Responses to Ellen Davis

1. You began by saying that it surely must be the case that prophecy continues today, rather than its being confined to the Bible, but you didn’t say why it must be the case. Here are my two suggestions regarding the rationale for that conviction.

First, we need it, because otherwise we are in danger of being limited to what religious professionals tell the church or the world. Religious professionals such as pastors or professors are dependent on their audiences for their salary and thus their livelihood. They cannot afford to offend their audiences. Their families’ meals depend on their not doing so. So we who are religious professionals, and also our congregations, have to work on the assumption that we may not say the tough things that need to be said. We need people who are not on the payroll to say those things, people whose equivalent in the Bible were prophets such as Amos and Jesus who had not been to seminary and were not on their audiences’ payroll.

But the fact that we need prophecy does not prove that it is available. The evidence of that fact is the promise from Joel 2 that you noted in your first lecture. God promised a pouring out of his spirit, upon the equivalent of the people who were not on the congregation’s payroll—people such as sons and daughters, and male and female servants. Acts 2 declares that this promise was kept at Pentecost, but one does not get the impression from Joel that it would be simply kept on one occasion and then cease (as Reformed theologians have argued). The outpouring of God’s spirit was to be a future of the new age, which did not cease in New Testament times. The promise has needed to be kept again and again. But after Pentecost the exercise of prophecy did not become a consistent reality in the church. Joel’s promise suggests it was designed to be so or has the potential to be so.

1. You noted the radical concreteness of prophetic expression. My comment is to note the contrast with our preoccupation with God being the same yesterday, today, and forever. While God is consistent, that characteristic does not mean God cannot have a change of mind.

Further, this concreteness points to the importance of the fact that God’s message in Isaiah 40—55 (as the clearest example of a recurrent phenomenon in scripture) was not given ahead of time to Isaiah ben Amoz. Its form shows that it came by means of a prophet through whom God was speaking directly in the context to the people for whom the message was intended. God did not speak two centuries ahead of time, out of the context. God related to people where they were, was present with them where they were, and spoke to them where they were.

1. You spoke of the link between prayer and prophecy. Prophets, in other words, stood in an uncomfortable position between God and their people, mediating both ways between them. It often means confronting whichever party you are facing. Prayer thus means challenging God to have a change of mind in light of who he is. We are used to the heresy that prauer is meant to change us. The Bible rather suggests that it’s meant to change God.

Alongside the fact that the first prophet was a pray-er, I note that the second prophet to be so designated in scripture was Miriam, someone who led people in praise (Moses is also called a prophet, but not until Deuteronomy). She too thus served people’s relationship with God.

I liked your comment on Abraham’s being a flawed intercessor—the Egyptian king’s problem was Abraham’s fault, but Abraham’s prayer was needed for the problem to be solved. We are often told that there are conditions you have to fulfill to have your prayers answered—to be a person of faith and holiness, for instance. But you can be a person of faith and holiness and not see your prayers answered, or be a flawed intercessor and see them answered. Prayer does not work by rules. We are called to be people of faith and holiness because it’s right, not because it works. Abraham prays not because he’s perfect but because he is a prophet.

A question I would want to raise is whether there a danger in the idea of bring God’s friend. It reminds me of the common Christian talk of partnering with God. The Scriptures do not speak of us as God’s partners but as God’s servants. God, after all, is the almighty, transcendent, creator of the universe! Thus you note that Abraham, God’s friend, is deferential to God in Genesis 18. Analogously, being Jesus’ friends does not render us immune his disciples from being addressed as the embodiment of Satan. God is not our buddy.

Your comment about Abraham as the flawed intercessor also made me think about the two possible understandings of Genesis 15:6. Paul assumes it means that God credited Abraham’s faith as *tsedaqah*. But maybe it more likely means Abraham takes God’s promise as *tsedaqah*.

1. You note that there are two different kinds of Gentiles: wicked ones and responsive ones. My further reflection is that the distinction is more heuristic (to use another of your words) than absolute. By that I mean that it is not fixed who are the Sodomites. Even Sodom was within the reach of God’s mercy. Last night my wife and I watched the movie *Flight* in which Denzil Washington plays a heroic pilot who pulls off an extraordinary landing of an airplane that is disabled though negligence on the part of the airline. But he is also an alcoholic and a drug-addict, under the influence of alcohol and drugs as he flew. The question in the movie seemed to be, will he get away with flying in this condition or will he be exposed? But the turning point in the movie (and in his life) comes during the hearing into the causes if the crash, when he utters the addict’s crucial words, “God help me,” and comes clean. One would have thought that Denzil was a Sodomite and that the only question was indeed whether he would get away with it, but it turns out that you can move out of Sodom. Even Sodom is within reach of God’s mercy. It’s not over till it’s over.

That possibility links with a question raised after the first of your papers, the question whether the Noah covenant still holds. I’d say it’s important that this a question Scripture doesn’t answer. If the answer is yes, then we can do what we like. If the answer is no, then we might as well commit suicide. In fact, the jury is still out; there is everything to play for. (I think this question also links with the fact that there is no creation covenant in the Bible. Covenant comes in only after there is sin in the world. You don’t need a covenant in Genesis 1—2.)