

DALLAS BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

**THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF INTERCESSION WITH
AN EMPHASIS ON JEREMIAH**

**SUBMITTED TO
THE GENTLE READER
FOR
PEW CONFERENCE**

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APRIL 5, 2003**

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I. Introduction

The world's longstanding failure to understand and listen to prophets and prophecy in general is one of the most lamentable tragedies of history. Sometimes this failure involves the disbelief of a prophet's true words, which often results in tragic judgment on the disbelievers.¹ Yet there is also a tragic misunderstanding of what prophets and prophecy are all about, a mistake which we in the modern church still make today. This mistake is to think that prophets are called merely to speak a message about the future; but prophecy is much more than that. Prophets, in fact, are called first to intercede, second to call for repentance, and lastly to tell the future if God deems it necessary as an incentive for people to repent; Jeremiah's ministry demonstrates the nature of the prophetic role of intercession, the act of intercession itself, and the inevitability of judgment in spite of intercession.

II. The Roles of the Prophet

A. AS A PREDICTOR OF THE FUTURE

Biblically, how is a prophet recognized? The supreme test of a prophet is given in Deuteronomy 18:21-22: "And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him." (KJV).

¹ This is not to say that the disbelief of a prophet *directly* resulted in the judgment; to do so would attribute more authority to the prophet than a mere man deserves; this is only to say that the disbelief would not allow the prophet's words to bring repentance, the only thing capable of averting the judgment which was already coming from God.

It cannot be denied that a prophet's test is his accurate predictions of the future. , There are, however, several tasks for a prophet to perform, and predicting the future is only one of them. The other roles are intercession and speaking God's truth. The third role, which is predicting the future, is the only one that can be externally tested; hence, the test for a prophet is provided in Deuteronomy.

B. AS A SPEAKER OF THE TRUTH

When we observe the supreme prophetic archetype, Jesus Christ, there seem to be other aspects of prophecy than simply soothsaying. It is clear that Christ was a prophet, yet how often do we think of him as being a prophet simply because He predicted the future? Although Jesus Christ did predict the future sometimes, such as in Luke 21, the heart of his prophetic nature seems to be something else.

The two people on the road to Emmaus who were among the first to see Christ after his resurrection said of "Jesus of Nazareth" that He "was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Luke 24:19). At this point in time, roughly forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans and several hours before the two realized that it was the resurrected Jesus they were talking to, the two had not even had a chance to see most of Jesus Christ's detailed predictions of the future come true; they had not yet *seen* the predictions of the resurrection come true, though it had and though they had seen the predictions of His death come true. They actually seem to base Jesus' prophetic role almost entirely on something else: his words, his deeds, and his power therein. When most of us think of Jesus Christ as a prophet, we rarely think of his confirmation as a prophet in accordance with Deut. 18, but rather in accordance with some other aspect of his person, an aspect that we rarely identify.

This other aspect is most easily understood as the second prophetic role, speaking the truth. Our misunderstanding of the words “prophet” and “prophecy” is inherent in our own English language. Our word “prophet” came from the Greek word *prophetes*, and it is in the translation that some of the origins of our misconception of prophets have come about. Because of its transliteration and the passage of time, the English word “prophet” has lost some of its original meaning.

Joseph Thayer when defining *prophetes* gives the basic definitions of “an interpreter” and “spokesman for God; one through whom God speaks.”² *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, after talking about the fore-telling aspect of *prophetes*, continues with the words, “In spite of this knowledge, he is not a magician or soothsayer,” a statement that would indicate that the prophet is most importantly a forth-teller.³ Conclusively, the Dictionary says, “The prophet is essentially a proclaimer of God’s Word.”⁴

It is clear that, etymologically, prophets are not merely predictors of the future, but are primarily speakers of God's word. Furthermore, of the *prophetai* (plural of *prophetes*) in Acts 11:27, it has been said that “They were not just fore-tellers, but forth-tellers.”⁵ Prophecy is about speaking God’s word boldly. Prophets are analyzers of the present as well as predictors of the future. The nature of the second role of prophets is

² Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1991), 553.

³ Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: W.M.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1968), 829.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Archibald Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. III (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 161.

simply to speak God's word to men, and it is a role that is primary to the role of prediction. Prediction is usually no more than an incentive to repent in accordance with God's words spoken through the prophet.⁶

C. AS AN INTERCESSOR

The role of the prophet as an intercessor is the all-important role that may be the most often ignored or unknown. In Genesis, Abraham is revealed to be a prophet, and the story reveals a very important role of prophets: God said of Abraham, "he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live" (Gen. 20:7). Here it is Abraham's role as a prophet to *intercede* for King Abimelech so that Abimelech will live, not to say to him "*Thus sayeth the Lord, thou shalt live.*" The Old Testament contains numerous other revealing examples of the prophetic role of intercession.

A revealing story is told about Moses the prophet in Ex. 32. When the rebellious children of Israel made the golden calf, the LORD was prepared to destroy the nation, and he told Moses of his intentions. But Moses interceded, and the people were not destroyed. Elijah is known to have prayed for rain on the land of Israel (I Kin. 18:41-42); both Elijah (I Kin. 17:17-22) and Elisha (II Kin. 4:24-34) prayed for a dead child who was restored to life. Samuel, also a prophet, interceded for the people, for instance in I Sam. 7:5.

Every one of the major prophets is seen to have had the role of intercessory prayer. Isaiah in Is. 64 prays, "But we are all as an unclean thing [...]" (64:6) "Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people" (64:9).

⁶ The prophet Agabus in Acts 21 may be one exception.

Daniel's intercessory prayer on behalf of Israel is in Dan. 9:4-19. This is an interesting prayer both for its eloquence and its content. The bulk of the prayer (9:5-15) consists of Daniel confessing the sins of his people. The last three verses consist of a plea for mercy. It is important that Daniel makes this prayer just after receiving the interpretation of a vision (Dan. 8:15-27). Just like Abraham in Gen. 20 and Moses in Ex. 32, the prophet reacts to divine revelation with intercessory prayer.

Some examples of prophetic intercession are also provided in the minor prophets. In Amos 7:1-6, a prophet once again is found to be crying out to God in intercession: "O LORD GOD, forgive, I beseech thee!" (Amos 7:2). And "The LORD repented for this: It shall not be, saith the LORD" (Amos 7:3).

The book of the prophet Habakkuk is made up entirely of his prayer to the LORD and the LORD's answer to his prayer. There are three prayers. In the first prayer, in Hab. 1:2-4, he asks for justice; in the second prayer, in 1:12-2:1, he asks for justice. After asking for justice twice, in the third prayer (chapter 3) he asks for mercy: "O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; *in wrath remember mercy*" (3:2; italics added).

Jeremiah's intercession experience and a passage in Ezekiel will be discussed in more detail later. There seems to be little indication of a call to intercessory prayer in the books of Hoseah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.⁷ The same is true of the prophets Nathan and Gad.

It is vitally important, however, that we understand that every Old Testament prophet who carried the words of God to men, for instance Nathan, is an intercessor in

the sense of being a mediator (an arbitrator). Inasmuch as speaking God's words to men is the definition of a prophet, then the prophet is by definition an intercessor in this one sense of the word.

Clearly intercession is a very important prophetic role, and, in the sense of mediation, is virtually universal. Inasmuch as prediction is a part of speaking the truth and speaking the truth is a part of mediation (and hence intercession), the question of which of these three roles is the most important is almost a meaningless question. Intercession could be said, however, to be more important than the other two prophetic roles because it *includes* them and they are only a part of it. This statement is only true, however, *insofar as prediction is a part of speaking the truth and insofar as speaking the truth is mediation and hence intercession.*

III. A Closer Look at Jeremiah as an Intercessor

Jeremiah the prophet is a prime example of the genre: he was called as a prophet, spoke as a prophet, was persecuted as prophets usually are, and his words proved to be true. Jeremiah is also a good example of the prophetic role of intercession.

The process of intercession is anything but simple. An intercessor between God and people must first be able to see the sin of those people. What Jeremiah did with his knowledge of Judah's sin is amazing. Rather than becoming a vindictive condemner of the sinners, he stood between the sinners and their angry God. The act of "intercession" begins with mediation. Jeremiah, however, went so far as to identify himself with the sin

⁷ At least, I know of no such indication.

in a life of intercession. Once he has seen the sin, "the true prophet" will become "identified with sin."⁸ Jeremiah was a true prophet and no exception.

A. PERCEPTION INTO SIN

Jeremiah understood the nature of fallen human beings so well that his words form one of the most eloquent and pointed statements of humanity's sinful condition. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" says the prophet in Jer. 17:9. A prophet's perception into such things as sin is a hallmark of prophecy. Clyde Francisco commends Jeremiah for understanding mankind's sin better than anyone else in the Old Testament:

In the book of Jeremiah are to be found the clearest teachings concerning human depravity in the Old Testament. Chapters 1-3 of Genesis clearly teach that man was originally created in the image of God. Then sin entered into the Garden and the image became marred although still present (Gen. 5:3). Jeremiah adds to this picture the convictions born of his own experience. It is not necessary to go into the Bible to know that man is depraved. One only has to look deep within his own heart.⁹

More than any other knowledge perceived by a prophet, the knowledge of the sin in the world is (chronologically) the primary reason for his ministry. Jeremiah well understood man's sinful tendencies.

⁸ Oswald Chambers, *Still Higher for the Highest* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1970), 16; the actual words are the heading of a daily devotional message and may be the words of the compiler of the book, David Lambert.

⁹ Clyde Francisco, *Studies in Jeremiah* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1961), 83.

Furthermore, Jeremiah was gifted with a keen insight for identifying the sins of his people, Judah, who had together turned their backs on the truth and become unclean. After the first chapter of Jeremiah, which deals with Jeremiah's call experience, are more than two chapters dedicated to making the case that Israel was unrighteous. In Jeremiah 2:13 he provides an excellent illustration: "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." F.B. Huey elaborates on this:

The people had abandoned [...] the Lord who had brought them into the promised land and had embraced worthless idols. Jeremiah compared that decision to an exchange of a well of flowing water for a cracked cistern that could not hold water. Jeremiah's hearers would understand the comparison, for it was necessary to line the porous limestone rock cisterns of Palestine with plaster in order for them to hold water.¹⁰

Here is an excellent example of Jeremiah's understanding of the sinful situation of Israel. Jeremiah's skillful illustration shows how well he had understood the crimes of a people that had turned away from Yahweh.

The specific ways in which Israel had forsaken its King are also identified by Jeremiah. For example, in Jeremiah's famous Temple Sermon, he identifies the issues of empty religious rituals that are devoid of true worship, of hypocrisy, and of heathen cults:

Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these. For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor; If ye oppress not the stranger, the

fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt (Jer. 7:4-6) [...] Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit (7:8) [...] Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations? (7:9-10) [...] The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto other gods, that they may provoke me to anger (7:18).

The peoples' sins were great, and it was abhorrent in God's sight that their persistence in religious rituals did nothing to change their lives. Furthermore, they were worshipping pagan gods such as Baal and the Queen of Heaven at the same time as they observed their ritualistic "worship" of Yahweh. Jeremiah could clearly see the sinful nature of the land. Huey comments on this: "Jeremiah accused the people of repeated violations of the Ten Commandments . . . They felt no shame about breaking the moral laws of God and then coming to stand in the temple that bore God's name."¹¹ That Jeremiah had a keen understanding of the people's sins is clear.

B. MEDIATION

Any person who goes between two warring parties can be viewed as an intercessor. This sort of communication between God and man is the simplest form of intercession. From the first day of his prophetic call, Jeremiah was a mediator between

¹⁰ F. B. Huey, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. XVI (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 64.

Judah and God, who said to Jeremiah, "thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak" (Jer. 1:7). Here Jeremiah is called to speak God's words to the people. This he did throughout his entire life in obedience to his calling.

He also spoke the people's words to God. In Jer. 14 the prophet again fulfills his job as an intercessory mediator. Having observed the sin of the people, he now prays for mercy. In his own words, "O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against thee. O the hope of Israel, the savior thereof in time of trouble [...] thou, O LORD, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not" (Jer. 14:7-9). Huey suggests that the people were speaking these words of repentance: "Here it is most likely that the words reflect a presumptuous attitude of the people. They believed they could call on God whenever they were in trouble."¹² If these were the words of the Israelites, the words are still in the book of Jeremiah as if they were his words. Apparently, Jeremiah was bringing their requests to God in an act of intercession between God and man, much like his ministry of bringing God's words to man. In fact, just as the prophetic role of prediction is an outflow of the role of speaking, so the role of speaking is an outflow of the prophetic role of intercession.

Faulhaber in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* eloquently sums up the role of Jeremiah the mediator between God and men:

He heard the sins of his people crying to heaven for vengeance, and forcibly expresses his approval of the judgment pronounced upon the

¹¹ Ibid., 106.

blood-stained city [. . .] The next moment, however, he prays the Lord to let the cup pass from Jerusalem, and wrestles like Jacob with God for a blessing upon Sion (Zion). The grandeur of soul of the great sufferer appears most plainly in the fervid prayers for his people.¹³

Contrary to popular understanding of prophecy, a prophet's first task is not to warn of the coming judgment, but to intercede between the people and their wrathful God. Jeremiah *wrestled* before the throne of God in prayer. This sort of prayer is the act of intercession. It must be remembered, of course, that any mediation between God and man is incomplete, save Christ's.

C. IDENTIFICATION

The most extreme form of intercession, however, is identification with sin. Later in the same chapter Jeremiah pleads, "We acknowledge, O LORD, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers: for we have sinned against thee. Do not abhor us, for thy name's sake, do not disgrace the throne of thy glory: remember, break not thy covenant with us" (14:20-21). Huey here says that these words were Jeremiah's legitimate prayer. "It seems more likely that Jeremiah was speaking on behalf of the people, confessing their sins in the spirit of Ezra [...]"¹⁴ The passage in Ezra refers to a later time when the people of Israel had sinned by intermarriage with the Gentiles. In Ezra chapter nine, Ezra intercedes for the people. The important aspect of this intercession is that Ezra *identified* himself with the people's sin, even though he himself was not guilty of any such crimes:

¹² Ibid., 151.

¹³ M. Faulhaber, "Jeremias" *The Catholic Encyclopedia* [www.newadvent.org]; Available from <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08334a.htm>>; Internet; accessed 9 Apr. 2002.

¹⁴ Huey, 155.

"O my God, *I* am ashamed [...] for *our* iniquities are increased over our head [...]" (Ezra 9:6, italics added). When an innocent person identifies himself or herself with the sin of others, it is a purer (and nobler) act of intercession than simply to plead the case between the two parties. So it is with Jeremiah, who said "*We* acknowledge, O LORD, *our* wickedness ... *we* have sinned against thee" (Jer. 14:20, italics added). Even though Jeremiah himself was personally innocent of their crimes, he was willing to identify himself with the sin of his people. This is the true calling of a prophet, and Jeremiah was faithful to his calling.

D. INEVITABLE JUDGEMENT

Yet sin is real, judgment is real, and there is a time when it cannot be averted. Jeremiah learned to be an intercessor, but he was taught the character of God in other ways, too. For God is also God *our judge*. Jeremiah learned through his intercession experience that sin must still be paid for. In spite of Jeremiah's intercession, it was simply too late for the people of Judah.

Jeremiah's go-between prayer in Jer. 14:7-9 is answered by God with the terrible words, "Then said the LORD unto me, Pray not for this people for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence." (Jer. 14:11-12). Says Huey on these words, "[...] They had rejected him (God). Now he was rejecting them and was going to punish them for their sins."¹⁵

Even harsher is God's response to Jeremiah's identification act of intercession in Jer. 14:20-21. God responds in Jer. 15:1 with a vivid description of the futility of interceding for a consistently rebellious and unrepentant people: The LORD says,

“Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of my sight, and let them go forth.” This phrase makes clear the absolute hopelessness of the situation. "Moses was an effective intercessor," Huey says, and "Samuel also was well remembered for his prayers on behalf of Israel. But neither of these great intercessors would be heard now."¹⁶ After interceding for the people, Jeremiah is met with what is easily viewed as failure: "God could no longer tolerate the stubbornness of the people."¹⁷ Enough was enough. It was simply too late. Jesus Christ Himself, the ultimate intercessor, also knows this, for He is revealed in Rev. 19:11-21 as an avenging God of wrath. Even Christ the intercessor knows that there is a time when judgment cannot be averted. The same way that time is running out for the entire world in spite of Christ's intercession on the world's behalf is much the same way as it was running out for Judah, in spite of Jeremiah's intercession on Judah's behalf. Yet by no means may it be said that intercession is futile even in cases where there is apparently no end result of redemption, for righteousness and obedience are their own rewards.

D. JEREMIAH AND JESUS CHRIST

It is not for no reason that Jeremiah has been called "the likeliest to Christ of all the prophets."¹⁸ The greatest way that a supreme God can reveal Himself to His creation is by having His creatures learn to be like Him. Hoseah is a splendid example of a mere man learning what it is to be like God. As he learned to love his wife unconditionally and in spite of her unfaithfulness to him, he learned what God, the lover of Israel, felt

¹⁵ Ibid., 153.

¹⁶ Ibid., 157.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ George Smith, Jeremiah (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922), 7.

like. We in New Testament times are called to be imitators of Christ. All humans, in fact, are called to follow the standard of the ideal human being, Jesus Christ. Though he almost certainly did not know it, Jeremiah was following the standard of Christ in the sense of prophetic intercession. There are certainly Old Testament revelations of Christ, such as in Joshua 5:13-6:5 and Job 19:25. Now the Person of Jesus Christ, our supreme intercessor, has been fully revealed. Knowingly or unknowingly—probably unknowingly—Jeremiah's role of intercession was similar to Christ's role of intercession. It is only logical that his being like Christ in this way was a fuller revelation of God's character to Jeremiah himself, and possibly to others, though we must assume that they did not know that there is a specific Person who is the ultimate intercessor.

Faulhaber points out that the book of Jeremiah, unlike the other major prophetic books, contains few Messianic predictions. However, it goes on to say that Jeremiah predicted Christ *by his life*. In his own words, "This lack of actual Messianic prophecies by Jeremias (Jeremiah) has its compensation; for his entire life became a living personal prophecy of the suffering Messias (Messiah) . . . Jeremias was a Messianic prophecy embodied in flesh and blood [...]"¹⁹ Jeremiah's life prediction of the Christ was not strictly limited to his suffering (as mere suffering), but was an outflow of his agonizing work as he stood in intercession between God and Judah, for it was through such a life that his suffering came. Isaiah's description of Christ shows as much of Christ's intercession, calling Jesus a sufferer and an intercessor in the same context: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows [...] (Isa. 53:4) [...] and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isa 53:12).

¹⁹ M. Faulhaber, "Jeremias."

Reverend Cheyne said, "Jeremiah is not unfitly called a 'type,' an unfinished sketch as it were, of the unique, the incomparable One . . . if he did not predict the true Christ in words, he did so by his life."²⁰ These words are aptly spoken of a prophet such as Jeremiah.

Jeremiah the prophet remains in most people's minds one of the best examples of a prophet that the Scriptures can provide, and with good reasons. He is a splendid example of the three prophetic roles; his predictions of coming doom came true, he certainly preached a message of repentance from God, and he was an intercessor. He is a prime example of the intercessory act of prophecy, which taught him to use his perception into sin for intercessory mediation, prayer, and even identification with sin. His ministry, finally, is an example of intercession's limitations: for intercession can only go so far when the people have no true repentance. We have much to learn from Jeremiah, both about the office of the prophet and about ourselves: for we, too, much like Jeremiah, are called to imitate Christ in intercession.

IV. A More Detailed Examination of Identification

Similar to Ezra, the prophet Daniel uses words like "we" and "us" rather than "they" and "them" fifteen times in his prayer in Dan. 9:4-19 (KJV). He says "our" instead of "their" seventeen times. Rather than disassociating himself from the sins of his people, he takes them on himself and calls himself guilty along with the rest of them. From this convicted position, Daniel begs for God's mercy for them all. It is not uncommon for intercessory prayers to be prayers of identification. Just what that identification means, however, and to what extent it goes, are difficult questions,

²⁰ T. K. Cheyne, *Jeremiah: His Life and Times* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1888), 202; I do not mean to imply that Jeremiah was a "type" of Christ in all of the theological implications of the term.

particularly where the prophet is concerned. A passage in Ezekiel 4 sheds some light on the subject.

Ezekiel is told by God, “Lie thou also upon thy left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it: according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it thou shalt bear their iniquity. For I have laid upon thee the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days: so shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel. And when thou hast accomplished them, lie again on thy right side, and thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days: I have appointed thee each day for a year” (Ezek. 4:4-6).

This story clearly shows the prophet identifying himself with a sinful people. Oswald Chambers comments: “Verses 4 through 8 indicate a deeper aspect of Ezekiel’s commission, the vicarious aspect. Ezekiel is to personify identification with the justice of God in his punishment of Israel and Judah. The Old Testament prophets never stood aloof from the judgments of God; they identified themselves with the life of their time and vicariously underwent the judgments.”²¹ On the other hand, Anton T. Pearson writing in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* says, “Here Ezekiel represents Israel bearing her iniquity rather than vicariously suffering for it.”²² Even if one assumed that Ezekiel was in this instance merely symbolically identifying himself, rather than vicariously identifying himself, with Israel’s and Judah’s sin, there still remains some small level of identification—that being, Ezekiel *was* the symbol for the sinful people.

²¹ Chambers, Oswald, *Notes on Ezekiel. The Complete Works of Oswald Chambers*, 1473-1486. (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2000), 1478.

²² Charles F. Pfeiffer, and Everett F. Harrison, eds, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 713.

Leslie C. Allen has written of Ezekiel's symbolic act in the *Word Biblical Commentary*. In her own words, "While in vv 1-3 Ezekiel represented the divine subject of the section that announced punishment in the judgment oracle, here he correspondingly represents the standard subject of the section of accusation. [...] Putting his full weight on one side represents the guilt or culpability of the covenant people, which he is to 'bear.' This bearing is not substitutionary, as if the prophet were atoning for their guilt, but representative."²³ Allen therefore agrees with Pearson that the act is merely symbolic, but does at least partially agree with Chambers that the prophet is indeed identifying himself with the guilty parties. Allen continues, "The phrase 'bear guilt' has been borrowed from priestly circles, where it has a range of meanings; in this case the sense is closest to the usage in Exod. 28:38."²⁴ The verse in Exodus describes the high priest literally bearing the guilt of the people.

Another commentator, Iain M. Duguid, wrote in *The NIV Application Commentary*, "When we combine this approach with the dual significance of the phrase 'bear their sin,' the following interpretation emerges: Ezekiel is to lie on his left side for 390 days, representing 390 years, bearing the guilty of the entire covenant of Israel. The iniquity of the community is placed on him [...] Then during the period of forty days, he represents the punishment of the Exile, which he depicts in terms of the symbolic figure of forty years."²⁵ Later Duguid writes, It is clear that Ezekiel's 'bearing sin' for the people has no substitutionary purpose. The siege and destruction of Jerusalem are not

²³ Leslie C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary*, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Baker, eds., vol. 28 (Dallas:Word Books, 1994), 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Iain M. Duguid, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel*, Terry Muck, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 90.

averted by his sufferings.”²⁶ Duguid goes along with Chambers and Allen in an explicit affirmation of identification, and goes along with Pearson and Allen in denying a substitutionary act of intercession.

It is important that Person’s comments still retained some level of identification, and that Chambers’ words never specifically indicate an *effective* substitution; the only stark disagreement involves the term “vicarious.” Duguid also pointed out, based on Hebrews 10:1-11, that “the whole Old Testament sacrificial system [...] could not effectively remove sin.”²⁷ This includes the intercession of even the priest. The question, then, remains how effective or important the prophetic role of intercession is in comparison to the priestly role. It is a logical guess, and *only* a guess, that they are both at heart roles of intercession, one focusing more on mediation and the other focusing more on substitutionary atonement.

The conclusion, based on the commentaries, is that Ezekiel did identify himself with the sins of Israel and Judah, but that the identification was by no means substitutionary. It is logically possible that there is a vicarious intercession in which the prophet becomes *guilty* of sin but is not involved in any *atonement* of sin. While Chambers may possibly have overstated his point by saying “vicarious,” we will let him have the last word since he is such a great master of the application of scripture:

We gather our spiritual skirts around us from touching the life of the time we are in; the prophets did not, they stood firm for God in actual conditions. They are a marvelous prefiguring of Our Lord whom it pleased God to bruise. The Son of God became vicariously identified with sin, and through that identification with sin the Church of God is born in

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *ibid.*

order that she might bear the burden of God's purpose for the whole world.²⁸

Concerning us in the New Testament era, Paul has written in Roman 2:1, “Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things.” As the old saying goes, “It takes one to know one.” If we are already guilty of the same crimes, then identification with someone else’s sin is by no means absurd.²⁹

V. Conclusion

The numerous examples of prophetic intercessory prayer and prophetic intercessory identification prove that intercession is an important role of the prophet, possibly the most important role. Perhaps a distinction should be made between the *calling* of a prophet and the *characteristics* of a prophet. While I do believe that intercession is the primary calling of a prophet, it is certainly not the prophet’s primary characteristic, unless perhaps in the (universal) sense of mediation.

The prophet is gifted with, in a very, *very* small sense, the mind of God (or, maybe, the eyes of God). That is, he sees things like sin a little bit more like God sees them. A person with the spiritual gift of mercy, for instance, would have the heart of God. The prophet does not naturally have the heart of God, and the person with the gift of mercy does not naturally have the mind or the eyes of God. The prophet’s calling may be more to develop the heart of God than to use his mind like God’s mind. His mind like

²⁸ Chambers, *Notes on Ezekiel*, 1478.

²⁹ I do not know if there is true vicarious intercession (by a human) for another’s sin in either the Old Testament or in the New Testament era, though I know of at least one incident of vicarious intercession for another’s *pain* in the New Testament era: C.S. Lewis praying for his wife’s physical pain. If there is now—and if there was in the Old Testament era—the possibility for truly vicarious intercession for other people’s sin, it is certain that such intercession would be incomplete: only Christ’s vicarious intercession is completely substitutionary, and complete in every way.

God's mind must be used to develop the heart of God. This he does through intercessory prayer.³⁰ It is evident from Matthew 5:44 that intercessory prayer has this effect: that it makes one love one's enemies: "But I say unto you: Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." While "love your enemies" and "pray for them which persecute you" can certainly be applied as separate commands entirely, they are easily connected thus: "Love your enemies by praying for those who persecute you." Both commands are not found in the same sentence without a reason. Acting as if we love our enemies will lead to the reality of loving them.

Even if intercessory prayer is not the most important calling of the prophet, it remains a very important one. Prophets, however, are not the only ones called to intercession. The leader must intercede for those under his leadership. King Hezekiah's prayer for the nation when Assyria threatened (Is. 37) and Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (I Kin. 8 and 2 Chron. 6) are good examples. Clearly, the task of the high priest, whether it be the Aaronic priesthood in the Old Testament or Jesus Christ's today, is the task of intercession. We are called to pray "continually" (I. Thes. 5:17), and the nature and importance of the prophetic role of intercession are further incentives for us to do so. Furthermore, the prophetic role hints at the correct thing to do when we observe sin in others: then is the time to intercede for them in prayer.

Intercessory prayer, then, is of great importance for Christians today. The aspects of intercession and roles of the prophet are, and always have been, important, and the Christian church should not neglect the study of them.

³⁰ I cannot prove this, but it seems logical.

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