

# Prophecy and Prophets

Prophecy is the reception and declaration of a word from the Lord through a direct prompting of the Holy Spirit and the human instrument thereof.

## Prophecy in the Old Testament

The Old Testament uses three key terms to refer to prophets. *Ro'eh* and *hozeh* are translated as *seer*. The most important term, *navi'*, is usually translated *prophet*. It probably meant *one who is called to speak*.

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

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 (see Judg. 4:6-7,9,14). Samuel, who led Israel during its transition to monarchy, was a prophet, priest, and judge (see 1 Sam. 3:20; 7:6,15). He was able to see into the future by vision (see 1 Sam. 3:3:11-14) and to ask God for thunder and rain (see 1 Sam. 12:18). Samuel led in victory over the Philistines (see 1 Sam. 7), and God used him to anoint kings. Gad and Nathan served as prophets to the king. 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.

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. The Babylonian threat was the background and motive for much of the ministries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The advent of the Persian Empire in the latter part of the sixth century B.C. set the stage for prophets such as Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Thus, the prophets spoke for God throughout Israel's history.

The prophets influenced almost every institution of Israel, despite the fact that they were often viewed with contempt; they were locked up (see Jer. 37), ignored (see Isa. 6:9-13), and persecuted (see 1 Kings 19:1-2). In addition to serving judges and kings, the prophets also addressed Israel's worship. They criticized vain worship (see Amos 5:23-24) and priestly failures (see Amos 7:10; Mal. 2). The word of the Lord was also spoken in worship (see Pss. 50:5; 60:6; 81:6-10; 91:14-16; 95:8-11). The prophets' call to covenant faithfulness revealed an awareness of the law (see Isa. 58:6-9; Ezek. 18; Mic. 6:6-8; Hos. 6:6; Amos 2:4; 5:21-24).

Prophets formed guilds or schools (see 2 Kings 4:38; 1 Sam. 10:5; 19:20). Although most references to prophetic schools belong to the period of the monarchy, there is some evidence to believe the schools continued (see Jer. 23:13-14). The mere existence of the books of prophecy is probably due in part to the prophets' helpers (see 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 an 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 constituted false prophecy (see Jer. 14:14). The prophets were at times allowed to see into the throne room or heavenly court (see Isa. 6:1-7; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Jer. 23:18-22; 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. Throughout Israel's history genuine prophets had ecstatic experiences, but such 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 that served as dramatic, living parables. Hosea's marriage taught about God's relationship with Israel (see Hos. 2:1-13; Isa. 20:1-3; Ezek. 4:1-3; Jer. 19:10-11).
5. The prophets also performed miracles that confirmed their message. While some prophets like Moses (see Ex. 4:1-9) and Elijah (see 1 Kings 17) worked many miracles, virtually all prophets occasionally saw a miraculous fulfillment of God's word (see Isa. 38:8). This miracle-working capacity also included healing (see 1 Kings 17:17-22; 2 Kings 5; Matt. 12:22-29).
6. Prophets also conveyed the word of God by writing (see Isa. 8:1; Ezek. 43:11).
7. Prophets were expected to minister to their people. They were to test God's peoples' lives (see Jer. 6:27) and to be watchmen for moral compromise (see Ezek. 3:17). Particularly important was the role of intercessor—sometimes even for the prophet's enemy (see 1 Kings 13:6; 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37; Amos 7:2; Jer. 14:17-20, 21; Isa. 59:16).

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

1. A true prophet must be loyal to biblical faith, directing hearers to worship Yahweh alone (see Deut. 13:1-3).
2. The words of a true prophet would be fulfilled (see Deut. 18:22; Jer. 42:1-6; Ezek. 33:30-33). This was a difficult test to apply because there were often long lapses between predictions and fulfillment (see Mic. 3:12; Jer. 26:16-19). Some predictions seemed very unlikely, and others were conditional—based on the hearer's response (see Jonah 3:4-5). Furthermore, prophets could behave inappropriately (see 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 (see 2 Kings 20:1-6). Also, someone could predict correctly while not being loyal to Yahweh (see Deut. 13:1-3). Accurate prediction, therefore, was not a final test.

3. A prophet's words would agree with previous prophets' words (see Jer. 28:8).
4. A prophets would display good character (see Mic. 3:11).
5. A true prophet would be willing to suffer because of faithfulness to God (see 1 Kings 22:27-28; Jer. 38:3-13).

*Clues for interpreting prophecy.* 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 facts about the future.

The interpreter must remember the prophets' limited perspective. 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. We must seek to read prophecy in light of its whole, deriving partial insight from different prophets. Prophecy must also be read in its historical context. Particular attention must be paid to the prophet's intention. For example, a prophet may rebuke another country to offer assistance to Israel (see Isa. 46-47), to make Israel examine its own conduct (see Amos 1-2), or to bring a nation to repentance (Jonah 3:4,8-9).

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

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 (see 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 (see Matt. 11:13-15; Mal. 3:1-4). Similarly, Paul applied prophecies about literal, national Israel to the church (see 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 (see Rom. 4:11,16; Gal. 3:7). This distinctively Christian reading was considered legitimate because of Christ's fulfillment and interpretation of the Old Testament (see 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 New Testament realities. For example, Christ can be compared to Adam (see 1 Cor. 15:22-23; 10:11).

4. Some readers believe Old Testament words take on a fuller sense or meaning. Old Testament expressions may have divine significance, unforeseen by the Old Testament author, which comes to light only after God's later word or deed.

## Prophecy in the 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*), meaning *spiritual ones* (see 1 Cor. 14:37). The prophets played a foundational role in the early church (see 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 was seen as an inbreaking of the Spirit's work that was especially visible in prophecy. For example, in Luke the angel's visitation and prediction (see 1:11,26-27) provoked Mary and Zechariah to prophesy (see 1:46-79). After an angelic visitation to the shepherds, the prophet and the prophetess declared Jesus to be the redemption Israel awaited (see 2:10-12,25,36-38). John the Baptist also predicted that Jesus would baptize in the Spirit (see Matt. 3:11).

Jesus called Himself a prophet (see Luke 13:33). His miracles and discernment were rightly understood as prophetic (see John 4:19). He taught not by citing expert rabbis but with His own prophetic authority (see Mark 1:22; Luke 4:24).

The early believers saw the outpouring of the Spirit (see Acts 2:17) as a fulfillment of Joel's prediction that all of God's people, young and old, male and female, would prophesy. These gifts may intensify at the end of time, as will evil. Although any Christian might occasionally receive a prophecy, some seem to have a special gift of prophecy (see 1 Cor. 12:29; 13:2). Prophets function primarily in the worship of the church (see Acts 13:2). They predict (see Acts 11:28; 20:23; 27:22-26), announce judgments (see Acts 13:11; 28:25-28), act symbolically (see Acts 21:10-11), and receive visions (see Acts 9:10-11; 2 Cor. 12:1). Prophetic insights in the New Testament led to missionary efforts (see Acts 13:1-3; 10:10-17; 15:28,32). Although teaching and prophecy are different, they can also be related (see Acts 13:1-2; Rev. 2:20). Some prophets preached lengthy messages (see Acts 15:32) and gave exposition to biblical texts (see Luke 1:67-79; Eph. 3:5; Rom. 11:25-36).

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

New Testament prophecy was limited (see 1 Cor. 13:9); it was to be evaluated by the congregation (see 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20-21). Someone may even respond inappropriately to prophecy (see Acts 21:12). The supreme test for prophecy is loyalty to Christ (see 1 Cor. 12:3; Rev. 19:10). Some Christians have the gift of discernment (see 1 Cor. 12:10). Jesus said prophets would be known by their fruit (see Matt. 7:15-20). Paul demanded orderly, Christ-honoring upbuilding prophecy that submits to apostolic authority (see 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 (see 1 Cor. 11:5-7). Prophecy outside apostolic

authority can be safely ignored; thus, prophecy is not a threat to Scripture's special authority (see 1 Cor. 14:38-39; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).

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