



*Heb 1:1 In the past, God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end. 3 He reflects the brightness of God's glory and is the exact likeness of God's own being, sustaining the universe with his powerful word. After achieving forgiveness for human sins, he sat down in heaven at the right-hand side of God, the Supreme Power*

As I intimated this morning, we shall be exploring the area of how God speaks to His church in our modern age in the next few weeks. I thought one way we might do that is to see the way by which God spoke to those in times past first. I am always quite amused by tonight's text verse because in the AV the wording is quite different to modern translations. Why would God have spoken to men in the Sunday Times? And was the diver wearing a frog suit?

In times past God spoke to the fathers by the prophets. But in these last ages He has spoken to us by His Son. Let me clear up a misconception. As you know there are many who believe that the gifts of the Spirit ended after the first century – including therefore prophecy. Now only the Son speaks and we have His words recorded in Scripture – a finalised book. Some place that as early as AD70, many say that it is the end of the first century. There are several proof verses that they give to suggest this which I don't want to deal with tonight because all can be repudiated. Instead scripture gives us more than adequate reference to the ongoing work of the Spirit simply by the weight of passages that talk about it. We're not talking about verses, but whole tracts of scripture that suggest a God who actively works in His church.

Look through church history and you see lots of outbreaks of spiritual activity through which we can see the Spirit moving in power in men and women's lives. And there you will find both the use and misuse of spiritual gifts. There has always been the pressure for both diversion to cults of extremists as well as suppression by Christians who find it hard to think outside the rational.

What am I saying then about Hebrews 1? Yes God does speak to us in these last days by His Son because we have that relationship with Him and that ability to walk right into God's holy presence through the blood of Jesus. It doesn't mean that prophecy was abolished – it doesn't say that, but what it does say is that we have been brought into a more intimate relationship with God that he can speak into our lives as He did the prophets. Does that mean prophecy was abolished. Not according to the rest of the NT. Besides, the writer doesn't mention the scriptures at all. God spoke through that didn't He? However the writer to the Hebrews uses the scriptures (written by those self-same prophets) extensively to demonstrate the efficacy of the finished work of Jesus.

So if we want to look at modern-day prophecy, we need to take a look what the OT has to say about prophecy. What we know is that there were plenty of prophets recorded in the OT. Some wrote large books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel but there are more Minor Prophets too: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. There are an even greater host of oral prophets who never wrote books but who are referred to – at least 38 are recorded. However there were many more it would seem as there are a number of records of groups of prophets in towns in the time of the kings e.g. in Ramah (1 Samuel 19:18 onwards), Bethel (2 Kings 2:3), Jericho (2 Kings 2:5), and Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38) and appear to be under the tutelage of another prophet. Prophets were a fundamental part of life in Israel and Judah prior to the Exile. That ran to hundreds of prophets. In 1 Kings 18 we read how a man called Obadiah hid over 100 prophets when Ahab was trying to kill them. The prophetic in the OT was common rather than isolated.

However it doesn't mean that they were all any good. There are plenty of examples where prophets gave a convenient message rather than a true one. 1 Kings 22:1-28 – Micaiah was the only true prophet of the Lord and only had the correct prophecy. Ahab had 400 prophets and at least one of them thought he was genuine. We'll see what the test for a true prophet was later and see why Micaiah fulfilled it and the others didn't.

Let's deal with some basics. There are three words used in the OT for a prophet.

Nabhi was one who spoke for God. He speaks from an inner compulsion of the Spirit of God the message he

has received. Main word for prophet.

Ro'eh was a person who was possessed of supernatural vision, insight, and foresight. He was called a "seer."

Chozeah was an authoritative messenger from God, a beholder or seer, who received supernatural vision.

In English, these words tend to get translated in a variety of ways in addition to "prophet": "Man of God," "Servant of Yaweh (LORD)," "Messenger of Yaweh," "Interpreter," "Sentinel," "The Man of the Spirit."

I found a handy definition: A prophet is a man who speaks to men on behalf of God the message he has received from God. Prophecy is the declaration and illustration of the principles of the divine government, whether in the past, present, or the future. Prophets were God's specially called and inspired messengers. They were "holy men of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

What all that means is that almost anyone could be raised up as a prophet, according to who the Holy Spirit moved. There was no prophetic class or tribe. Anyone could even be one – even King Saul was numbered amongst the prophets twice – the second time when he was not in a very good spiritual condition! In fact some great prophets were still usable to God even though they went through dark times of doubt – Elijah and Jeremiah. What these indicate is that the Holy Spirit can speak through anyone, but the usual is to speak through people who are ready to be available and used by Him.

What is also interesting is the way in which prophets related to written scripture. In the times of the prophets, there was already authoritative scripture – the Law, the Torah. They knew it was wrong to embrace other gods. They knew it was wrong to rely on other kings and nations. They knew it was wrong not to worship in the prescribed way – because Torah told them! Prophets were sent as a reminder of their national and personal obligations. Think on Hosea and Amos who had a serious message to give a nation who thought they had got away with it – they got real antagonism.

We usually associate prophets with foretelling the future – but it isn't. It was as much if not more a case of forth-telling God's message to people who were falling short of their covenant obligations usually. Look carefully at many of the prophecies and you find they are warnings about disaster if repentance was not forthcoming, or promised judgement for what had happened over a long period because God's long-suffering character had run out of line. This is a critical point. Prophecy helps to establish and reinforce the message of scripture in the OT, and warn of the inevitable consequences of failing to heed it.

However, it was the foretelling that often brought the messages of hope. Some of the great prophetic passages in the OT are of course Messianic – Psalm 22, Isaiah 53 and the like. It is passages like these that God used to reveal more of Himself as He made promises of hope to a people who were letting Him down and would face destruction and exile. But these promises of hope revealed God's continuing love, grace and mercy for His people – which as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, culminated in the sending of His own son.

Then of course on the foretelling front are prophecies that are still to be fulfilled – prophecies of the last days. There are many in the OT which see the culmination of the ages being as the nations are drawn to Zion e.g. In Ezekiel and Daniel.

So, there were lots of people involved in prophecy in the OT. How could they tell a good one from a dud? Easy – scripture helps! Here is the test that comes in the Torah and is the definitive one in the OT because it is early, clear and authoritative – and it is confirmed in the rest of the OT and the NT

Deut 13:1 "Prophets or interpreters of dreams may promise a miracle or a wonder, 2 in order to lead you to worship and serve gods that you have not worshipped before. Even if what they promise comes true, 3 do not pay any attention to them. The Lord your God is using them to test you, to see if you love the Lord with all your heart. 4 Follow the Lord and honour him; obey him and keep his commands; worship him and be faithful to him. 5 But put to death any interpreters of dreams or prophets who tell you to rebel against the Lord, who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves. Such people are evil and are trying to lead you away from the life that the Lord has commanded you to live. They must be put to death, in order to rid yourselves of this evil.

- It doesn't matter whether the prophecy comes to pass or not – if it isn't in Yahweh's name, it's a dud.
- True prophecy always complies with God's law and standards as set out in scripture.

It's clear and decisive. Any true prophecy will be in conformity with God's word and be in His name. Fulfilment alone is not proof that it is of God, it must be in His name and according to His declared law and purposes. You can't get clearer. Death was the penalty for false prophecy.

I referred to Micaiah earlier. Ahab had 400 prophets and at least one claimed to be a prophet of Yahweh. Micaiah was genuine because of the name he operated under and the fact that he was not being disobedient in cow-towing to Ahab, the master idolater in the way the 400 others had obviously done. For Micaiah, the outcome of the battle would exonerate him.

So what do we conclude?

- anyone who the Lord called and the Spirit moved could be a prophet
- there were no shortage of prophets in Israel – but some were more important than others as God moved them.
- quality varied, particularly where they became compromised by their lifestyle in relation to other gods and often genuine prophets needed to be raised up because the majority had become dodgy
- prophets spoke out God's message for the people then – often judgement
- prophets brought messages of future hope and that applies as much to us now as then.
- true prophets spoke in God's name based on His already revealed and authoritative word

These are important principles and next time we shall start to see how these applied in the NT. For us, we see that God has revealed Himself to His people and that we have as His people a future hope that in Christ is true and certain as we see the truth worked out over millennia.

*Preached by Mark Reid, MRBC Felixstowe 7/2/10, © Mark Reid 2010*