

What is a Prophet?

My brother's idea of a prophet was summarised by this unlikely conversation at a party.

- A. Yes, I am as it happens.
- B. Are you a prophet?
- A. Without any trouble at all, thank you.
- B. Can you foretell the future?

Before I heard about the prophets in the Bible, I too used to think that a prophet was someone who could foretell the future. I never expected to meet such a person.

One day I heard a taped talk by David Pawson, then a minister in Millmead church, Guildford. He said prophecy was for today. This sounded suspect to me, until he explained that one could hear from God and then pass it on to someone in a way that would help them, like the lady who wanted to befriend her next door neighbour, and found herself telling her that she thought God had a message for her. "Oh yes?" said her friend, all curiosity. The lady gave the message. "I think he's saying, 'Don't be afraid'."

This proved to be just the thing for the woman, who was carrying fears that she had not admitted to a soul. The two ladies were then able to get the fears out in the open, where they evaporated, as privately held fears often do when shared with a sympathetic friend. So helpful!

Once I heard this anecdote, I was hooked. I wanted in. Some people teach that prophecy ceased in the early church, but I reckoned that God was still God, and that he had things to say to us today, if he could get our attention. I made it my aim to listen.

So what characterises a prophet? The Bible is the place to look. These are the insights I have had.

The first person identified as a prophet is Abraham, by God himself. "Return the man's wife to him," God said to Abimelech in a dream, "and he will pray for you, for he is a prophet, and I will heal you (1)." This is odd, as in all the stories about Abraham, although he hears clearly and in detail from God about the future, he never speaks it out to anybody else. It seems that the emphasis is not on the speaking out to others, but on the hearing from God.

The next prophet is Moses. He heard from God, followed the instructions and spoke to Egypt's Pharaoh and his fellow Israelites, and led them out of Egypt and through the desert. Indeed, we read that God spoke with him face to face (2). He certainly spoke out the words of God.

There is an interesting sub-plot here. Because Moses considered himself a poor speaker, God said that when relating to Pharaoh, Moses would be as God, and Aaron, Moses' brother, would be his prophet (3). This highlights the role of the prophet as being the megaphone in the hand of the Almighty.

The next prophet was Samuel. "None of his words fell to the ground," we are told (4). He heard from God and passed it on, much of the time to King Saul, with mixed results. The pattern of the prophet being God's mouthpiece seems to be becoming the norm.

Then, however, we read of schools of prophets. Even King Saul was drawn into this briefly (5). Was prophecy something you could be trained in? Moses had wanted all God's people to be prophets, we recall (6). It does not need to be for the limited few.

Elijah and Elisha followed on. They related to the kings of Israel much as Moses had related to Pharaoh. Like Moses, they performed miracles, including calling down fire from heaven and raising the dead (7). What interests me about them was the lack of long term results from their ministry. After they had gone, the nation continued on the downhill path it had been on as if they had never been there. The day would come when the land was overrun, and the people were taken off in exile to Babylon. Their ministry feels like a stone being dropped in a pond. There are ripples for a while, but then things settle back to what they were before.

In the hundred years before disaster struck, the major prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke to the nation. Ezekiel followed, when the exile was under way. There were also lesser prophets, whose writings are shorter, though not less inspired by God.

Isaiah's book starts with the words, the vision which Isaiah saw (8). Did he experience everything visually, and turn it into poetry, rather than hearing the words, maybe? What interests me about him is the vision of the suffering servant (9). Christians see a wonderful foretelling of Jesus in the familiar lines, but at the time and for hundreds of years afterwards, the words must have seemed totally opaque to anyone listening. Indeed, had I been around at the time, on hearing that passage my response would have been that Isaiah appeared to have lost it all together. Could he really be speaking from God?

Jeremiah interests me. He annoyed everybody by predicting disaster when everything was going well and there was no hint of the coming storm. Then when the skies darkened and catastrophe seemed inevitable, he had a different message, all about the great future that was in store for the nation. In other words, he was always several steps ahead of everyone else. This seems to be a feature of a prophet: by the time you have caught on to what he is talking about and are ready to act on it, he has moved on to something entirely different.

Jeremiah had trouble with false prophets. They told the people what they wanted to hear. But God was against such people, saying 'peace peace' when there was no peace (10). This recalls Moses' instruction that false prophets would be identified by their predictions not coming to pass. They were to be eliminated (11).

We learn that prophecy is not a game. It should not be undertaken lightly.

Ezekiel's experience of God was characterised by remarkable visions. He was among the exiles in Babylon. There are detailed plans for a future temple later in the book, with a notable absence of people; however, a stream which flows out from the altar and down into the desert becomes a torrent which no-one can cross, bringing healing and fruitfulness to the waste lands (12). Memorable.

Daniel's gift was the interpretation of dreams, as Joseph's had been centuries earlier. Daniel and his friends were strongly opposed, being thrown into the burning fiery furnace and into the lion's den, but

they came through unscathed. This foreshadowed the deliverance of the Israelites in the coming turbulent years, as revealed in Daniel's visions, which he found so complex that he was overwhelmed by them (13).

So we see a variety of experience and practice among the prophets of old. It seems unwise to try to fit them all into a single mould.

One more point emerges from the New Testament book of Revelation. John was told to eat a scroll, and that it would taste like honey in his mouth but turn bitter when it was in his stomach. Then he would prophesy over nations and rulers (14). I understand this to mean that prophecy seems wonderful when you receive it, but the act of passing it on can be hard. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to desire prophecy earnestly, but it seems wise to add that prophets can come to a sticky end (15). Mary, the mother of Jesus, who carried the word of God literally inside her, would find a sword piercing her heart (16).

Do the prophets have anything in common? Well, yes. Something I have noticed is that they speak to us by their lives as well as their words. Take Joseph, for example, whose dreams came true in the end. His journey involved being thrown in a pit so that he would die, being imprisoned for a crime he did not commit and then being raised up to rule the land (17). This foreshadows the experience of Jesus. Likewise Jeremiah was put in a pit and left to die, but was then raised up again in his turn (18). Same with Daniel and his friends, in the furnace and among the lions. Similarly, Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on mount Carmel and had a great victory, but was then seized with the wish to die, before he was raised up again at mount Horeb where God was not in the wind or fire but in the still small voice (19). All of these lives foreshadowed the Messiah. The prophets themselves would not have known this: they just experienced the roller coaster ride. It seems that a prophet needs the ability to hold on in tough times.

Finally, we read that the whole tribe of the Israelites were prophets (20). Their experience of falling into bondage in Egypt and then being set free by mighty acts of power foreshadow Jesus' death and rising up from the grave.

So the message seems to be, draw near to God and he will draw near to you (21). But don't expect an easy ride. Also, remember that Moses himself did not enter the promised land because he let the Lord down (22). Read the sobering story of the prophet who did well but then lost his life through disobedience to God, and take note! (23). Prophecy is a solemn business.

David Pennant, February 2021.

1. Genesis 20:7
2. Deuteronomy 34:10
3. Exodus 7:1
4. 1 Samuel 3:19
5. 1 Samuel 19:20-24
6. Numbers 11:29

7. 1 Kings 17:22, 18:38 and 2 Kings 4:32-35
8. Isaiah 1:1
9. Isaiah 52:13 – 53.12
10. Jeremiah 6:11-14 (= 8:11), 23:30-32 and chapter 28
11. Deuteronomy 18:20
12. Ezekiel chapter 47:1-12
13. Daniel chapters 1 – 6 contain the stories, and 7 - 12 the visions.
14. Revelation 10:10-11
15. 1 Corinthians 14:1, Hebrews 11:32-38.
16. Luke 2:35
17. Genesis chapters 37 – 50
18. Jeremiah 38:1-13
19. 1 Kings 18 – 19
20. Psalm 105:12-15
21. James 4:8
22. Deuteronomy 32:48-52
23. 1 Kings chapter 13

www.pennantpublishing.co.uk