

Prophecy and the Word of God

I have chosen to do five studies on the topic, 'Prophecy and the Word of God'. The individual studies will be titled thus.

1. Prophecy and the Word of God
2. The call of the prophets
3. The message of the prophets
4. Jesus, the Prophet. Prophecy in the New Testament
5. The word of knowledge and the Word of God

Prophecy is a large topic and I am restricting this series to 'Prophecy and the Word of God' and not to engage many other issues. This will anchor the studies on the basis of prophecy, i.e. the Word of God. It is only as this is addressed that we can make sense of other issues. With a topic like this, there will of course be some confusion and controversies. I will address them to the best of my ability as we go on.

What is prophecy?

We begin by looking at a passage from 2 Peter. This is the anchor for our studies.

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:16-21)

The concept of prophecy in scripture is unique. There is not anything like that in all religions and cultures. When I started this with the Chinese group, there is not a word to translate it in the Chinese language. The literal translation is something like 'knowing before' or 'prior knowledge', and I believe this to be the case in all cultures. In English, we too understand it this way. This is the common understanding, that is, telling the future or fortune telling. We may be able to differentiate this understanding by another term, forth telling, i.e. telling forth the word of God. My problem then was to explain things in such a way as to dissociate from the cultural understanding and to put in place the way scripture wants us to understand it. I am not sure if I had been successful in doing that. I hope I can do better here.

There is no question that in scripture there is a sense in which prophecy gives to us a glimpse of the future, of things to come. This is true and I will explain why that is so later. The key understanding of prophecy is given to us by Peter when he said, 'For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (1 Peter 1:21). It is important that Peter needed to dissociate prophecy from having its origin in the human person, yet the person is instrumental in proclaiming the prophetic word. That word is from God when the person is at one with the Spirit of God. This needs to be the framework from which we work our way through the various issues related to prophecy. The moment we ground it in the human person, then we are back to fortune telling. We need to discard that before we can make any sense of what the scriptures give to us.

Prophet and prophecy

We begin by asking a few questions? What is prophecy and what kind of person is a prophet? Why is there a need for prophets and prophecies? Do we need prophets today? A good place to start looking for these answers is from Deuteronomy 18 when Moses related to the people of Israel regarding the prophet in their midst.

¹⁵“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken.’¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ (Deut. 18:15-20)

Put simply, a prophet is one who speaks the words of God, i.e. informs the people of Israel the will and purpose of God. That is the primary function of a prophet. How does the prophet speak the words of God? We are told here that it is God Himself who put His words in the mouth of the prophet (Deut. 18:18). It is a given. The ability to speak the words of God does not come by investigation or analysis as we so often do because we are brought up with the scientific principle. It is a given, i.e. a gift from God, given to fulfil the purpose of God. In other words, when one has been given the words of God, then one has to speak them, and not only so, but also to live by them.

In this sense, Adam was given the words of God but did not speak the words of God. Scripture did not say that Adam was a prophet, but he had been given the words of God. Not only did he not speak it, but he ignored it and did what was expressly forbidden. That is no prophet and that is why scripture did not mention him as such. There is a certain punishment for that. We read, “And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him” (Deut. 18:19). That was indeed the Adamic punishment, driven from the presence of God and unable to hear His words. Since then, the words of God need to be heard and thus the need for prophets to transmit that.

We must not think of the words of God as sayings or dictum to guide us through life. There is a sense in which the words of God will do that. However, more importantly, the words of God need to be regarded as the self-disclosure of God, God telling us who He is and what He wants of us. The latter comes to us as commandments and command us God will. We need to obey those commandments, yet mere obedience will not do us any good unless we see them as God’s self-disclosure, telling us the nature of God. We have seen from the studies in Deuteronomy that the Ten Words of God given to Moses are indeed the self-disclosure of the image of God, i.e. informing us as to who God is. The words of God express the image of God.

We say that the bible is the word of God. Indeed, it is. In it we find the record of God dealing with a disobedient people. What does it tell us about God? It is the record of God loving and restoring the people that He has created. In the acts of God recorded for us, we have a glimpse of our loving God and Father. He has disclosed His nature to us. So, it is not mere commandments to follow but a disclosure of a relationship that needs restoration and the way God goes about doing that. The prophets herald the message of this restoration and the consequences of not abiding by it. We will say more about this in the third study. For now, we need to see how do the prophets receive the words of God.

¹⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.”¹¹ Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?”¹² Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” (Ex. 4:10-12)

We extol fine speech and eloquence, but that is not the prerequisite God requires. It is the person God chooses. The ability to perform the task is God-given. He is the creator who ‘has made man’s mouth’ (Ex. 4:11) and promises to be with the prophet in accomplishing the task. We must not presume this to exclude the human element. Amos eloquently said,

The lion has roared; who will not fear?
The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8)

God’s words to His people cannot be hid under a bushel. God will raise up His prophets to speak the

words even though many will not want to hear.

Prophets and the relationship with God

¹⁰ And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, (Deut. 34:10)

Some have read the verse this way, ‘And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses who knew the Lord face to face’. It is not our knowledge of God that counts in the process. God knows the person He chooses and thus He calls and raises the person to fulfil the task. It speaks of a close relationship with God and it needs to be. If not, how could one speak the words of another whom one does not know.

For us today, the closeness of this relationship with God is mediated by Christ through the Holy Spirit. Similar to what is said here in Deuteronomy is what Paul said to the Corinthian church.

¹ ... we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Cor. 8:1-3)

Jesus chose the twelve because He knew them. God chose Paul for the task of bringing the gospel to the gentiles. Nowadays we turn that around to say that we choose God and we choose to bring His message to the world. There is a sense in which we do that, ‘but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Peter 1:21). This is not something that we can be totally objective. It is a relationship with another, and that another here is a divine being. One knows and feels within that this is so. How can we be sure then?

Prophecy and the Word of God

Thanks to the church fathers, we have the documents that constitute the Old and New Testaments, the authoritative documents of the church. Christ had come and gave the final word of the Kingdom. The writer to the Hebrews said this.

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, ... (Heb. 1:1-2).

In teaching Jesus Christ as the mediator, question 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, ‘How do you come to know this?’ The answer is, ‘The holy gospel tells me. God began to reveal the gospel already in Paradise; later God proclaimed it by the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed it by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law; and finally God fulfilled it through his own beloved Son.’

The word of God is the revelation of God. This revelation is the holy gospel. It started in Paradise, i.e. with Adam and Eve and all that happened subsequently. As a result of the fall, the gospel was proclaimed by the patriarchs, i.e. from Abraham and his posterity. As a result of sin, the gospel was also proclaimed by the prophets, the mouth piece of God. This revelation was also demonstrated in the sacrifices and ceremonies conducted by Israel in her worship. In short, this is salvation history.

The writer to the Hebrews went on to argue the superiority of Christ and the finality of His work. We will be presenting Jesus Christ as the ultimate prophet of God in a later study. All prophecy has its finality in Christ. We need to bear this in mind as we approach the prophetic word in scripture.

We now have what we term the closed canon. The final word has been spoken and we are not to add to that. This is important for the church. Otherwise, another word will invalidate the superiority and finality of the work of Christ. I will have more to say about this in the last study. Paul made it clear regarding the need for clear instruction and teaching from the scriptures. This is the all sufficiency of scripture. So, he said this to young Timothy.

¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:15-17)

False prophets

We need to say a few words regarding false prophets as they abound in Israel and just about everywhere. Put quite simply they do not speak the words of God as they are not of God, i.e. they are not in communion with God and hence do not know God. They give assurance to the people when disaster looms near.

Its heads give judgment for a bribe;
its priests teach for a price;
its prophets practice divination for money;
yet they lean on the LORD and say,
“Is not the LORD in the midst of us?
No disaster shall come upon us.” (Micah 3:11)

It seems prophecy can become a lucrative business. Falsehood abounds everywhere in Israel, in Christ’s days and of course even today. In the closing chapters of Mark’s gospel, he warned us of this danger.

²¹ And then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. ²² For false christ and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³ But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand. (Mark 13:22)

The day dawns and the morning star rises

Prophecy has nothing to do with whether it will rain tomorrow when we have our picnic. It also has nothing to do with whether US or China will win the arms race. It has everything to do with Christ, the One who has secured our future with Him. The whole thrust of the prophetic word in scripture is directed to this end. So, as we started with the text from 2 Peter, we repeat it here again.

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, **until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts**, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:16-21)

We have not looked at this passage till now. The morning star is Jesus, the finality of the prophetic word.

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” (Rev. 22:16)

Peter was writing to the Christians some 40 years after Jesus’ resurrection. Some were wondering when Jesus would return and indeed would it be in their lifetime. Their faith was wavering. Peter sought to reassure them and pointed back to Jesus’ transfiguration when the voice of God was heard approving of Jesus’ mission on earth (Matt. 17:5), an event to which he and the other apostles were eyewitnesses. This is the prophetic word, the voice of God and they need to hold firm to that. The prophetic word has its finality in Christ and they need to be patient, ‘do well to pay attention’, and wait ‘until they day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts’. That is the final act when Christ returns or rather the dawn of a new day, the beginning of a new era.

Peter went on with this well know statement, ‘For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’. What he wanted to say is that

we cannot use our experience to interpret prophecy. Prophecy is not subject to how we see the world and its events. Prophecy is the interpreter of our experiences. In other words, we need to understand our experiences in the light of what has said and promised.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10-12)

Earlier in his first letter, Peter had argued that what the prophets in the past had written about ‘the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories’ had come to pass. They had heard it through the word preached and the Holy Spirit had confirmed these things in their hearts. If that is so then the prophetic word regarding the return of Christ will certainly be fulfilled in due course. The prophets of old took the word of God and they could see the coming Messiah, a topic that we will deal with in a later study. We need to rest assured of the prophetic word given to us in Christ (we will see this in the fourth study).

Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the church is, ‘built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone’. The authoritative words that were given to the prophets and apostles combined together to bring us eventually to the central stone in the foundation: Jesus Christ.