

PROPHECY, PROPHETS Reception and declaration of a word from the Lord through a direct prompting of the Holy Spirit and the human instrument thereof.

Old Testament Three key terms are used of the prophet. Ro'eh and hozeh are translated as "seer." The most important term, nabi, is usually translated "prophet." It probably meant "one who is called to speak."

Moses

History Moses, perhaps Israel's greatest leader, was a prophetic prototype (Acts 3:21-24). He appeared with Elijah in the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8). Israel looked for a prophet like Moses (Deut. 34:10).

Deborah

Prophets also played a role in the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land. The prophetess Deborah predicted victory, pronounced judgment on doubting Barak, and even identified the right time to attack (Judg. 4:6-7,9,14).

Samuel

Samuel, who led Israel during its transition to monarchy, was a prophet, priest, and judge (1 Sam. 3:20; 7:6,15). He was able to see into the future by vision (3:11-14) and to ask God for thunder and rain (12:18). Samuel led in victory over the Philistines (1 Sam. 7), and God used him to anoint kings.

Gad and Nathan

Gad and Nathan served as prophets to the king.

Elijah and Elisha

Elijah and Elisha offered critique and advice for the kings. The prophets did more than predict the future; their messages called Israel to honor God. Their prophecies were not general principles but specific words corresponding to Israel's historical context.

Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah

Similarly the classical or writing prophets were joined to history. Israel's political turmoil provided the context for the writing prophets. The Assyrian rise to power after 750 B.C. furnished the focus of the ministries of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel

The Babylonian threat was the background and motive for much of the ministry of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

The advent of the Persian Empire in the latter part of the sixth century set the stage for prophets such as Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Thus the prophets spoke for God throughout Israel's history.

Locked up, Ignored, and Persecuted

The prophets influenced almost every institution of Israel, despite the fact that they were often viewed with contempt: they were locked up (Jer. 37), ignored (Isa. 6:9-13), and persecuted (1 Kings 19:1-2).

Criticized Vain Worship and Priestly Failures

In addition to serving judges and kings, the prophets also addressed Israel's worship. They criticized vain worship (Amos 5:23-24) and priestly failures (Amos 7:10; Mal. 2).

The Word was spoken in Worship

The word of the Lord was also spoken in worship (Pss. 50:5; 60:6; 81:6-10; 91:14-16; 95:8-11).

Call to Covenant Faithfulness

The prophets' call to covenant faithfulness revealed an awareness of the law (Isa. 58:6-9; Ezek. 18; Mic. 6:6-8; Hos. 6:6; Amos 2:4; 5:21-24).

Prophetic Schools

Prophets formed guilds or schools (2 Kings 4:38; 1 Sam. 10:5; 19:20). While most references to prophetic schools belong to the period of the monarchy, there is some evidence to believe the schools continued (Jer. 23:13-14). The mere existence of the books of prophecy is probably due in part to the prophets' helpers (Jer. 36:4). Perhaps their words were recorded because they provided a moral challenge to the entire nation and not merely to a king or individual. Surely once the prophet's words were written, they were not ignored but continually studied and reapplied.

The Experience of the Prophet

Prophets generally shared several key experiences and characteristics.

(1) An essential mark of a prophet was a call from God.

Attempting to prophesy without such a commission was false prophecy (Jer. 14:14). The prophets were at times allowed to see into the throne room or heavenly court (Isa. 6:1-7; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Jer. 23:18-22; compare Amos 3:7; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; 2 Cor. 12:1-4; Rev. 1:1-3; 22:18-19).

(2) Prophets received a word from God through many means-- direct declarations, visions, dreams, or an appearance of God.

The great variety in prophetic experience prohibits any oversimplification; ecstatic experiences were not mandatory for receiving God's word.

(3) Prophets spoke the word of God.

They were primarily spokespersons who called His people to obedience by appealing to Israel's past and future. For example, God's past blessing and future judgment should provoke social justice and mercy for the disadvantaged.

(4) Prophets relayed God's message by deed as well as by word.

They worked symbolic acts which served as dramatic, living parables. Hosea's marriage taught about God's relationship with Israel (Hos. 2:1-13; see also Isa. 20:1-3; Ezek. 4:1-3; Jer. 19:10-11).

(5) The prophets also performed miracles which confirmed their message.

While some prophets like Moses (Ex. 4:1-9) and Elijah (1 Kings 17) worked many miracles, virtually all prophets occasionally saw a miraculous fulfillment of God's word (Isa. 38:8). This miracle-working capacity also included healing (1 Kings 17:17-22; 2 Kings 5; Matt. 12:22-29).

(6) Prophets also conveyed the word of God by writing
(Isa. 8:1; Ezek. 43:11).

(7) Prophets were to minister to their people.

They were to test God's peoples' lives (Jer. 6:27) and be watchmen for moral compromise (Ezek. 3:17). Particularly important was the role of intercessor--sometimes even for the prophet's enemy (1 Kings 13:6; 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37; Amos 7:2; Jer. 14:17-20,21; Isa. 59:16).

(8) Throughout Israel's history genuine prophets had ecstatic experiences.

False Prophets

Distinguishing between false and true prophets was very difficult, though several tests of authenticity emerge in the Old Testament.

True Prophet Test

The true prophet must be loyal to the biblical faith directing one to worship Yahweh alone (Deut. 13:1-3). A second test required that the words of a true prophet be fulfilled (Deut. 18:22; Jer. 42:1-6; Ezek. 33:30-33). We must remember that this is a difficult test to apply. There were often long lapses between predictions and fulfillment (Mic. 3:12; Jer. 26:16-19). Some predictions seemed very unlikely, and others were conditional--based upon the hearer's response (Jonah 3:4-5).

Furthermore, prophets could behave inappropriately (Num. 12:1-2; 20:1-12; Jer. 15:19-21; 38:24-27). Prophets appeared ambivalent at times when simply delivering the word of God as it was given (2 Kings 20:1-6). Also one could predict correctly while not being loyal to Yahweh (Deut. 13:1-3). Accurate prediction was not a final test. Other tests included agreement with previous prophets' words (Jer. 28:8), good character (Mic. 3:11), and a willingness to suffer because of faithfulness (1 Kings 22:27-28; Jer. 38:3-13). Similarly, the New Testament believers had to distinguish true prophecy (1 John 4:1; 1 Cor. 14:29). See False Prophet.

Hints for Interpretation

Desire to Know God

Prophets intended to evoke faith by proclamation, not merely to predict the future. Thus reading the prophets with a lustful curiosity is inappropriate. Our primary desire must be to know God, not just the facts of the future.

Progressive character, partial insight from different prophets.

The interpreter must remember the limited perspective of the prophet. The prophets were not all-knowing but all-telling--that is they told what God had told them to tell. Prophecy has a progressive character. One must seek to read prophecy in light of its whole, deriving partial insight from different prophets.

Historical context

Prophecy must also be read in its historical context. Particular attention must be paid to the intention of the prophet. For example, a prophet may rebuke another country to offer assistance to Israel (Isa. 46-47), make Israel examine its own conduct (Amos 1-2), or to bring a nation to repentance (Jonah 3:4,8-9).

Often more than one fulfillment

Caution must be exercised when reading predictive prophecy because prophecy often has more than one fulfillment. Many prophecies have an immediate application to their own situation and are also applicable to another context. Thus the prediction that Christ is born of a virgin (Matt. 1:23) also had a fulfillment in Isaiah's day (Isa. 8:3). Similarly prophecies of "the day of the Lord" had several fulfillments (partial) which also foreshadowed a final fulfillment (Obad. 15; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Zeph. 1:7,14; Ezek. 30:3; compare 2 Pet. 3:10).

Several ways to understand predictive prophecies

Modern evangelicals understand predictive prophecies in several ways.

(1) Some prophecies seem to have a direct, literal fulfillment:

the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:5-6; Mic. 5:2).

(2) Not all predictions were fulfilled literally.

Jesus taught that the prediction about Elijah's return was fulfilled by John the Baptist and not a literal Elijah (Matt. 11:13-15; Mal. 3:1-4). Similarly, Paul applied prophecies about literal, national Israel to the church (Rom. 9:25-26; Hos. 1:9-10, 2:23). The literal father of Israel, Abraham, was seen to be the father of the believing church (Rom. 4:11,16; Gal. 3:7). This distinctively Christian reading was thought to be legitimate because of Christ's fulfillment and interpretation of the Old Testament (Luke 4:17-21).

(3) This Christian reading of the Old Testament often takes the form of typological interpretation.

The New Testament authors believed Old Testament events, persons, or things foreshadowed the later Christian story. Thus, they used the images of the Old Testament to understand the New Testament realities. Christ can be compared to Adam (1 Cor. 15:22-23; see 10:11).

(4) Some readers believe that Old Testament words take on a "fuller sense" or meaning.

Old Testament expressions may have a divine significance, unforeseen by the Old Testament author, which comes to light only after God's later word or deed. See Typology.

New Testament

The word prophetes means "to speak before" or "to speak for." Thus it refers to one who speaks for God or Christ. Prophets were also called pneumatics (pneumatikos), "spiritual ones" (1 Cor. 14:37). The prophets played a foundational role in the early church (1 Cor. 12:28-31; Eph. 4:11; 2:20). Due to the presumed prophetic silence in the time between the Testaments, the coming of Jesus is seen as an inbreaking of the Spirit's work especially visible in prophecy. For example, in Luke the angel's visitation and prediction (1:11,26-27) provoked Mary and Zecharias to prophesy (1:46-67; 67-79). After an angelic visitation to the shepherds, the prophet and prophetess declared Jesus to be the redemption Israel awaited (2:10-12,25,36-38). John the Baptist also predicted that Jesus would baptize in the Spirit (Matt. 3:11).

Jesus called Himself a prophet (Luke 13:33).

His miracles and discernment were rightly understood as prophetic (John 4:19). He taught not by citing expert rabbis, but with His own prophetic authority (Mark 1:22; Luke 4:24).

Fulfillment of Joel's prediction that all would prophesy

The early believers saw the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:17) as a fulfillment of Joel's prediction that all God's people, young and old, male and female, would prophesy.

Prophetic gifts intensify at the end of time

These gifts may intensify at the end of time as will evil.

Gift of prophecy

While any Christian might occasionally receive a prophecy, some seem to have a special gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 12:29; 13:2).

In worship

Prophets function primarily in the worship of the church (Acts 13:2).

Prophets predict, announce judgements, act symbolically, and receive visions.

They predict (Acts 11:28; 20:23; 27:22-26), announce judgments (Acts 13:11; 28:25-28), act symbolically (Acts 21:10-11), and receive visions (Acts 9:10-11; 2 Cor. 12:1). Prophetic insights led to missionary efforts (Acts 13:1-3; 10:10-17; 15:28,32). While teaching and prophecy are different, they also can be related (Acts 13:1-2; Rev. 2:20). Some prophets "preached" lengthy messages (Acts 15:32) and gave exposition to biblical texts (Luke 1:67-79; Eph. 3:5; Rom. 11:25-36).

The prophets used phrases such as "the Lord says" or "the Holy Spirit says" as introductory formulas for prophetic insight into the future (Acts 21:11), or for inspired adaptation of an Old Testament text (Heb. 3:7).

Evaluation by the congregation

New Testament prophecy was limited (1 Cor. 13:9); it was to be evaluated by the congregation (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20-21).

Loyalty to Christ

One may even respond inappropriately to prophecy (Acts 21:12). The supreme test for prophecy is loyalty to Christ (1 Cor. 12:3; Rev. 19:10).

Gift of discernment

Some Christians have the gift of discernment (1 Cor. 12:10). Jesus said prophets could be known by their fruit (Matt. 7:15-20).

Orderly, Christ Honoring, Upbuilding, Submitted to Apostolic Authority

Paul demanded orderly, Christ-honoring, upbuilding prophecy which submits to apostolic authority (1 Cor. 14:26-40). Thus prophecy is not without restraint. Circumstance may even demand that the dress of men and women prophets be stipulated (1 Cor. 11:5-7). Prophecy outside of apostolic authority can be safely ignored; thus prophecy is not a threat to Scripture's special authority (1 Cor. 14:38-39; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).

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