

# FROM BIBLICAL ROOTS

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THE CHRISTIAN and the Jewish traditions both spring from biblical roots and depend on many ideas which developed in what Christians call the Old Testament, Jews simply the Bible. One of the most important of these ideas is prophecy. Like many other elements developed in the bible and in our respective traditions, its roots are in fact more widespread in the human race, both before and since the period of the Old Testament; and again, like many other such elements, the idea of prophecy can live on, in a secularized sense, among those who no longer accept and live by the faith which underpinned belief in prophecy in biblical times. The aim of this article is to outline (1) how prophecy was understood in biblical times, and (2) what it has meant in Christian tradition and practice and in current uses of the term, Christian and secular, in the hope of (3) helping people to think more clearly about this element in Christian life, about how it may still be active, and what are the criteria for judging an utterance or action worthy to be called prophetic.

First a few more introductory remarks are in order. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines prophecy as 'divinely inspired utterance or discourse', and then in Christian theology in particular, as 'utterance flowing from the revelation or impulse of the Holy Spirit'. Both these definitions imply that there are or can be human utterances which are actually thus influenced by God or the Holy Spirit. To speak thus presupposes a good deal: that God exists, that finite human minds can somehow receive communications from the infinite Spirit, and that it can be validly known when this happens. This is to say that prophecy presupposes a framework of belief about God and human nature. But it is not to say that people can be certain that any particular utterance is the result of divine communication faithfully received, until they are convinced that it is credible, compatible with what they believe about God, supported by the moral seriousness of the speaker, and producing good fruits. In short, even when people believe that prophecy can be a reality, utterances need to be weighed and tested before they can be trusted as prophecy, and believers should never forget that

such a conclusion belongs to the world of faith, not of proof in the ordinary sense. All the biblical prophets—even Jesus whom we hold as more than a prophet, the very Word of God—were subject to this testing before our forebears in faith could reach the conclusion which we have inherited, by which we accept the prophets and Jesus and say of their words ‘this is the word of the Lord’. And if there has been, or can be, true prophecy since the early Church, we have to know how to test it, as St Paul tells us: ‘Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil’ (1 Thess 5,19–21).

*Conclusions from Old Testament prophecy*

Whenever people talk about prophecy, again and again they show that they are thinking in terms of certain typical figures in the Old Testament (especially Amos and Jeremiah), and apparently assuming that such figures can be recognized as true prophets when they arise. But this was, and remains, far from the case. The actual people whom we know as ‘the prophets’ were often very problematic, and by no means easily recognizable as God’s true mouthpieces. It is true, and will remain true for both Jews and Christians, that the Old Testament is our main source of models for thinking about prophecy in all contexts from then till now. But we must understand that those whom the bible calls prophets are accessible to us only in the way that their words, or the story of their actions, were finally edited by the scribes who gave the ‘sacred books’ their final form. We know Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah as prophets first of all because we accept a tradition which presents them to us as such. But they were not immediately recognized as prophets. Some were very unpopular with religious people. The bible tells us of some of the conflicts in which these historic persons were involved, often criticizing religious institutions which other parts of the bible tell us were established by God’s command. It is the bible itself which presents many of the prophets (especially those just named) as *political* figures, sometimes supporting the policies of kings and religious leaders, but often embarrassing them and evoking the reaction (heard so many times since then) that ‘men of God should keep out of politics’. The bible also contains hints to help us reconstruct the process by which those whom we know as prophets came to be recognized as such, while others, who may have

enjoyed great prestige in their day, for example Jeremiah's patriotic opponent Hananiah (Jer 28), are presented as 'false prophets'. This process must have taken time and perhaps involved painful conflicts and divisions, till the stories were finally edited and the texts of those who were judged to be true prophets were canonized.

The Old Testament as we know it, in its final form, contains a range of different kinds of material and data which are relevant to any thinking about prophecy. Probably most Christians today think of the Old Testament prophets as courageous moral and religious reformers, recalling people to the essentials of faith in God and social justice. This view focuses especially on the great eighth-century prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah and the 'first Isaiah') and then on Jeremiah and some parts of Ezekiel. In all these, again, people tend to focus selectively on passages which represent the prophets as models of independent and critical speech and action; but in fact the Old Testament contains other models and examples, including even some practices which a later viewpoint would judge superstitious, such as divination by lot or by *Urim and Thummim* (whatever that was). There is mention of prophets who enjoyed recognized status by membership of groups, for example in the time of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kg 18-2 Kg 13); others, such as those described in the story of Saul (1 Sam 10) seem to have practised trance states (perhaps like shamans in some so-called 'primitive' religions). There seems to have existed some place for prophetic activity within the 'official' temple worship: Joel's penitential sermon is in such a context, while something similar seems likely to lie behind those passages in several psalms where a voice speaks in the person of God, warning or appealing to the people (e.g. Pss 50,81,95). Thus there are traces of some 'institutional' prophets having been recognized in Israel, but in the Old Testament as finally edited the central emphasis is on individuals raised up by God's free choice, and especially those whose writings are preserved. With this emphasis in mind, the scribal editors once call Abraham a prophet (Gen 20,7), while in Deuteronomy they recast the Sinai traditions as a great prophetic sermon by Moses, and finally declared him the supreme and unsurpassed prophet (Dt 34,10). The edited historical traditions are interwoven with stories of prophets sent by the Lord to warn Israel, who till Samuel (and several times after him) are anonymous. Thus the canonical prophets are preserved within an elaborate 'Deuteronomic' framework: their often disquieting

independence and critical character are allowed to appear only in the harness of a theological scheme which sets the great lawgiver Moses above and before all, and interprets all Israel's history as a drama of faithfulness and infidelity to God's will which was always being declared to the people. This framework can be recognized as a theological synthesis worked out during the Babylonian exile (sixth century BCE) by scribes who saw Jeremiah's unpopular teaching as having been vindicated by events, and proved to represent God's will, as against the 'triumphalist' claim that God would protect his temple for ever.

Yet strangely—almost as if God would not allow this superbly ordered scheme to banish all questioning for ever—the scribal editors left all its problems visible. Once we believe that God communicates his will to human beings, we need to be satisfied about the credentials of the agents claiming to deliver his messages. In a culture which accepts a system of divination or oracles, the system may be believed to work for as long as the culture is stable. But the Old Testament traces the development of a people away from that kind of culture, largely under the influence of individuals claiming indeed to deliver messages from God, but under far more precarious conditions and often without the backing of a trusted 'system'. A speaker who preaches a message encouraging accepted religious principles can easily be acclaimed; but when the message is new and threatening to spiritual security, as was that of Jeremiah, another spokesman can claim, perhaps with equal conviction and convincing force, to speak in God's name. The fact is that the Old Testament does not give us satisfactory criteria for evaluating 'prophetic' messages (by the inverted commas I mean to signify a claim which has not yet been proved), either when they come singly or (and above all) when they are in conflict.

In the First Book of Kings this critical problem is twice presented dramatically: first in the story of the unnamed prophet from Judah and the old prophet of Bethel (1 Kg 13), and then in the story of the kings of Israel and Judah who were planning a campaign and seeking prophetic encouragement (1 Kg 22). Against a whole chorus of established 'prophets' who are promising victory, the solitary Micaiah ben Imlah mocks them and the king of Israel with a powerful claim to divine authority, which brings suffering to Micaiah, but eventually vindicates him. The whole problem is in that 'eventually'. The places where the Old Testament gets

nearest to offering regular criteria for verifying 'prophetic' utterances are in Deuteronomy (18,15-22) and in the story of Jeremiah's conflict with Hananiah (Jer 28); both appeal to eventual vindication. But if a community needs to know God's will here and now, how can they wait, and how long? Of course, this is not the only kind of criterion. There is the moral character of a claimant. Jeremiah denounces other 'prophets' as false on these grounds (Jer 23,9-15). We may say that wickedness will hinder union with God and openness to his will, making it less likely that a wicked person can be a true prophet; but unfortunately moral goodness and sincerity cannot guarantee the truth of a message, nor is it clear that every kind of moral fault destroys the powers of insight and of speaking truly about God. The other criterion which is most emphasized by both Jeremiah and other prophets consists in the claim to speak from intimacy with God and by a direct commission from him. So Amos (ch 7), Isaiah (ch 6), Jeremiah (ch 1) and Ezekiel (chs 1-2). Conversely 'false prophets' claim falsely to have been sent by God, when they have dreamed up their messages (e.g. Jer 23,16-40). But how does the prophet who is personally convinced of his divine mission prove it to his hearers, above all if his opponents are pious and seem to have tradition behind them? Even Jeremiah sometimes cried out to God in agonies of doubt (Jer 20,7-18). Curiously, a criterion of 'orthodoxy' is never developed in the Old Testament, though perhaps it is sometimes implicit in the moral criterion.

To conclude this brief survey of the Old Testament evidence, it is far more problematic than we might like. It bids us believe that God does speak to and through human agents, and that their words have come to be accepted as God's word; it suggests the criteria which were used, but also reveals, and quite alarmingly, how unsatisfactory in practice these were. Indeed, I have come to suspect that those who canonized the prophets, while honouring their memory, wanted to make clear (especially through examples like the story in 1 Kg 13) that looking for prophets, and then waiting to see which ones are justified by subsequent events, is not a practical way to run your religious life. For *that* purpose they held up the primary, ultimate and supreme prophet, Moses, indicating that in practice he should be enough for any good Jew. But the scribes were not in a position to exclude further disputes about God's will, and in the period between the exile and the time of Jesus disputes multiplied: not now between conflicting claimants

to prophetic authority, but between *interpretations* of the religious heritage now enshrined in scripture. Indeed, given the nature of the Old Testament data as a whole, this was inevitable. The fact is, the bible presents God as speaking to humans in two modes: as *commanding* actions, including the founding of institutions (such as the whole Mosaic structure of society and the temple) but also as *challenging*, by calling individuals, irrespective of their institutional status, to speak in the name of God and to pronounce judgment on those same religious institutions and practice as if these had at best only conditional value, compared with the personal practice of mercy and justice, which the same individuals said were alone pleasing to God (e.g. Amos 5,21-24; Hosea 6,6; Micah 6,6-8; Jeremiah 7). This duality in the Old Testament is irreducible: prophecy remains *disturbing*.

#### *Prophecy in Christianity*

It may surprise some readers that so little has been said so far about prophecies of hope and encouragement, and especially about the expected Messiah. If this is the case, it will be a measure of how far we let the traditional Christian interpretation rule our reading of the Old Testament and smooth out the problems it contains—though these also are surely part of ‘God’s word’ for us. The famous prophecies of Isaiah (‘Immanuel’ in ch 7 and the visions of a peaceful king to come in chs 9 and 11) were first uttered to encourage Isaiah’s contemporaries (about 700 BCE) to hope for stability in their time. But bad times continued to come and even got worse. In the meantime the prophets had been canonized and were being read for edification. Not surprisingly, the words of hope were re-interpreted, and the fulfilment which had not yet come was expected in a future messianic kingdom. So arose the visions of future blessings of peace and fertility which come at the end of several of the prophetic books and counter-balance their otherwise predominantly grim message; and other new expressions of vision and longing for interpretation of events appeared, to fuel expectation that God was about to send an ‘anointed one’ (Davidic king, priest or prophet, or all three) to deliver his people from their sufferings.

This was, then, a widespread mood when Jesus appeared, and as he made his impact, naturally his hearers had to ask themselves who and what he was, using the interpretative categories which were to hand. Though his disciples eventually claimed that he was

indeed of the house of David, this seems at first not to have been common knowledge. He was certainly not of priestly descent. He was a layman, appealing to the poor; not technically a rabbi, he spoke with a personal authority which contrasted with the cautious tones of the scribes. When he appeared on the public scene, John the Baptist was already making an immediate impact as a prophet—a judgment which needed no long time for evaluation. It was natural that Jesus, too, should be acclaimed as a prophet, as we see happening at Nain (Luke 7,16). This instance was after a work of healing, which suggests that Jesus's works were interpreted as 'prophetic signs'. His own claims were made in veiled form; evidently he found popular messianic expectation a dangerous force in which he did not wish to get involved. He had something to reveal in word and deed on behalf of God which he knew would be unbearable to the religious establishment. Luke says he foresaw his death in Jerusalem as the inevitable fate of a prophet (Lk 13,33). His death appeared as one more tragic crushing of prophetic criticism. But this was all changed by the Resurrection. Once the disciples' faith was restored, they saw this as absolute proof that God had attested Jesus as Messiah (Acts 2,36), and they experienced in themselves a new power which they identified as the Holy Spirit, pouring out the gift of prophecy as foretold by Joel (Acts 2,16-33).

In the light of this faith, 'prophet' was not a high enough category for Jesus; to find the right terms was the task of the first five centuries. But the early Church without hesitation claimed to exercise authentic prophecy, as Acts makes clear by many instances. The claim is made not only in narratives, but also implicitly in the New Testament epistles; the writers are convinced that they not only express faith, but are 'inspired'. Often, however, the subject of the prophetic gift is not a new message, but the interpretation of past prophecy (2 Pet 1,20-21). Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth gives the fullest picture of a Christian community full of charismatic gifts, but also of the problems of discernment. Paul does not question the reality of the gift of prophecy, but insists that it and the other charisms of understanding and communication must be ruled by the higher charism of love.

This remains a guiding principle for all times; but it could not stop prophecy being problematic in the Church as it had been in ancient Israel. Perhaps it was above all the claim to *autonomous*

knowledge and declaration of God's will and judgment on the religious elite, on the part first of Jesus and then of such as Stephen, which made the breach with Judaism inevitable. The twofold pattern of God's *command* and of his *challenge* was at work again: some of Jesus's words and acts represent the former (as for example his calling a group of twelve and sending them out with authority), while the latter is constantly evident in Jesus's teaching and in his claim to speak from unique intimacy with God. The Church of Christ was founded not by authoritative acts alone, but also by endowment with the often unpredictable gifts of the Spirit, including that of prophecy—fed now not only by interpretation of the former scriptures, but by personal appropriation of, and meditation on, the gospel. These two elements, the one leading to formation of an institution, the other ever waiting on God to respond to his challenge, necessarily continue in the Church. They are its very warp and woof, or in Chinese terms its *yang* and *yin*.

One major work of early Christian prophecy is included in the New Testament, the Apocalypse or book of Revelation. It presents all the power, but also all the problems, of prophecy in extreme form. The visions enshrined in it have a double focus, in heaven and on earth; in this it is true to the political tradition of much Old Testament prophecy. The message is that, however great the trials Christians are undergoing on earth, all is under God's control, symbolized by the serene and triumphant heavenly liturgy. The Lamb was slain but he lives and is already victorious. This victory will at last be realized on earth and evil will finally be destroyed. Now everyone finds Revelation a disturbing book, but perhaps not everyone knows that the early Church took a long time to evaluate it; some Churches took up to four centuries to accept it. Even since its general acceptance, misguided desires to interpret its symbolism as predictions of future events in history have led Christians into hysterical fanaticism and atrocious crimes, especially against the Jews. We ought never to forget that the Church only accepted this book after careful evaluation, and it needs guidance and discernment to read it.

In fact, several texts from the early Church show us the testing of prophecy in action, and the criteria with which I shall close are essentially those which can be found, explicitly or implicitly, in the New Testament and in other works of the early period of openness to prophecy. This seems to have come to an end when the growing institutional power of bishops reacted strongly against



the movement of Montanus in second-century Asia Minor. From then on we hear no more of recognized 'prophets' in the Church, not even as a category of saints, though not a few saints made an impression as prophetic figures in word, act or life-style. Otherwise, probably most people thought of prophecy as a past charism of biblical times; few bishops would ever have seen its continuing exercise as anything but a threat to their authority, and the general theology of the Church developed late in Catholic theology. It is really Vatican II which brought the prophetic function back into its due place in the theology of the Church. Though the theme comes in as part of a formal scheme of the threefold functions of Christ in which the Church shares, it is no longer suggested that the prophetic function is now only exercised by the official teachers of the Church; wider distribution of the Spirit's gifts is recognized.

*How is potential prophecy to be evaluated?*

It is relevant, if obvious, to bear in mind that we do not think of calling an utterance or a person prophetic unless he or she makes an impression out of the ordinary. Commonly, of course, by prophecy people mean *prediction*; this is indeed important in the bible, but the latter always puts the main emphasis on speaking in God's name. The other main context in which 'prophetic' is popularly used, especially in the press, is with reference to bold criticism of authority (perhaps especially ecclesiastical?) and also impressive warnings of doom to come, for example atomic or ecological disaster. In these cases we can see a secularized culture using a stereotype transferred from biblical tradition, often in a way which shows no real understanding of its meaning. If we want to think seriously about recognizing prophecy in the Church today, we shall need to examine at least the following:

- (1) compatibility of the utterance with the essentials of the gospel;
- (2) compatibility with the principles of basic ethics;
- (3) if the 'prophet' speaks of God and his will, are there signs making it credible that he speaks from personal experience?
- (4) personal moral character and integrity;
- (5) the 'prophet's' stated or apparent intentions in relation to the Church and society (if, for example, his utterances are made in anger, does his intention seem ultimately constructive?)

(6) the foreseeable fruits of the 'prophet's' utterances or actions.

If these criteria seem to be met, but doubt or conflict still remain, the 'prophet' must face the further trial of suffering, which has often been his/her lot in history. It would, of course, be desirable to go on to consider examples today of utterances which invite assessment as 'prophecy', but this must be left to the reader. Though the viewpoint of this article has envisaged prophecy *in* the Church, it may well happen that a significant utterance is made from beyond its formal membership; then the real question for prophetic discernment is not the standing of the speaker, but whether Christians should recognize God's word in the utterance. The point is of especial importance today, when some of the most urgent concerns facing humankind are often voiced by people of patent integrity but not of Christian faith.