

## ***Patriarch and Prophet: Abraham's Prophetic Characteristics in Genesis***

JAY TODD

College of the Ozarks

[jtodd@cofo.edu](mailto:jtodd@cofo.edu)

*In Gen 20:7, YHWH refers to Abraham as a prophet, thus distinguishing Abraham as the first person explicitly identified as a prophet (נביא) in the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately, the relevant secondary literature (prophetic introductions, biblical theologies, and theologies of the Pentateuch) has given minimal attention to Abraham's prophetic role. This article attempts to correct this oversight by examining Abraham's prophetic characteristics in the Abrahamic narrative (Gen 11:27–25:11). After outlining general prophetic characteristics given in the Pentateuch and the rest of the Hebrew Bible, this article highlights Abraham's prophetic characteristics in order to demonstrate Abraham's role as a prophet in the biblical text. The article's final section compares and contrasts Abraham with two other prophets in the Pentateuch, Balaam and Moses, in order to identify possible implications for the theology of the Pentateuch.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Abraham, prophet, prophetic characteristics, Balaam, Moses*

### INTRODUCTION

On two occasions in the Abrahamic narrative (Gen 11:25–25:11), Abraham,<sup>1</sup> while sojourning in a foreign land, asks his wife Sarah to inform the foreign king that she is his sister. On both occasions, the king takes Sarah into his house, thus prompting YHWH to act on her behalf in deliverance. Although these matriarch-in-danger scenes are fertile ground for theological discussion, the second journey is most significant for this article's purposes. Genesis 20 records Abraham's journey to Gerar, Abimelech's capture of Sarah, YHWH's consequent threat of

1. I use the name "Abraham" exclusively throughout this article.

judgment on Abimelech and his household, and Abimelech's claim of innocence. Even though YHWH affirms Abimelech's innocence, he informs Abimelech that he will need Abraham's intercession to live, since Abraham is a prophet (Gen 20:7).

YHWH's designation of Abraham as a prophet (נביא) distinguishes Abraham as the first individual in the Hebrew Bible (HB) called a prophet.<sup>2</sup> One would expect this unique feature of the Abrahamic narrative to ripple throughout the secondary literature regarding Abraham specifically and the prophets in general, yet a perusal of the literature does not support such expectations. In fact, discussions of prophets and prophecy in the HB largely ignore Abraham's role as a prophet while studies of Abraham's portrayal in Genesis often underemphasize this role.

A survey of the relevant literature (prophetic introductions, theologies of the Pentateuch, OT theologies, etc.) reveals that the reasons for the dismissal of Abraham as a prophet vary significantly. Some give no rationale regarding their motives for the omission of Abraham in their works. For example, Willem VanGemeren and Daniel Hays both begin their historical survey of the prophetic movement with Moses, not Abraham.<sup>3</sup> Granted that the historical survey is a minor part of their books (especially Hays), the omission of Abraham indicates their perceived importance (or lack thereof) of his prophetic role. In particular, VanGemeren identifies his motivation for this omission when he writes "of one continuous stream from Moses to John the Baptist" and designates Moses "the fountainhead of the prophetic movement."<sup>4</sup>

Other interpreters acknowledge the divine designation in Gen 20:7, but argue that Abraham was not a prophet in the classical or full sense of the term.<sup>5</sup> For example, Gary Smith distinguishes between the

2. While נביא is the most frequently used term to designate prophets, several other terms appear regularly in the Hebrew Bible (i.e. איש האלהים, ראה, and חזה). Even when these other terms are taken into consideration, Abraham is the first biblical character assigned any title related to prophetic activity.

3. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 27–69. J. Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 23–24.

4. VanGemeren, *Interpreting*, 28.

5. J. Carl Laney ("The Role of the Prophets in God's Case against Israel," *BSac* 138 [1981]: 324) acknowledges the prophetic designation of Abraham in Gen 20:7, but dismisses it as "a unique and rather isolated appearance of the term before the Mosaic period." For him, the prophetic office began with Moses (314). Robert R. Wilson ("Early Israelite Prophecy," *Int* 32 [1978]: 4) acknowledges that Abraham, along with Miriam and Deborah are called prophets (or prophetesses), but comments, "the traditions about

“broad usage of the term [prophet]” and “a narrower definition,” with the former including Abraham and others who “were called prophets even though the Scriptures contain no record of their call to a prophetic office.”<sup>6</sup> In the latter group Smith places prophets such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Samuel, “who received a call to be a prophet and spent their time conveying God’s message in an oral, dramatic, or written form.”<sup>7</sup> Some who agree with Smith do not specify which characteristics qualify a biblical character as a full-fledged prophet, but simply dismiss Abraham’s prophetic designation as a “loose” use of the word.<sup>8</sup>

A third group of interpreters, particularly those of a critical persuasion, dismiss the divine designation as an addition that reflects the Elohist’s view of Abraham.<sup>9</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp’s comments on Abraham’s designation as a prophet serve as a good example of this position. He writes, “All it [i.e., the description of Abraham as a prophet] tells us is that the Elohist source, to the extent that we can reconstruct it,

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them do not deal primarily with their prophetic activities, and . . . it is not obvious why these figures were regarded as prophets at all.” R. K. Harrison (*Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969], 741) writes, “Although the first person to be designated a *nābhi*’ (נָבִיָּה) in the Old Testament was Abraham (Gen. 20:7), prophetism as such among the Hebrews can legitimately be said to have begun with the historical Moses, who later became a standard of comparison for all subsequent prophetic personages (Deut. 18:15ff.; 34:10).”

6. Gary V. Smith, “Prophet; Prophecy,” *IBDE* 3:986. Ironically, later in the same article, Smith writes, “the prophetic movement is far too complex to reduce all prophetic experience to one single pattern” (995).

7. *Ibid.*

8. Johannes Lindblom (*Prophecy in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962], 71) states: “‘Prophet’ in these passages [Gen 20:7 and others] is not a precise term, but taken in a loose sense, referring to a supernatural endowment.” Willem VanGemeren (“Psalms,” in *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [EBC 5; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991], 667) states that “the term ‘prophet’ is only loosely used of Abraham as God’s ‘prophet’” in Gen 20:7.

9. Gerhard von Rad (*Old Testament Theology* [trans. D. M. G. Stalker; Peabody, MA: Prince, 2005 (1956–1960)], 12) writes, “Beyond doubt, when the title of prophet is given to Abraham (Gen. xx. 7), or to Moses (Deut. xviii. 15, xxxiv. 10, etc.), or to Aaron (Ex. vii. 1), or to Miriam (Ex. xv. 20), this is to be taken as representing the way in which a much later age looked upon these people.” He expresses the same sentiments in *Genesis: A Commentary* (rev. ed.; trans. John H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 228–9. Wilson (“Early,” 12) argues “that it is” not simply “a retrojection from a much later time, . . . but that the group responsible for the Elohist material believed that prophecy existed at a very early stage in Israelite history.” Lindblom (*Prophecy*, 71) writes, “Unhistorically Abraham is called a prophet in Gen. xx. 7.”

seems to have been deeply influenced by the prophetic movement.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, Abraham was simply “posthumously honored with the title of prophet.”<sup>11</sup> Or as von Rad puts it: “[W]hen the title of prophet is given to Abraham . . . It is an anachronism.”<sup>12</sup> These scholars therefore dismiss Abraham as a prophet on the basis of their assumptions regarding the development of Israelite religion and the prophetic movement therein.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, regardless of their reasons, many scholars do not recognize pervasive prophetic overtones throughout the Abrahamic narrative. Nonetheless, there are exceptions, namely, select commentators who highlight prophetic qualities in certain portions of the Abrahamic narrative.<sup>14</sup> Due to the nature of their commentaries, however, many of them are unable to discuss Abraham’s prophetic characteristics in a systematic manner. In this article, I seek to meet such a deficiency by providing a systematic treatment of the prophetic characteristics in the Abrahamic narrative. My central thesis is that throughout Genesis, the Pentateuch’s author<sup>15</sup> consistently portrays Abraham as a prophet. His role as a prophet is such a key component of his characterization that discussions of the prophetic movement in Israel must begin with Abraham.

To such an end, I begin by discussing different characteristics associated with prophets in the HB; I then apply these characteristics to

10. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 62–63.

11. *Ibid.*, 64.

12. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:12.

13. Von Rad locates the beginning of the prophetic movement in the ninth century during the time of Elijah and Elisha (*ibid.*, 6).

14. John Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* (EBC 2; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990). Gordon Wenham, *Genesis* (WBC 1–2; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987–1994). Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* (NICOT 1–2; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990–1995). Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001). Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* (NAC 1b; Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2005). When it comes to OT Theologies, the major exception is Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991). Also, Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu (*An Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007], 808) include Abraham in a list of pre-monarchical prophets, but do not discuss him.

15. It is beyond the scope of this article to rehearse the centuries-old debate over the authorship and composition of the Pentateuch. I affirm the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch but have chosen to use “Pentateuch’s author” or “the author” for the purpose of clarity, since I discuss Moses as a character within the Pentateuch later in the article.

the Abrahamic narrative in order to demonstrate Abraham's role as a prophet.

#### PROPHETIC CHARACTERISTICS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The great variety of prophetic activity in the prophetic tradition makes it difficult to outline the prophetic characteristics in the HB. In his article on early Israelite prophecy, Robert Wilson highlights the difficulty of clearly defining distinctions between the early prophets and the writing prophets. He also surveys the ways scholars have divided the prophetic movement in Israel into two phases.<sup>16</sup> After reviewing several approaches,<sup>17</sup> Wilson concludes that "there is biblical evidence for *continuity* [italics original] in prophetic activity throughout Israelite history."<sup>18</sup> Additionally, he identifies biblical evidence for this continuity, the foremost of which is the lack of any attempt in the HB "to distinguish the activities of the early prophets from those of the writing prophet."<sup>19</sup> In the end, Wilson attributes this continuity across the prophetic tradition to the groups responsible for the Elohistic and Deuteronomic traditions and their vision of the prophets' "important role in maintaining social structure."<sup>20</sup> Wilson thus makes the same error he accuses the early critical scholars of making: "hypothetical reconstructions."<sup>21</sup>

Despite Wilson's hypothetical reconstructions, his emphasis on the continuity of prophetic activity provides a good foundation for the present discussion. In what follows, I list the major characteristics of

16. Wilson, "Early," 3–16.

17. Wilson mentions the following approaches: 1) "early critical scholars who saw the writing prophets as representatives of the purest form of monotheistic religion and ethics," 2) ecstatic behavior in early Israelite prophecy, and 3) extent of prophetic involvement in the cult (early Israelite prophets are usually connected to the cult) (*ibid.*, 5–7).

18. *Ibid.*, 7.

19. *Ibid.* He also writes, "Form-critical analysis of the prophetic speeches has shown a basic continuity between the speech forms used by the early prophets and those employed by the writing prophets."

20. *Ibid.*, 16.

21. Wilson (*ibid.*, 5) critiques the early critical scholars for hypothetically reconstructing "the messages of the early prophets," while he himself hypothetically reconstructs the sources, the groups behind the sources, and their attitudes toward the prophets.

prophets in the HB<sup>22</sup> and divide these characteristics into two major groups. The first group is a list of qualities explicitly connected to prophets in the Pentateuch. If the author portrays Abraham as a prophet in the narratives of Genesis, then one would assume he would fit the Pentateuch's own prophetic criteria. The second group consists of additional prophetic qualities gleaned from texts outside the Pentateuch.

### *Prophetic Characteristics Given in the Pentateuch*

#### 1) Intercessory Prayer

- Pentateuch: Gen 20:7; Exod 32:11–14; Num 11:2; 14:13–19; 21:7
- Outside of Pentateuch: 1 Sam 7:5–11; 12:19–25; 1 Kgs 13:6; Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 37:3; 42:2, 4, 20; Ezek 9:8; 11:13; Amos 7:2, 5

#### 2) Proclamation of YHWH's Word

- Pentateuch: Exod 4:22; 5:1; 7:1, 17, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3; 11:4
- Outside of Pentateuch: numerous instances of the phrases: (1) "Thus says the Lord" and (2) "the word of the Lord was to . . ."

#### 3) Empowerment by the Spirit of YHWH

- Pentateuch: Num 11:24–29
- Outside of Pentateuch: 1 Sam 10:6ff.; 1 Chr 12:18; 2 Chr 15:1–8; 20:13–21; 24:20; Ezek 11:5; Mic 3:8; Joel 2:28–32

#### 4) Visionary Experience

- Pentateuch: Num 12:6–8
- Outside of Pentateuch: 1 Sam 3:1–21; 1 Kgs 22:17–22; Isa 1:1; 6:1–11; Jer 1:11–14; 4:23–26; 24:1–10; 38:21–23;

22. Since these prophetic characteristics are commonly assumed in the secondary literature, I have chosen not to discuss them; instead, I have listed biblical references where one can find examples of each prophetic activity. These lists are not exhaustive.

Ezekiel 1–10; 37; 40–48; Amos 7:1–9; 8:1–2; 9:1–4; Zech 1:7–15; 2:1–4; 2:5–9; 3:1–10; 4:1–14; 5:1–11; 6:1–8<sup>23</sup>

### 5) Prediction of Future Events

- Pentateuch: Deut 18:20–22
- Outside of the Pentateuch: 1 Kgs 22; Jer 28

### 6) Covenant Mediation

- Pentateuch: Exod 19:23–25; 20:18–21; 24:1–18; Deut 18:15–18
- Outside of Pentateuch: 2 Sam 7:4–17

## *Prophetic Characteristics Given Outside the Pentateuch*

### 1) Ecstatic Behavior<sup>24</sup>

- 1 Sam 10:6, 9; 19:18–24; 2 Kgs 9:11; Jer 29:26; Hos 9:7

### 2) Prophetic Call

- 1 Sam 3; 1 Kgs 19:19–21; Isa 6; Jer 1:4–19; Ezekiel 2–3; Amos 7:14–15

### 3) Sign Activity

- 1 Sam 10:9; 1 Kgs 13:1–5; 2 Kgs 19:29; 20:9 (Isa 38:78); Isa 7:14; 8:18; 20:3; Ezek 4:1–3; 24:24

### 4) Covenant Enforcement

- Isa 24:5; Jer 11:1–13; 22:9; 34:12–20; Ezek 44:5–9; Hos 6:7; 8:1; Mal 2:10

23. References taken from M. R. Stead, “Visions, Prophetic,” *DOTP*, 818–26.

24. Gary Smith’s (“Prophet; Prophecy,” 996) cautions regarding ecstatic behavior in the HB are noteworthy: “[T]he assumption that the ecstasy of the writing prophets was analogous to the irrational frenzied ecstasy of the foreign prophets is largely inadmissible.”

These prophetic characteristics demonstrate the great variety of prophetic activity in the HB, but also provide evidence for continuity across the different epochs of the prophetic movement. In regard to this continuity, several summary points are necessary. First, if one follows John Walton's threefold division of the prophetic movement—pre-monarchy, pre-classical, and classical<sup>25</sup>— then none of the prophetic characteristics are limited to a single prophetic era. Second, all six of the Pentateuch's prophetic characteristics appear in each of the three time periods. Furthermore, when one examines the Pentateuch in hindsight, one discovers that three of the four characteristics explicitly connected to prophets in the Prophets also appear in the Pentateuch.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, with the exception of ecstatic behavior, all the prophetic characteristics outlined above appear in each of the major periods of prophetic activity in the HB, thus providing solid criteria by which to evaluate Abraham.

#### PROPHETIC CHARACTERISTICS IN THE ABRAHAMIC NARRATIVE

Now that we have outlined the major prophetic characteristics in the HB, it is time to turn our attention to Abraham. In so doing, we will discuss four chapters where these qualities appear: Gen 15, 17, 18, and 20.

##### *Genesis 15*

Genesis 15 narrates one of the most significant events in the Abrahamic narrative and the Bible as a whole: YHWH's covenant with Abraham. Additionally, this narrative contains more indicators of Abraham's prophetic role than any narrative in Genesis. The first indication of Abraham's prophetic role in this chapter is the presence of "the signature formula for prophetic revelation."<sup>27</sup> The chapter begins in the following manner: אחר הדברים האלה היה דבר-יהוה אל-אברם ("After these things the

25. John Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament*, (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 52. Walton divides these three time periods in the following manner: 1) Pre-monarchial prophets are prophets who prophesied up to Samuel (e.g. Moses and Deborah); 2) Pre-classical prophets are prophets who prophesied during the time of the monarchy but before the writing prophets (e.g. Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah); and 3) Classical prophets are the writing prophets.

26. The prophetic call appears in Exod 3–4, sign activity in Exod 7–12 and Deut 34:11–12, and covenant enforcement in Deuteronomy.

27. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 162.



word of the YHWH was to Abram"; Gen 15:1).<sup>28</sup> The author's use of such wording is particularly striking when one considers the distribution of this phrase in the HB. This common prophetic phrase appears 88 times in the Prophets, but only here in the Pentateuch. Of the 88 occurrences of this phrase in the Prophets, 87 describe the prophetic reception of the divine word.<sup>29</sup> The use of such "stock" prophetic phraseology effectively creates prophetic overtones that continue throughout this significant chapter.

In a similar manner, the author accentuates the prophetic connotations of Gen 15:1 by using the prepositional phrase במחזה ("in a vision") to describe how YHWH's word came to Abraham. Outside of Gen 15:1, the word מחזה ("vision") appears three times in the HB, each time in the context of prophetic activity.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Abraham's prophetic vision in Gen 15:1 parallels YHWH's description of prophetic revelation in Num 12:6, even though a different word for "vision" (מראה) appears in this latter passage.<sup>31</sup> Hence, the prophetic connotations associated with this word, the use of its synonym in Num 12:6, and the common usage of other related words<sup>32</sup> underscore the conclusion that the author intentionally portrays Abraham as a prophet in this chapter.

The third indicator of Abraham's prophetic activity in Gen 15 is the prophecy God gives Abraham in vv. 13–16. Here God reveals future events that will affect Abraham's offspring,<sup>33</sup> i.e., Israel's journey to Egypt, the Exodus, and the conquest of the land (Gen 46–Exod 12 and Joshua). Although one may object that Abraham did not actually give a prophetic prediction to other people, there are indications in the larger narrative (discussed below) that God expects Abraham to teach his

28. This same phrase appears again in v. 4 *sans* the verb היה.

29. The only exception is found in Jer 6:10, where this phrase is used to describe the people's attitude toward YHWH's word.

30. It occurs twice in reference to Balaam's activity (Num 24:4, 16) and once in reference to the false prophets in Ezekiel's day (Ezek 13:7).

31. Numbers 12:6 reads: ויאמר שמעו־נא דברי א־יְהוָה נביאכם יהוה במראה אליו אתודע בהלום ("And he [YHWH] said, 'Listen to my words. If there is a prophet among you, in a vision I, YHWH, make myself known to him, in a dream I speak with him.'")

32. Victor Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis 1–17*, 418) points out that "related words which also mean 'vision,' such as ḥāzôn (35 times), ḥāzûṭ (5 times), and ḥizzāyôn (9 times), appear frequently."

33. Wenham (*Genesis 1–15*, 327) refers to these verses as a prophecy and connects them to 15:1.

household (Gen 18:19). Undoubtedly, such instruction would include this prophecy.

At this point, a couple of comments are necessary regarding this prophetic revelation in the context of Gen 15 and the Pentateuch. First, both Gordon Wenham and John Sailhamer highlight the connection between the description of Abraham's reception of YHWH's word in vv. 1–4 and the prophecy of Israel's time in Egypt in vv. 13–16.<sup>34</sup> The presentation of "Abraham's credentials as a prophet"<sup>35</sup> . . . "prepare[s] the way for the prophecy of the Egyptian bondage."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it does not seem that the author randomly selected key prophetic introductory phrases from the prophetic books, but that he selected these phrases as an integral part of his overall agenda for Gen 15.

When one evaluates this passage in light of the larger context of the Pentateuch, one discovers an important implication relating to the test of a prophet. Deuteronomy 18 teaches that the words of a true prophet come to pass, whereas those of a false prophet do not. When viewed in the larger context of the Pentateuch, most of YHWH's predictions in Gen 15:13–16 are fulfilled later in the Pentateuch. Commenting on the significance of this fulfillment, Sailhamer writes, "[W]ithin the narrative of Genesis and the Pentateuch, the vision and its fulfillment are a confirmation of the prophetic words of Abraham."<sup>37</sup> Such a confirmation within the Pentateuch provides further evidence for identifying Abraham as a prophet, but the prophecy of Gen 15:13–16 is not the last signal of Abraham's prophetic activity in this important chapter.

A fourth and final indicator of Abraham's role as a prophet in Gen 15 is his covenant mediation. As with the later Mosaic and Davidic Covenants,<sup>38</sup> the Abrahamic Covenant has a prophetic mediator: Abraham. Although YHWH makes his covenant with Abraham only (Gen 15), its ultimate fulfillment involves Abraham's offspring, who will return and possess the land of Canaan. Genesis 17 contains a further confirmation of Abraham's mediatorial role when YHWH gives the sign of the covenant (circumcision). On three occasions in this chapter,

34. Ibid. See also Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 149.

35. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 149.

36. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 327.

37. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 151.

38. Moses serves as the mediator of the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 18:15–18) and Nathan serves as the mediator of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:4–17).

YHWH states that he is establishing his covenant with Abraham and his offspring after him (vv. 7, 9, 10). Abraham thus functions as a mediator between YHWH and Abraham's offspring, who would inherit the covenant promises.

### *Genesis 17*

The reference to Gen 17 in the previous paragraph serves as a fitting transition to another prophetic quality in the same chapter: covenant enforcement. When YHWH gives Abraham the covenant sign of circumcision, he lays out strict requirements regarding the circumcision of Abraham's household (vv. 9–14). At the end of this chapter, Abraham not only obeys YHWH's commands personally, but he also enforces the covenant stipulation of circumcision on his son and every male in his household (vv. 22–27). Abraham's enforcement of the covenant regulation may parallel the task of later prophets who persistently call the people to covenant obedience.

### *Genesis 18*

Within the narrative of Gen 18, two indicators of Abraham's prophetic role come to the forefront. The first of these, the proclamation of YHWH's word, is perhaps the most important of the prophetic characteristics since it is the one feature that unites all prophets in the HB. The prophetic proclamation of God's word is such a central component of the prophetic task that some have dismissed Abraham as a prophet on the basis of this criterion alone. For example, John Schmitt writes, "Although Abraham is identified as a prophet by the source usually called E, Abraham does not function as the other prophets do. He does not address the people in the name of God."<sup>39</sup> In response to Schmitt's assertion that Abraham "does not address the people in the name of God," one finds indications to the contrary in Gen 18:19. In YHWH's deliberation with the other visitors near the oaks of Mamre, he gives his reasons for revealing his plan for Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham (vv. 16–19). For the purposes of this article, v. 19 is significant. It reads:

כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את־בניו ואת־ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך יהוה לעשות  
צדקה ומשפט למען הביא יהוה על־אברהם את אשר־דבר עליו:

39. John J. Schmitt, "Prophecy (Preexilic Hebrew)," *ABD* 5:482.

For I have known him so that he will command his sons and his household after him and they will keep the way of YHWH to do righteousness and justice so that YHWH may bring upon Abraham what he spoke concerning him.

This verse contains two important elements pertaining to Abraham's prophetic function. First, Abraham's divinely appointed task is to "command his sons and his household after him" (v. 19). This "prophetic audience" demonstrates that YHWH's revelation to Abraham was not merely for Abraham's benefit, but for the benefit of the covenant community. It also serves as evidence that Abraham did indeed "address the people in the name of God." This covenant community did not merely consist of his sons, but of "his household after him." Like the classical prophets, Abraham's prophetic teaching had in its purview later generations.<sup>40</sup>

Second, the content of Abraham's command is even more striking when one considers his prophetic role. Abraham is tasked with commanding his sons and later household "to keep the way of YHWH" and "to do righteousness and justice" (v. 19). A quick perusal of the distribution of the word pair "righteousness and justice" demonstrates its dominance in the prophetic literature.<sup>41</sup> Concerning this connection to the prophets, Victor Hamilton states, "For the message of Abraham to his children is the same as the message of the prophets to their contemporaries. They too were concerned for the practice of these two virtues."<sup>42</sup> As with the use of the prophetic introductory formula in chapter 15, so here the use of a phrase closely associated with prophetic proclamation is yet another indication of the thoroughness of Abraham's prophetic characterization. And yet the signals in the narrative do not end here.

40. Mathews (*Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 223) connects this verse to v. 18 in the following manner: "the divine election of the man . . . will result . . . in a people characterized by righteousness . . ., which in turn results in the Lord fulfilling his promise of worldwide blessing (v. 18)." For evidence that the words of the classical prophets were written down in view of later generations, see Isa 8:16–22; 30:8–11; and Jer 30:1–3.

41. Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis 18–50*, 19) notes that the phrase "justice and righteousness" occurs more frequently. He cites the following texts as examples of this word pair: 2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kgs 10:9; Isa 32:16; 33:5; 56:1; 59:9, 14; Jer 9:23; 22:3, 15; 23:5; 33:15; Ezek 18:5, 19, 21, 27; 33:14, 16, 19; 45:9; Amos 5:7, 24.

42. Ibid.

The second prophetic activity in Gen 18 is Abraham's prophetic intercession for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 22–33).<sup>43</sup> Although Abraham's bold intercession<sup>44</sup> for the Sodomites does not result in YHWH relenting from his intended destruction, the author does identify Abraham's favor with YHWH as the reason for YHWH's rescue of Lot and his family (Gen 19:29). As the smoke of Sodom and Gomorrah go up from the land, the author notes, ויזכר אלהים את־אברהם, "And God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out from the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt".

### *Genesis 20*

Abraham's intercession for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as a good transition to the final passage under consideration in this article: Gen 20. As mentioned in the introduction, this chapter contains the Pentateuch's only explicit reference to Abraham as a prophet. Furthermore, this passage connects Abraham's prophetic designation to his intercessory prayer for Abimelech and his household. In contrast to Abraham's intercession for the unrighteous nation of Sodom, here Abraham intercedes for a righteous nation (vv. 4–6) that has come under the judgment of YHWH because of the actions of the prophet himself. Thus, Abraham's prophetic intercession results in healing for Abimelech and the women of his household (vv. 17–18).

### *Summary of the Prophetic Characteristics in the Abrahamic Narrative*

The above evaluation of the Abrahamic narrative in light of common prophetic qualities throughout the HB has demonstrated that the textual portrayal of Abraham is far more prophetic than has hitherto been granted by many. The author highlights Abraham's role as a prophet in two ways. First, the use of key prophetic terminology on three occasions

43. Waltke and Fredricks (*Genesis*, 271) write, "This scene presents Abraham as a noble prophet. Amos declares, 'Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets' (3:7). . . . He pleads, like the weeping prophet Jeremiah, for the deliverance of the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah."

44. Commenting on this passage, James McKeown (*Genesis* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008], 105) notes that it "is one of the most daring portrayals of human-divine relations in the entire OT" and that "[e]ven the intercession of Moses on behalf of Israel is portrayed in less intimate terms (Exod 32:11–14)."

points to an authorial agenda at work in the narrative. Second, the Abrahamic narrative contains six of the ten prophetic characteristics outlined in the previous section. When one narrows the focus of evaluation to those prophetic characteristics explicitly mentioned in the Pentateuch, the evidence is even more impressive, since Abraham reflects five of the six characteristics. The author therefore appears to use the criteria given later in the Pentateuch to provoke the reader to reconsider the extent of Abraham's prophetic activity in Genesis. Not only is Abraham an intercessor, but he is also the recipient of a prophetic vision, a covenant mediator, a proclaimer of YHWH's word, and a foreteller of future events. Consequently, readers of the HB do not have to wait until the prophetic books to evaluate Abraham's prophetic credentials. One can identify his role as a prophet within the Pentateuch itself. Thus, as readers move from the Pentateuch to the Prophets, they are already equipped to identify prophetic activity, much of which resembles the Great Patriarch himself. He is a prophet in the full sense of the word, even before readers meet the other great prophets of Israel such as Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The prophetic books merely confirm Abraham's prophetic role rather than establish such a role. Such a confirmatory function extends beyond the prophetic books to the Writings. It is to such a discussion that we now turn.

#### CONFIRMATION FROM PSALMS

One of the benefits of Pentateuchal studies is the possibility of finding confirmation for one's interpretations in later biblical texts that cite or allude to the Pentateuch. In this regard, it is rather surprising to find how little attention the Latter Prophets give to Abraham.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the Latter Prophets do not explicitly identify Abraham as a prophet. The Writings, on the other hand, not only contain a few more references to Abraham in general,<sup>46</sup> but also include one psalm that confirms the central thesis of this article. Psalm 105 recounts the wonderful works of YHWH (v. 2), beginning with his covenant with Abraham and ending with his gift of the land to Israel. While recounting the patriarchs' sojourns in the land of Canaan, the psalmist writes:

45. Abraham is only mentioned four times in the Former Prophets (Josh 24:2, 3; 1 Kgs 18:36; 2 Kgs 13:23) and seven times in the Latter Prophets (Isa 29:22; 41:8; 51:2; 63:16; Jer 33:26; Mic 7:20).

46. Abraham is mentioned twelve times in the Writings: Pss 47:9; 105:6, 9, 42; Neh 9:7; 1 Chr 1:27, 28, 34; 16:16; 29:18; 2 Chr 20:7; 30:6.

לֹא־הִנִּיחַ אִדָּם לְעִשְׂקָם וַיּוֹכַח עֲלֵיהֶם מַלְכִים  
אֶל־תִּגְעוּ בַּמְשִׁיחִי וּלְנַבִּיאי אֶל־תִּרְעוּ

He [YHWH] did not allow a man to oppress them and he rebuked kings on their behalf: “Do not touch my anointed ones and do not do evil to my prophets.” (vv. 14–15)

These verses, which directly reference the events of Gen 20, demonstrate that the psalmist regarded Abraham, as well as the other patriarchs, as a prophet.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF ABRAHAM’S PROPHETIC ROLE FOR THE THEOLOGY OF THE PENTATEUCH

Before concluding, I will briefly outline some implications of my findings in view of the overall message of the Pentateuch. The recognition of Abraham as a prophet in the book of Genesis should prompt readers to compare Abraham with two other significant prophets in the Pentateuch: Balaam and Moses.

##### *Abraham and Balaam*

On several occasions in the rabbinic tradition, the rabbis contrast the character traits of Abraham and Balaam on the basis of key parallels between the Abrahamic and Balaam narratives.<sup>47</sup> In particular, both the rabbis and modern interpreters have noted extensive similarities and significant contrasts between the Balaam narrative (Num 22–24) and the narrative of Abraham’s Binding of Isaac (Gen 22) on conceptual, structural, and linguistic levels.<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Safren summarizes the interpretive significance of this contrast well when he writes, “For the purpose of heaping scorn and ridicule on the figure of Balaam, and of denigrating his vaunted manic prowess, what better foil could be found than the revered ancestor Abraham, that rock of Israelite faith, the epitome of virtue, the receiver of manifold divine revelations?”<sup>49</sup> Such a tradition accords well with the information found later in Numbers

47. Jonathan Safren (“Balaam and Abraham,” *VT* 38 [1988]: 106) cites B. Sanhedrin 105b; Gen. Rabbah 55.8; and Num. Rabbah 20.12. Ricky Novick (“Abraham and Balaam: A Biblical Contrast,” *JBQ* 35 [2007]: 28) cites Pirke Avot 5:19.

48. For a good discussion of these parallels and their interpretive significance, see Safren, “Balaam and Abraham,” 105–13.

49. *Ibid.*, 113.

regarding Balaam's death and his role in the Moabite seduction of Israel at Baal Peor (Num 31:8, 16).

Even though the moral qualities of Abraham and Balaam contrast significantly, important similarities exist between the divine revelations given to them. In the above discussion of the prophetic characteristics in the Abrahamic narrative, I noted that Gen 15 and Num 24:4, 16 contain the only three occurrences of the Hebrew word *מְזוּזָה* in the Pentateuch. In Num 24, the author uses it to describe YHWH's prophetic revelation to Balaam. This key connection invites one to compare the content of YHWH's revelation to both of these prophets. In doing so, one readily notices two similarities. First, the last line of Balaam's third oracle directly echoes YHWH's initial promise to Abraham in Gen 12:3 (ואברכה מברכיך ומקללך אאר) ["I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse"]. Second, the theme of Balaam's fourth oracle is the victory of Israel's future king over his enemies and the nations. This theme also appears in YHWH's words to Abraham in Gen 22. Genesis 22:17 reads, וירש זרעך את שער איביו ("And your offspring will possess the gate of his enemies"). These parallels in YHWH's revelation to these two prophets highlight a key motif in the Balaam narrative: In spite of Balaam's questionable character and motives, YHWH compelled him to speak only YHWH's words. Ultimately, what connects these two prophets is the unchanging word of God which he reveals to prophets—whether his own chosen one or a pagan pretender.

### *Abraham and Moses*

Conversely, a comparison between Abraham and Moses reveals a high degree of continuity. Both prophets are known for their intercession, covenant mediation, reception of the divine word, and prediction of future events for the nation of Israel. The correspondences between the prophetic activities of these two great Pentateuchal prophets lead to a few observations. First, the prophetic predictions of these two prophets serve as two great towers that cast their shadows across the entire HB. YHWH's revelation to Abraham in Gen 15 outlines some of the key movements in the story of Israel that occur throughout the remainder of the Pentateuch and into the book of Joshua. Moses' predictions at the end of Deuteronomy (chs. 30–33) outline much of Israel's activity in the remainder of the OT and even take readers into the NT. While both of their predictions overlap in regard to the conquest of the land, Moses' predictions pick up where Abraham's leave off. While later prophets supplement and clarify YHWH's revelation to these two prophets,



YHWH gives the core of his plans for his people to the two great prophets of the Pentateuch.

A second area of continuity between Abraham and Moses is YHWH's mode of revelation to both prophets. In Num 12:6–8, YHWH differentiates between Moses and other prophets. In contrast to other prophets, YHWH speaks with Moses פה אל-פה (“mouth to mouth”) and Moses תִּמַּנְתָּ יְהוָה יְבִיט (“sees the likeness of YHWH”; Num 12:8). The expression “mouth to mouth” is very similar to the description of YHWH's communication with Moses in Exod 33:11, which states that YHWH spoke to Moses פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים כְּאִשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ (“face to face as a man speaks to his friend”). If Moses' communication with YHWH is best described in terms of communication between friends, it is significant that later biblical authors describe Abraham as the friend of God (Isa 41:8 and 2 Chr 20:7). Furthermore, in Genesis, YHWH not only appears to Abraham, but also speaks directly to him on several occasions (Gen 12:1, 4; 13:14; 15:1; 21:12; 22:1). Concerning these direct interactions, Walter Kaiser writes, “Therefore it was not only Moses to whom God spoke clearly ‘mouth to mouth’ (Num 12:6–8) but also Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”<sup>50</sup> Such intimate, friendly communication between YHWH and these two great prophets sets them apart from other prophets in the prophetic tradition. As YHWH states in Num 12:6, he spoke to other prophets through visions and dreams; “not so . . . Moses” (Num 12:7) and—one might add after reflecting on the early portions of the Pentateuch—Abraham.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the continuity between these two prophets provides a more comprehensive picture of the prophetic office in the Pentateuch. Many interpreters rightly recognize Moses as the greatest OT prophet (Deut 34:10) and the model for all future prophetic activity (Deut 18:15–18). Such prominence is reinforced when one evaluates the six prophetic characteristics that appear in the Pentateuch. All but one of these characteristics relate directly to Moses, either as the one who communicates the prophetic quality or the one who models the quality. The single exception is prophetic intercession, the very characteristic which YHWH explicitly connects to Abraham in Gen 20. So when Moses intercedes for the people (Exod 32:11–14; Num 11:2; 14:13–19; 21:7), one knows this activity is part of his prophetic task only because Abraham the prophet has already modeled it in Gen 20. Even as Moses gives readers additional qualities by which to evaluate Abraham's

50. Kaiser, *Toward*, 85.

51. This conclusion is based on the assumption that in Num 12:6–8 YHWH highlights the difference between Moses and his contemporaries, not prophets before him (i.e., Abraham).

prophetic qualifications, so also the Abrahamic narrative provides a criterion that enhances Moses' prophetic function in the Pentateuch.

### CONCLUSION

In this article I have demonstrated that if we apply the prophetic characteristics given by the HB broadly and the Pentateuch specifically to Abraham, he meets the criteria of a prophet, even more so than some of the classical prophets. The presence of key prophetic terminology in the Abrahamic narrative reinforces the conclusion that Abraham's prophetic characteristics are not simply the result of random correspondences between Abraham and later prophets. If therefore the author's intent is important in our interpretation of the biblical text, we must identify Abraham as a prophet.

These conclusions present a challenge to each of the groups mentioned in the introduction. Even though critical scholars deny the historicity of the Abrahamic narrative, they—when dealing with the meaning of the final form of the Pentateuch—must acknowledge Abraham's prophetic role. The final editor of the Pentateuch clearly intends to portray Abraham as a prophet. The second group—those who diminish the prophetic role of Abraham—should cease arbitrarily selecting two of three prophetic qualities and then denying Abraham's prophetic role on the basis of such criteria. When one considers all the prophetic qualities, Abraham's prophetic résumé is impressive. Lastly, those who simply dismiss Abraham as a prophet face the greatest challenge. Such a dismissal entails missing a key component of the Abrahamic narrative and ignoring YHWH's own prophetic designation of the patriarch.

Finally, in the introduction, I pointed out that the most common exceptions to the neglect of Abraham's prophetic role are commentaries on Genesis. It is not coincidental that those who deal with the textual features of the Abrahamic narrative in an in-depth manner consistently notice the prophetic qualities of Abraham. The challenge for prophetic research is to give proper emphasis to Abraham in more systematic treatments of the prophetic tradition. Specifically, historical surveys of the prophetic movement in Israel must begin with Abraham, not Moses, and must deal seriously with the other prophetic features in the Abrahamic narrative. It is my hope that this article will compel students of the prophets to embrace Abraham as both a great patriarch *and* a great prophet.