paper argues that such instances that betray the prophets' humanness, rather than question their authenticity, validate and ennoble the "Thus says the Lord" signature of their prophecies. In other words, the fact that prophecy is not all about the prophet, but about God and God's word, is what these instances of the prophets' self-negation significantly uphold. Yahweh was in total control, and the human weakness of the prophet simply confirmed it. This paper begins with a brief reference to the meaning of the word, *Prophet*; then, it explores the nature of the Call of prophets and how it relates to the argument being made here; and finally, some of the prophetic texts consistent with the principle of prophetic self-negation are considered.

## Who is a Prophet?

A prophet is a spokesperson for God; he is a person called by God to speak to people on God's behalf and convey a message or teaching.<sup>3</sup> In Hebrew, the word *navi*, "spokesperson", traditionally translates as "prophet." The

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Walter, *The Conscience of Israel: Pre-Exilic Prophets and Prophecy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Walter, *The Conscience of Israel*, 16

<sup>3</sup> Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Prophets and the Word* (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1964), 41.

meaning of *navi* is perhaps most clearly described in Deuteronomy 18:18, where God said, "...and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." Thus, the *navi* was understood to be the "mouthpiece" of God.<sup>4</sup> In addition to speaking and writing messages from God, the prophets are often asked to act out prophetic parables in their lives as a message to the people. A few examples of such messages are Isaiah's stripping and walking barefoot for three years to illustrate the coming captivity (Isaiah 20), Ezekiel's lying on his side for 390 days and eating measured food to illustrate the coming siege (Ezekiel 4), and Jeremiah and the Rechabites (Jeremiah 35:13-16). Prophets were the intermediaries between God and the people.

## The Call of the Prophets

Most biblical passages recounting the call or commissioning of the prophets as messengers of God are very personal and autobiographical. They are reports from the prophets themselves of an inner, somewhat mystical, experience with God. However, their individual call experiences are usually viewed within the shared theological context of their role as prophets of God.<sup>5</sup> The primary Old Testament accounts include the call of Moses (Exodus 3-4), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-21), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:1-3), and in a modified form, Amos and Jonah. While there are variations in the structure of these accounts, there are normally five basic elements common to all: a) a situation of distress or crisis in which God confronts the person; b) the commissioning of the person for some action or message; c) objections raised by the person in the form of inadequacy for the task; d) assurance of God's help, often in a formula like "I will be with you," and e) a sign to confirm the commission, often with the content of the message.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most articulate narratives about the Call of the prophets is in Exodus 3-4, where Moses voices a series of five questions or objections to God. Moses expresses his hesitancy to accept the task of leading God's people out of Egypt as follows: "Who am I that I should go?" (3:11); "What shall I say to them?" (3:12); "What if they do not listen?" (4:1); "I am slow of speech." (4:10); and "Send someone else" (4:13). In many ways, God's response to each of these objections is: "I will be with you."<sup>7</sup> As seen in many of the prophets, there is some reluctance or opposition to their Call. To this resistance, God responds with an assurance of His presence to enable the prophet to carry out the mission. God's assurance, "I will be with you," emphasises the commitment of God to the human agents, despite their inability or reluctance to accomplish the prophetic tasks. God's assurance of His presence, irrespective of the person's unwillingness and inadequacies, points to the fact that prophecy is grounded in God's plan and revelatory activity in the world. The prophetic mission, therefore, is intricately connected to God's plan of revealing Himself to human beings. In other words, God is active in the world; God is at work in unfolding historical events; and those working for God must be grounded in an appreciation of God's activity in the world. The prophets would not succeed because of their own skill or knowledge. God's role and faithfulness in guiding His people through the prophets, who on the surface might be inadequate for the task, is central.<sup>8</sup>

## The Prophets and the Principle of Self-Negation

A distinctive feature that sets the Hebrew Bible apart from other historical writings is its relentless willingness to mention the weaknesses of its heroes. Most of the great figures who did exploits for God were presented to have, at some points, fallen under the influence of their human nature. The prophets, including Moses who, without a doubt, is regarded as the greatest and most dynamic of the Old Testament prophets and leaders, did not have their failures omitted.<sup>9</sup> They either lacked confidence in God's promised presence and became fearful and angry or they became self-confident and presumptuous. Such details in the Hebrew Scripture emphasise the prophets' humanity and the efficacy of God's Word, despite the prophets' human weaknesses. In other words, prophecy was about God, not about the prophet. The following are some prophetic texts consistent with the concept of prophetic self-negation:

<sup>4</sup> Walter, *The Conscience of Israel*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Stuhlmueller, *The Prophets and the Word*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Stuhlmueller, *The Prophets and the Word*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Isaiah 6:7; Jeremiah 1:8; Ezekiel 2:6

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets (Two Volumes in One)* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 47.

<sup>9</sup> George Coats, *Moses Tradition* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 1993), 4.

## The Prophet Moses

In the book of Numbers 20:1-5, as Moses led the people of God through the desert, he faced the pressure that often comes in the face of difficulty. Thirty-seven after the people's rebellion at Kadesh (Numbers 14), the stage seemed set for history to repeat itself. Like the first generation which complained about the lack of water in Kadesh, the second generation complained. Moses experienced pressure from all angles. In Numbers 20:1, Miriam's death was a burden to Moses. The absence of water would irritate the nation of Israel and challenge the leadership of Moses and Aaron (verse 2). The effect of this great need was collective opposition and verbal ferocity from the people who cried out, "If only we had expired or breathed out our lives when our brethren died before the Lord!"<sup>10</sup> They seemed to imply that anything was better than their journey to the Promised Land. More pressure is added in verses 4 and 5 as Moses' motives are questioned and he is blamed for the hardship of the desert. The Prophet also faced internal pressure as he recalled the last experience at Kadesh 37 years earlier. He was very concerned that Israel would produce a repeat performance, incur God's judgment again, and restrict him from ever entering the land he so greatly desired.

The leaders, Moses and Aaron, did what all leaders of God's people should do when faced with leadership challenges – they entered God's presence and sought Divine answers. "They fell upon their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them" (v 6). God then gave Moses and Aaron exact prescriptions (commands) which, in turn, demanded exact obedience (v 8). Moses was explicitly told 1) to take the rod, 2) to assemble the congregation, and 3) to speak to the rock. Moses did obey two of the three commands. He took the rod and, with Aaron, gathered the congregation together to witness the miracle that God intended to perform. Moses, however, failed regarding the third imperative. If Moses had obeyed the third command, it would have been a testimony to the people who witnessed. "The act of speaking to the rock, by its unusual nature, would draw attention to the rock and not to Moses."<sup>11</sup> "Speaking to the rock" would have revealed the rock (God) as being the source of water and not the efforts of Moses. But Moses failed. In verse 10, he displayed the self-negating attitudes of impatience, anger, and self-exaltation. In his self-righteous anger, Moses displayed a spirit of pride and independence by asking, "Shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" The "we" in his question is blasphemous, whether Moses intended it to refer to Aaron and himself or God and himself. God, not Moses, provided the water out of the rock.<sup>12</sup> Moses not only usurped God's place by using the word "we," he did so by his action – "he struck the rock." Though the rock yields its water, God immediately doles out an unbelievably severe punishment: "Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them" (Numbers 19:12). Thus, even Moses, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, by his life and works, confirms that prophecy is all about God and God's Word, not about the prophet.

## The Prophet Elijah

The prophet Elijah is reckoned as one of the greatest prophets of Israel. Called to prophetic service, which put him in conflict with the Israelite king Ahab, Elijah, moved by God's Spirit, became a fiery zealot of true faith and piety.<sup>13</sup> He is generally considered to rank immediately after Moses. Having demonstrated the power of God in 1 Kings 19, it is startling to see how the prophet's humanity plays out. Elijah was bold and courageous, victoriously facing all kinds of odds, for "the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins and outran Ahab to Jezreel" (1 Kings 18:46). Elijah experienced God's supernatural strength to do the extraordinary. But in chapter 19, we find him fearful, running, exhausted, and depressed. After Ahab tells the notorious Jezebel everything Elijah had done, including killing all the prophets of Baal with the sword, she reacts with vengeance and threatens Elijah's life. Elijah runs for his life into the desert, crawls under a broom tree and, in deep depression, asks God to let him die:

It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors... I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too (1 Kings 19:5,10).

<sup>10</sup> Numbers 20:3.

<sup>11</sup> Coats, *Moses Tradition*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Psalm 78:15,16; Isaiah 48:21.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. A. Motyer, "Prophecy, Prophets", in *New Bible Dictionary* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962), 1039

Because of Jezebel's threats, Elijah shifted his focus from God. He forgot the mission God gave him and the assurance of God's presence. He shifted his focus to himself and his circumstances. Thus, Elijah, the great prophet of God, fell into self-pity and almost despaired as he whined at God in fear, "I am the only one left." This self-negating moment in Elijah's life signifies the prophet's validation of God's absolute control. The mission was God's mission, not the prophet's mission.

## The Prophet Jeremiah

The image of the prophet as one who goes into uncontrollable outbursts under the influence of a power beyond himself is seen clearly in Jeremiah:

O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot last.<sup>14</sup>

Jeremiah acknowledges his lack of control and points to the Spirit of God overpowering him. This is a part of the experience of prophecy. Jeremiah suffers from near-universal mockery. His message is caricatured and ridiculed. He calls out, "Terror is on every side," and it creates such a strong image that his listeners can understand.<sup>15</sup> Judah heard him loud and clear and laughed at him. This hurt Jeremiah badly and personally to the core, not because he cared all that much about the mockery itself, but because of who was mocking him – his own people. Jeremiah loved his people with the passion of God. Telling them of their coming ruin was the most painful task he had to take on. But that same passionate love kept reminding him that his people had to hear the horrible truth, so they could turn from their ways and return to God.<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah's passion burned so hot that it overpowered his sense of self-protection, and he blamed God for this. The prophet's struggle, entreaty with God, questioning, alarm, complaint, and other reactions stir within the passages called "The Confessions of Jeremiah" (11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). From these sections, one can almost see the prophet pointing to God as he laments: 'You made me this way, you gave me this task, this misery, this burden, this message.' And true, from his Call at the very beginning, the mission was always God's mission.

## The Prophet Hosea

A classical demonstration of *Thus says the Lord* is the torment the prophet Hosea had to undergo for the sake of God's Word. God instructed Hosea to marry a whore.<sup>17</sup> After marrying Hosea, Gomer went out for further whoredom, having 'children of harlotry.' No doubt Hosea did not like this in the least. He was human and sensitive. He paid a heavy cost for such a sensitised personality. He was quite emotional, immediately reacting to what people felt and said about him. He reacted at once to the least manifestation of friendliness or hostility. All through the fourteen chapters, such quick transitions are duplicated.<sup>18</sup> Hosea could never have maintained his historic, forgiving love over a long stretch of years unless God aided him. Though he was spirited by divine power, Hosea himself was not divine. He had emotional problems flowing from excessive sensitivity. His occasional lack of balance, his frail emotion, and his distorted tenderness all show up in a moment of stress.<sup>19</sup> He was an adult who keenly appreciated the human involvement of his situation. In an instance, he shouts angrily at the children: "Protest against your mother, protest! [Show her] that she is not my wife, and that I am not her husband. Let her remove her adultery from between her breasts, or I will strip her naked, leaving her as on the day of her birth" (2:2-3). Through the aid of God, Hosea reacts with strong love, and the victory of righteousness is won only after a prolonged struggle.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah 20:7-9.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jeremiah 20:10; 21:1.

<sup>16</sup> Stuhlmüller, *The Prophets and the Word*, 118.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hosea 1:2.

<sup>18</sup> Stuhlmüller, *The Prophets and the Word*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Stuhlmüller, *The Prophets and the Word*, 87.

## The Prophet Amos

Amos was not a "professional" prophet. He was a common man used by God to deliver His Word to His people.<sup>20</sup> Amos acknowledged that his prophecy was God's mission when faced with opposition from Amaziah, the priest of Bethel who accused Amos of prophesying for pecuniary reasons: "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" (7:14-15). He had no special training; he was not a graduate of the School of the Prophets nor was he descended from or related to any prophets. God sent Amos with a message for Israel (the Northern kingdom), even though he was from Judah (the Southern kingdom). He was not a man of wealth, yet was sent to warn the wealthy; not a man of luxury, or one who was lazy, yet sent to those who were both. All of this was designed to separate the *man* from the *message*.<sup>21</sup> There was to be nothing about this man which would attract a personal following. It was on the message that God desired the people to focus, not the messenger.

## The Prophet Jonah

The example of Jonah is an apt presentation of the fact that "it is not about the prophet as a human being, but about the Word of God he is forced to proclaim."<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the prophecy of Jonah is often seen as a part of the Old Testament that reflects the heart of God for the nations of the world. But Jonah, the prophet, does not deserve the credit. Even though Jonah was a prophet of God and understood God's Word, he lacked the love and compassion for the people to whom he was sent. From beginning to end, he was a reluctant participant in God's mission of mercy. His lack of care for the people of Nineveh reflected the attitude of his nation. He and the entire nation of Israel seemed oblivious to the fact that something had gone wrong with the people of Nineveh and that their lives were hanging in the balance.<sup>23</sup> But God compels Jonah to proclaim the Word and watch these enemies of Israel, the Ninevites, repent of their evil and obtain mercy. So, Jonah is not the principal character of his own book. The principal character is God. Despite Jonah's failure, God triumphed.

## CONCLUSION

This paper contended that the prophets' human weaknesses and vulnerabilities did strengthen their prophecy and confirm the divine origin of their message than weaken it. As the prophets struggled against their own weaknesses and the hostility of their environment, they received help from God. The prophets manifested extraordinary endurance because God was present to them. All of them came to their work because they experienced a divine call. What the prophets spoke was God's Word, not their own, hence they prefaced, concluded, and even occasionally punctuated their prophetic word with the classical reminder, "Thus says Yahweh," or "Oracle of Yahweh."<sup>24</sup> A major theological point highlighted by this paper is that leadership of God's people is not something to be sought and cannot be accomplished by the skills and strengths of the individual. The prophets did not campaign for the position; they were placed there by God or by situations in which they sought counsel from God. Not a single prophet of the Old Testament is portrayed as having in himself the ability to be a prophet. Even with figures that are remembered as having great personal skills, the biblical record is careful to attribute their *success* to God's presence in their lives, their faithful response to God, and their understanding of their role in the service of God. No prophetic success or achievement is attributed to the prophets' personal proficiency or charisma. Zechariah 4:6 summarises this point succinctly: "[It is] not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit [presence], says the Lord."

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<sup>20</sup> James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1969), 3.

<sup>21</sup> James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1969), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolae Roddy, "Biblical Anthropology: Why the Patristic Distinction Between Image and Likeness Matters," in *Studies in orthodox Hermeneutics: A festschrift in Honor of Theodore G. Stylianopoulos*, ed. Eugen J. Pentuic, et al. (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2016), 269.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jonah 1:2

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