

an Excursus on Old Testament Priesthood (Wilmington, 1984); R. Martin-Achard, 'Israël, peuple sacerdotal', in R. Martin-Achard (ed.), *Permanence de l'Ancien Testament: Recherches d'exégèse et de théologie* (Geneva, 1984); H. Valentin, *Aaron: Eine Studie zur vor-priester-schriftlichen Aaron-Überlieferung* (Freiburg, Switzerland and Göttingen, 1978); A. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest, according to the New Testament* (ET, Petersham, 1986); R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (ET, London, 1961); D. P. Wright, 'The Spectrum of Priestly Impurity', in G. A. Anderson and S. M. Olyan (eds.), *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield, 1991).

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PROPHECY, PROPHETS

Introduction

Prophecy is the most common means *God used to communicate with people throughout biblical history. The story of prophecy, from Genesis to Revelation, is the story of God speaking to people through human messengers, and thus it is the story of God's varying relationships with his people and with others. Speaking through the prophets, God guided kings and people by telling them how to act in specific situations, warned people when they disobeyed him, predicted events that he would bring about, interpreted events when they came about, and demonstrated that he alone was both ruler of history and a God who relates personally to his people.

The basic biblical principles regarding prophets and prophecy are found in the Pentateuch, especially in connection with *Moses, but a regular office of prophet, and bands of secondary prophets, are not fully established until the period covered by the later historical books and the prophetic writings. In the Gospels, *Jesus is seen as a great prophet, but much more than a prophet. The book of Acts and the epistles describe a gift of prophecy given to Christians which has lesser authority but much wider distribution than canonical prophecy, and prophecy is seen as the most valuable of the *Holy Spirit's many gifts to the church (see *Spiritual gifts). The Bible closes with a sobering yet magnificent

picture of the future in the prophecy of Revelation.

Prophecy and prophets in the Pentateuch

While NT authors identify both Abel (Gen. 4:1-8; Luke 11:50-51) and *Enoch (Gen. 5:18-24; Jude 14) as prophets, the first explicit mention of a 'prophet' (Heb. *nabi'*) in the OT occurs when God tells Abimelech that *Abraham 'is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live' (Gen. 20:7, RSV). This suggests that a 'prophet' has a special relationship with God whereby his prayers will be answered, an idea that is revisited later in the OT (see below).

A messenger empowered by the Spirit of God

The nature of a prophet as a messenger of God is described by a human analogy in Exodus 7: 'And the Lord said to Moses, "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you; and Aaron your brother shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land"' (Exod. 7:1-2). Moses is like God in that he gives a message to Aaron. Aaron is like a 'prophet' because he speaks the message that he has received. This fundamental idea of the prophet as a messenger of God pervades descriptions of prophets in both Old and New Testaments.

True prophecies are empowered only by the Spirit of God; only when the Lord places on the seventy elders some of the Spirit's empowering which has been on Moses are the seventy elders able to prophesy (Num. 11:25).

The prophets' message is not their own

What was implicit in the analogy of Moses and Aaron speaking to Pharaoh (Exod. 7:1) is made explicit in Deuteronomy: the prophet has no message of his own but can only report the message God has given him. God promises that whenever he raises up a prophet like Moses, 'I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him' (Deut. 18:18). Even greedy and rebellious Balaam must submit to God; he says, 'Have I now any power at all to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak' (Num. 22:38).

The uniqueness of Moses

Moses has a more direct relationship to God

than that of any other prophet in the entire OT. He is also entrusted with greater responsibility: 'if there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the LORD' (Num. 12:6-8; cf. Deut. 34:10).

While there are other prophets in the Pentateuch, such as Abraham, Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Balaam (Num. 22:38) and the seventy elders who prophesied (Num. 11:25), no prophet is equal to Moses. However, Moses promises that another prophet like him will arise: 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren - him you shall heed' (Deut. 18:15). Although this promise was partially fulfilled in many subsequent OT prophets who spoke the words of the Lord, it was ultimately a messianic prediction fulfilled in Christ (John 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:22; 7:37).

The expectation that one day all God's people would prophesy

The initial group of secondary prophets (the 70 elders who prophesied with Moses, Num. 11:25) provides a pattern for subsequent bands of prophets (see below) and also encourages an expectation that one day the gift of prophecy would be widely distributed among God's people: Moses says, 'Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!' (Num. 11:29). Here Moses longs not just for a widespread prophetic gift but even more for the widespread personal relationship to God of which that gift would be a sign, for he knows by experience that prophets walk close to God. This expectation is restated in Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28-29), and finds initial fulfilment in the NT *church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-18).

The problem of false prophets

Since a true prophet can speak only God's message, not his or her own, it follows that a false prophet is one who has no message from God but presumes to speak in God's name anyway (Deut. 18:20). If such false prophecy is joined with encouragement to serve other gods (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20), the prophet 'shall

be put to death' (Deut. 13:5). However, contrary to much popular misunderstanding, there was no death penalty simply for speaking a false prophecy; Deuteronomy 18:20 requires capital punishment only for one who speaks a message God has not given and 'speaks in the name of other gods' (so the Hebrew text and the LXX, contrary to modern versions that translate the Hebrew *waw* as 'or').

False prophets are recognized both by their advocacy of other gods and by the failure of their predictions to come true (Deut. 13:2-3, 5; 18:22). Such false prophets may even work 'a sign or wonder', but their false doctrine reveals their true nature. By allowing false prophets to exist in Israel, the Lord is 'testing' his people, to know whether they love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul (Deut. 13:3).

Prophecy and prophets in the post-Pentateuchal historical books and the writing prophets

Established, primary prophets

Just as in the Pentateuch Moses was established as the primary prophet of God, so in subsequent OT history there are prophets such as Samuel (1 Sam. 3:20), Gad (1 Sam. 22:5), Nathan (2 Sam. 7:2), *Elijah (1 Kgs. 18:22), *Elisha (2 Kgs. 2:15), Isaiah (2 Kgs. 20:1), Jeremiah (2 Chr. 36:12) and other writing prophets, who are established and recognized as prophets of the Lord. The pattern for such a recognized and prominent role was seen in Samuel when he was 'established as a prophet of the LORD' (1 Sam. 3:20), and the LORD 'let none of his words fall to the ground' (v. 19). It is frequently noted that such primary prophets were attested by miracles (1 Kgs. 18:24, 39; 2 Kgs. 5:8; see *Signs and wonders), true predictions (1 Sam. 9-10; 1 Kgs. 14:18; 16:12), and loyalty to the one true God.

Bands of secondary prophets

In addition to 'established' prophets who had recognized positions of *leadership, there were several bands of secondary prophets, such as those who met Saul after Samuel anointed him as king (1 Sam. 10:5), as well as the 100 prophets who were hidden by Obadiah (1 Kgs. 18:4), and the bands of prophets or 'sons of the prophets' in Bethel (2

Kgs. 2:3), Jericho (2 Kgs. 2:5, 7), and Gilgal (2 Kgs. 4:38).

These bands of prophets are viewed not as false prophets but as servants of the one true God, and were affiliated with true prophets such as Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:3, 5, 7). Therefore they must have received some kinds of message or revelation from God; this was the essential requirement for being called a 'prophet'. (For example, they had special knowledge from God that he would take Elijah on a certain day; 2 Kgs. 2:3, 5.) However, none of their prophetic utterances is preserved in the canonical Scriptures, which may suggest that their prophesying was not ordinarily counted equal in value or equal in authority to the messages of the primary, established prophets such as Samuel and Elijah. The distribution of prophecy to these bands of prophets foreshadows the outpouring of prophecy on 'sons and daughters ... menservants and maidservants' (Acts 2:17-18) in the new covenant.

The involuntary 'prophesying' and physical incapacity of Saul and his messengers (1 Sam. 19:20-24) is a unique incident in Scripture, and should not be generalized into a claim that there were 'ecstatic' bands of prophets throughout the land. (1 Sam. 10:5-13 indicates that prophecies were accompanied by music, but not that they were involuntary or ecstatic.)

Women as prophets

Several women are named as prophets in the OT: Miriam in the Pentateuch (Exod. 15:20); and in subsequent books Deborah (Judg. 4), Huldah (2 Kgs. 22:14-20; 2 Chr. 34:22-28), and the wife of Isaiah (Is. 8:3). (There is also a female false prophet, Noadiah, in Neh. 6:14.) These women prophets also foreshadowed the new covenant, when God would pour out his Spirit on all people, and 'sons and daughters' and 'menservants and maidservants' would all prophesy (see Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18).

Apart from Miriam's ministry in song and the song of Deborah and Barak, women prophets in the OT ministered privately to individuals rather than publicly to large groups; thus Deborah rendered private judgments (Heb. *mišpat*, Judg. 4:5; see also 2 Kgs. 22:14; 2 Chr. 34:22). The activity of women as prophets was distinct from the activity of the OT *priests, who were male, and who

had the responsibility of teaching God's laws to the people (Mal. 2:7; cf. Deut. 24:8; 2 Kgs. 12:2; 17:27-28; 2 Chr. 15:3; Neh. 8:9; Hos. 4:6; Mic. 3:11), and was distinct also from the activity of kings, who ruled the people. Thus the OT also foreshadows both the NT's encouragement of women to prophesy in churches (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5) and its prohibition of their teaching or governing the whole church (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:2; 1 Cor. 14:33-35). (See *Man and woman.)

Other names for prophets

Other names applied to prophets include 'man of God' (1 Sam. 2:27; 9:6; 1 Kgs. 13:1-10; 17:24; etc.) and 'seer' (this English term translates two different Hebrew words which seem to be nearly synonymous: *rō'eh* in 1 Sam. 9:9, 11; 1 Chr. 9:22; 29:29, etc., and *hōzeh* in 2 Sam. 24:11; 2 Kgs. 17:13; 1 Chr. 21:9, etc.). Another common title is that of God's 'servants' (1 Kgs. 14:18; 18:36; Jer. 25:4), and God himself calls them 'my servants the prophets' (2 Kgs. 9:7; 17:13; Amos 3:7), a title which suggests that God frequently sends them to perform various tasks.

How did prophets receive a message from God?

The OT records various means of receiving a message from God, including visions (1 Sam. 3:1, 15; 2 Sam. 7:17; Is. 1:1; 6:1-3; Ezek. 11:24; Dan. 8:1-2, etc.; cf. Num. 12:6). Dreams are also mentioned in the foundational passage, Numbers 12:6 ('If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream'), and Joel 2:28 promises dreams in connection with the future outpouring of a prophetic gift.

The most common means of communication from God to a prophet was a direct verbal message. Several times it is said simply that God put his words in the mouth of the prophet (Is. 51:16; Jer. 1:9; etc.; cf. Deut. 18:18). In places the message is called a 'burden' (Heb. *masá*, commonly translated 'oracle'; Is. 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; Jer. 23:33-40; Nah. 1:1; Zech. 9:1; 12:1; Mal. 1:1), suggesting that a heavy sense of responsibility and perhaps reluctance was felt by the prophet who received it. In over a hundred cases the reader is told, without further explanation, that 'the word of the Lord came

to the prophet _____' (1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4; 24:11; Is. 38:4; Ezek. 1:3; Jonah 1:1, etc.). In several passages this is said to happen at a very specific time: 'And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him' (2 Kgs. 20:4; cf. 1 Kgs. 18:1; Jer. 42:7; Ezek. 3:16; Zech. 1:7). Sometimes the *word of the Lord comes in the form of a spoken question which the prophet immediately answers (1 Kgs. 19:9; Jer. 1:11, 13). Finally, in many long sections in the writing prophets, the content of the prophet's message is presented, with no indication as to how the prophet received it.

The Holy Spirit (often called the Spirit of God, or the Spirit of the Lord) is seen as the personal agent who comes upon a prophet and makes God's message known to him (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; and note the general statements in Neh. 9:30; Zech. 7:12; cf. Num. 11:24-29).

The prophet is in a regular and unusually vital personal relationship with God and therefore in frequent personal communication with God. It is prophets who stand in the 'council' of the Lord (Jer. 23:18, 22), and the Lord makes known to them what he is going to do before he does it: 'Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets' (Amos 3:7). Such statements connote an amazing picture of personal friendship with God, which is realized in the experience of Abraham (2 Chr. 20:7; Is. 41:8; cf. Jas. 2:23) and Moses (Exod. 33:11; Deut. 34:10). Because prophets are in such close communication with God, they will often just 'know' something that they could not have known using their natural faculties alone, but that had to be revealed by God (1 Kgs. 14:4-6; 2 Kgs. 5:25-26; 6:12; 8:12-13; note Elisha's surprise in 2 Kgs. 4:27 that there was something the Lord had not told him). In the light of such a close personal relationship between God and the prophets, it is noteworthy that the NT epistle of James presents Elijah's prayer life as a pattern for Christians to imitate (Jas. 5:16-18).

How did the prophets deliver their messages?

Most often prophetic messages were simply spoken aloud, with an affirmation that they were indeed words of the Lord. The prophetic messenger formula, 'Thus says the Lord' occurs hundreds of times throughout the OT.

From time to time, dramatic physical symbolism accompanied a spoken prophetic message. Ahijah tore a new garment into twelve pieces and gave ten to Jeroboam to symbolize the division of the kingdom (1 Kgs. 11:30-31); Elisha had King Joash shoot an arrow symbolizing victory over the Syrians (2 Kgs. 13:15-18); Jeremiah smashed a potter's vessel to symbolize irreparable *judgment coming on Jerusalem (Jer. 19:10-13); Ezekiel dug through the city wall and carried baggage out, symbolizing forthcoming *exile (Ezek. 12:3-6). Such symbolic acts did not merely make the message unforgettable; they were one form in which the message came.

The authority of the prophetic message

Throughout the OT the prophets' words are the very words of God. When a true prophet predicts events, those events surely come to pass, 'according to the word of the LORD which he spoke by the prophet ...' (1 Kgs. 14:18; 16:12, 34; 17:16; 22:38; 2 Kgs. 1:17; 7:16; 14:25; 24:2). It is easy to understand why this should be so: if an omniscient, omnipotent God predicts something, then it will surely happen, unless God himself decides otherwise.

The prophets' words are words of God; therefore the people have an obligation to believe and obey them. To believe God is to believe his prophets (2 Chr. 20:20; 29:25; Hag. 1:12), for the words of the prophets are the very words of God (2 Chr. 36:15-16). Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey a true prophet is to disbelieve or disobey God, and he will hold the hearer responsible (1 Sam. 8:7; 1 Kgs. 20:36; 2 Chr. 25:16; Is. 30:12-14; cf. Deut. 18:19).

Because many of these authoritative prophetic words were recorded in the OT Scriptures, they present a strong *prima facie* argument regarding the authority of Scripture. God's people throughout all ages are under obligation to treat all the words of the prophets as the very words of God, words which he requires his people to believe and (when understood and applied rightly with respect to the new covenant) also to obey.

The content of the prophetic message: God's words to guide, warn, predict, and interpret

All the kinds of messages needed in a relationship between God and his people are

included in the words of the prophets. The prophets delivered to the people words sent by God for a wide variety of circumstances.

The message from God could include specific guidance about a particular course of action (1 Sam. 22:5). The prophet might declare God's choice of a king or another prophet, and confirm his declaration by the physical symbolism of anointing with oil, which established the person in the office (1 Sam. 15:1; 16:13; 1 Kgs. 19:15-16; 2 Kgs. 9:3-10). In some cases, individuals even went to a prophet seeking guidance from God (1 Sam. 9:6; 1 Kgs. 22:7; 2 Kgs. 3:11).

Moral guidance for a sinful people often turned to rebuke for sin and warning of punishment to come unless the people *repented (2 Chr. 24:19; Neh. 9:30; and frequently). In the context of such warnings, the prophets declared God's *law to the people (2 Kgs. 17:13; Dan. 9:10; Zech. 7:12); this is consistent with the dual role of Moses in earlier days as both primary lawgiver and primary OT prophet. The rebuking and warning activity of the prophets over many generations is summarized in 2 Kings 17:13: 'Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets.'" But the prophets not only warned of punishment; they also offered promises of *blessing that would follow if the people *obeyed the Lord (Jer. 22:4; Zech. 6:15).

However, not all promises of blessings were conditional upon the people's obedience. Extensive parts of the prophetic books predict that the Lord will act, first to bring back his people from exile (Is. 35:10; 51:11; Jer. 30:10), and then one day to establish a new *covenant in which he will write his law on the people's hearts (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-38). Many of the prophets' predictions look forward to a coming Messiah, and a complete list of such predictions would include all those explicitly mentioned in the NT (see Matt. 2:23; 4:14, *etc.*) and many not mentioned (see Luke 24:27). The prophets' ultimate vision is of a renewed earth with the Lord himself reigning as king (Is. 65:17; 66:22).

Finally, prophets interpret the events of history as they occur, telling the people God's

perspective on what is happening. They do so frequently in the prophetic books, and also in their function as the official historians of the kings of *Israel (1 Chr. 29:29; 2 Chr. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 32:32). Their activity as such is not a mere recording of facts, separate from the prophets' ability frequently to understand God's purpose in and evaluation of historical events. No doubt the prophets who recorded the acts of the kings of Israel were qualified to do so precisely because God showed them his interpretation of those acts. In the extant historical narratives the prophets often give God's interpretation of events, and such divine interpretations of events will also have characterized the accounts of the 'rest of the acts of King ____' which are said to have been recorded in the books of various prophets (2 Chr. 9:29; 13:22; 20:34; 26:22; 32:32).

In these prophetic tasks of guiding, warning, predicting, and interpreting, God was demonstrating his sovereign rule over history and also his ongoing love and holiness in his personal relationship with his people.

Other tasks of prophets: musicians and intercessors

Because prophets receive revelations from God, it is not surprising that they participate in the musical aspects of the temple service, probably delivering messages from God in song, or singing songs which God had given to the people for use in *worshipping him (1 Chr. 25:1-3; *cf.* Deut. 31:19-22; 1 Sam. 10:5). Whenever such songs declared what God had done in the life of the people, and offered him praise for it, the prophets were again performing their task of giving God's interpretation of current or past history.

Prophets are sometimes seen in a somewhat distinct role as highly effective intercessors, *praying for specific situations (1 Sam. 12:23; 1 Kgs. 13:6; 2 Kgs. 20:11; 2 Chr. 32:20; Jer. 27:18; 37:3; 42:4; Hab. 3:1; *cf.* Gen. 20:17; Exod. 32:11-14). Because prophets have a close relationship with God, it is not surprising that he hears their prayers and that they are closely involved in this aspect of the relationship between God and his people.

False prophets

It seems that there were always false prophets alongside the true; in fact, as we have seen, God allowed false prophets to arise in order

that he might test the people's hearts (Deut 13:3). However, God also gave guidelines to help his people know the true from the false. False prophets prophesy for personal gain (Mic. 3:5, 11) and tell the people only what they want to hear (1 Kgs. 22:5-13; Jer. 5:31). Their predictions do not come true (1 Kgs. 22:12, 28, 34-35; cf. Deut. 18:22); their 'miraculous signs' are inferior or nonexistent (1 Kgs. 18:25-29; but see also Deut. 13:1-2). Above all, they encourage the people to serve other gods (Jer. 23:13).

God repeatedly warned the people that he had not sent these false prophets, and that therefore they had no message from him. In fact, a false prophet is defined as someone who has not received a message from God, but simply prophesies out of his or her own mind (Neh. 6:12; Jer. 14:14-15; 23:16-40; 28:15; 29:9; Ezek. 13:2-3; 22:28; cf. Deut. 18:20).

The NT counterparts to the false prophets are 'false teachers' who speak 'false words' and bring 'destructive heresies' into the church (2 Pet. 2:1-3).

Frequent opposition to the prophets

Sometimes the people of Israel received and followed true prophets, but often the people were rebellious and did not want to hear God's words of rebuke and warning. Therefore true prophets often found themselves opposed and even persecuted by the people, especially by their leaders: 'but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the LORD rose against his people' (2 Chr. 36:16; cf. 2 Chr. 16:10; 25:16; Is. 30:10; Jer. 11:21; 18:18; 20:2, 7-10; 26:8-11; 32:2-3; 36:20-26; 37:15 - 38:28; Amos 2:12; 7:12-13). Some prophets were even killed (2 Chr. 24:20-21; Jer. 26:20-23). In the NT, Stephen says, 'Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?' (Acts 7:52). In enduring such persecution patiently while being faithful messengers for God, these prophets also foreshadowed Christ, and provided a pattern for Christians to imitate (Luke 13:33; 1 Thess. 2:15; Jas. 5:10).

Prophecy as a sign of God's favour

The existence of prophecy among the people of Israel was a great blessing, for it indicated that God cared about them enough, even in

their sins, to speak personally to them. While God was giving prophecies, he still had a relationship with them. On the other hand, the cessation of prophecy was a sign that God had withdrawn his favour from people who had strayed far from him (1 Sam. 3:1; 28:6; Lam. 2:9; Is. 29:10; Hos. 9:7; Mic. 3:7). The extensive outpouring of the gift of prophecy at the inception of the new covenant was thus an indication of God's abundant favour towards the new covenant church (Acts 2:16-18), and a functioning gift of prophecy is a sign of God's blessing on a church (1 Cor. 14:22).

Prophecy and prophets in the OT wisdom literature

Very little is said about prophets in the wisdom literature of the OT. There are only four explicit references to prophecy (Ps. 51 superscription; 74:9; 105:15; Prov. 29:18), plus a reference to Moses as the 'man of God' in the superscription of Psalm 90. The important role of prophecy in rebuking sin and encouraging obedience is emphasized in Proverbs 29:18: 'Where there is no prophecy [or 'prophetic vision,' *hazôn*], the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.' Psalm 74:9 was apparently written at a late period when there was no more prophecy, a fact that is seen as evidence of the loss of God's favour and presence: 'We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long.'

Prophecy and prophets in the Gospels

Many of the themes introduced in the OT continue into the NT, but they are developed further. In many places the gospels show how the predictive prophecies of the OT pointed to Christ and now find their fulfilment in him (Matt. 2:23; 4:14; 26:56; John 12:38; 17:12; 19:36, etc.). Jesus is seen as the long awaited 'prophet like Moses' (John 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:22-24; cf. 7:37), but he is not often explicitly called 'a prophet', and even when he is, it is usually by those who have little understanding of his person or mission (Matt. 21:11, 46; Mark 6:15; Luke 7:16; 24:19; John 4:19; 7:40; 9:17).

This is because Jesus is far greater than the OT prophets. While those prophets were messengers sent from God to the people, Jesus is not a mere messenger; he is God himself,

come in the flesh. Therefore, while Jesus is indeed the 'prophet like Moses', he is more than that; he is the one to whom the OT prophecies all pointed: 'And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself' (Luke 24:27; cf. Acts 3:18; 10:43; 26:22; Rom. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:10). Moreover, while the OT prophets were messengers who declared, 'Thus says the Lord', Jesus is himself the author of his message, who has the authority to declare, 'But I say to you' (Matt. 5:28, 32, 34, 44). Hebrews 1:1-2 explicitly contrasts the many kinds of revelation that came through the OT prophets and the far superior, single revelation that has come in the last days through God's own Son: 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.'

However, true prophets in the OT tradition do appear in the gospels, including Zechariah (Luke 1:67), Anna (Luke 2:36) and, pre-eminently, *John the Baptist (Luke 1:76; 3:2; cf. Matt. 11:14; 17:12). They appear at the time of Christ's coming, because they are God's messengers to proclaim what God has done in sending his Son into the world.

Regarding false prophets, Jesus warns that they are still to be expected; but they will be recognized by their fruit and by their false doctrine (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22).

The gift of prophecy in Acts and the epistles

Beginning with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in new covenant fullness at Pentecost, the gift of prophecy was widely distributed in the NT church: 'but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy"' (Acts 2:16-18). The Pentecost outpouring was not an isolated event, but one that signified the beginning of much more widespread and frequent personal communication between God and his people, and thus it also signified that a more deeply intimate relationship between God and all his people would be one

of the rich blessings of the new covenant.

Although several definitions have been given of the gift of prophecy, the NT indicates that it should be defined not as 'predicting the future', nor as 'proclaiming a word from the Lord', nor as 'powerful preaching', but rather as 'telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind'. The following material gives support for and explanation of this definition.

The NT apostles are the counterparts to OT prophets

Many OT prophets were able to speak and write words which had absolute divine authority (see above), and which were recorded in canonical Scripture. In NT times also there were people who spoke and wrote God's very words and had them recorded in Scripture; however, Jesus does not call them 'prophets' but uses a new term, 'apostles'. The apostles are the NT counterpart to the primary, established prophets in the OT (see Gal. 1:8-9, 11-12; 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Cor. 13:3; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:8,15; 2 Pet. 3:2). It is apostles, not prophets, who have authority to write the words of NT Scripture.

When the apostles want to establish their unique authority they never appeal to the title 'prophet' but rather call themselves apostles (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:1-2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 11:12-13; 12:11-12; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; 3:2, etc.). (See also *Mission.)

The meaning of 'prophet' in NT times

Why did Jesus choose the new term *apostle* to designate those who had the authority to write Scripture? One reason is that the gift of prophecy was going to be widely distributed to God's people at Pentecost, and it was appropriate to use another term to refer to the small group who would have authority to write NT Scripture. Another reason is that in NT times the Greek word *prophetes* ('prophet') generally did not mean 'one who speaks God's very words' but rather 'one who speaks on the basis of some external influence' (often a spiritual influence of some kind), or even just 'spokesperson'. Titus 1:12 uses the word in this sense; Paul quotes the pagan Greek poet Epimenides: 'One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons."'

The apostles as 'prophets'

Of course, the words 'prophet' and 'prophecy' were sometimes used of the apostles when they were giving a 'prophecy', emphasizing that a special revelation from the Holy Spirit was the basis of what they said (Rev. 1:3; 22:7; Eph. 2:20; 3:5). But this was not the terminology ordinarily used for the apostles, nor did the terms 'prophet' and 'prophecy' in themselves imply that their speech or writing had divine authority, any more than Paul's calling himself a 'teacher' (2 Tim. 1:11) implied that all 'teachers' in NT times had authority equal to Paul's. With respect to the apostles functioning as 'prophets', Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 speak of the 'foundational' role of a unique group of apostles (and perhaps also a limited group of prophets) who received the special revelation concerning the inclusion of Gentiles in the church (3:5). However, these verses have no direct relevance to the gift of prophecy as it functioned not in the 'foundation', but in the rest of the church, *i.e.* in thousands of ordinary Christians in hundreds of local churches in NT times. In other NT passages, the words 'prophet' and 'prophecy' are used more commonly with reference to ordinary Christians who spoke not with absolute divine authority, but simply to report something that God had brought to their minds (see discussion below).

The gift of prophecy to ordinary Christians

There are indications in the NT that 'prophecy' did not carry the same authority/power as Scripture.

1. *Acts 21:4*. In Acts 21:4, we read of the disciples at Tyre: 'Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.' This seems to be a reference to prophecy directed towards Paul, but Paul disobeyed it. He surely would not have done this if the prophecy had been God's very words and had had authority equal to that of Scripture.

2. *Acts 21:10-11*. Agabus prophesied that the Jews at Jerusalem would bind Paul and 'deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles', a prediction that was nearly correct but not quite; the Romans, not the Jews, bound Paul (v. 33; also 22:29), and the Jews, rather than delivering him voluntarily, tried to kill him and he had to be rescued by force (v. 32). The

verb used by Agabus in 21:11, *paradidomi*, denotes the voluntary, conscious, deliberate giving over or handing over of something to someone else, but the Jews did not voluntarily hand Paul over to the Romans. The prediction was broadly true, but it included inaccuracies of detail that would have called into question the authenticity of any OT prophet.

3. *1 Thessalonians 5:19-21*. Paul tells the Thessalonians, 'do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good' (1 Thess. 5:20-21). If the Thessalonians had thought that prophecy equalled God's word in authority, Paul would never have had to tell them not to despise it; they 'received' and 'accepted' God's word 'with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit' (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13; cf. 4:15). But when Paul tells them to 'test everything', this must include at least the prophecies he mentioned in the previous phrase. When he encourages them to 'hold fast *what is good*' he implies that prophecies contain some things that are good and some things that are not good. This could never have been said of the words of an OT prophet, or of the authoritative teachings of a NT apostle.

4. *1 Corinthians 14:29-38*. More extensive evidence on NT prophecy is found in 1 Corinthians 14. When Paul says, 'Let two or three prophets speak, and *let the others weigh what is said*' (1 Cor. 14:29), he suggests that they should listen carefully and sift the good from the bad, accepting some and rejecting the rest (this is the implication of the Greek word *diakrinō*, here translated 'weigh what is said'). An OT prophet like Isaiah would hardly have said, 'Listen to what I say and weigh what is said; sort the good from the bad, what you should accept from what you should not'. If the prophecy had absolute divine authority, it would be sin to do this. But here Paul commands that it be done, thus implying that NT prophecy did not have the authority of God's very words.

Paul implies also that no one at Corinth, a church in which there was much prophecy, was able to speak God's very words. He says in 1 Corinthians 14:36, 'What! Did the word of God come forth from you, or are you the only ones it has reached?' (author's translation).

All these passages indicate that the common idea that prophets spoke 'words of the Lord' when the apostles were not present

in the early churches is simply incorrect. They also imply that prophecies today should not be prefaced with 'Thus says the Lord'; to do this is to claim an authority that new covenant prophets do not have.

Spontaneous 'revelation' differentiates prophecy from other gifts

If prophecy does not contain God's very words, then what is it? In what sense is it from God?

Paul indicates that God can bring something spontaneously to mind so that the person prophesying reports it in his or her own words. Paul calls this a 'revelation': 'If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged' (1 Cor. 14:30-31). Theologians have used the word 'revelation' to refer to the words of Scripture, but here Paul uses it in a broader sense, to denote communication from God which does not result in written Scripture or words equal in authority to written Scripture (see also Phil. 3:15; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 1:17; Matt. 11:27).

Thus if a stranger comes in and all prophesy, 'the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you' (1 Cor. 14:25). In this way, prophecy serves as a 'sign' for believers (1 Cor. 14:22); it is a clear demonstration that God is definitely at work in their midst, a 'sign' of God's hand of blessing on the congregation. And since it will be effective for the conversion of unbelievers as well, Paul encourages the church to use this gift when 'unbelievers or outsiders enter' (1 Cor. 14:23).

Why did Paul value prophecy so highly (1 Cor. 14:1-5, 39-40)? Apparently because it was effective in 'building up the church' (1 Cor. 14:12), spontaneously revealing God's insight into someone's heart or into a specific situation, and thereby bringing 'upbuilding and encouragement and consolation' (1 Cor. 14:3). Even though it had to be tested and was never to be received as the authoritative 'words of the Lord' like the Bible (see above), through prophecies God was still manifesting his gracious presence in the day to day life of the church by guiding, warning, predicting, and giving his perspective on people's hearts and the events in which they were involved. In this way prophecy was a vivid expression

of the genuine personal relationship between God and his people.

However, Paul did not think that everything called 'prophecy' in the ancient world was like Christian prophecy. The Corinthians had previously been led astray to 'dumb idols' (1 Cor. 12:2), and Paul was well aware of demonic spiritual power at work in pagan temples; 'what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God' (1 Cor. 10:20). A failure to recognize this distinction leads to a fundamental error in the massive work of David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, 1983). He considers true Christian prophecy (which is empowered by the Holy Spirit) together with pagan prophecy (which is not) as one general religious phenomenon. Aune fails to consider the possibility that we can distinguish true from false prophecy on the basis of the prophet's willingness to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). No NT writer would have adopted Aune's perspective; nor should evangelical scholars today.

The difference between prophecy and teaching

Prophecy and teaching are always mentioned as distinct gifts (Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; 14:6; Eph. 4:11), but what is the difference? Unlike the gift of prophecy, 'teaching' in the NT is never said to be based on a spontaneous revelation from God. Rather, 'teaching' is an explanation or application of Scripture (Acts 15:35; 18:11, 24-28; Rom. 2:21; 15:4; Col. 3:16; Heb. 5:12) or a repetition and explanation of apostolic instructions (Rom. 16:17; 2 Tim. 2:2; 3:10, etc.). (It is what people today would call 'Bible teaching' or 'preaching'.) The distinction between teaching and prophecy is thus quite clear. If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, including interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in NT terms) a teaching. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a prophecy.

So prophecy has less authority than 'teaching', and prophecies in the churches are always to be tested by the authoritative teaching of Scripture. Timothy was not told to *prophecy* Paul's instructions in the church; he was to *teach* them (1 Tim. 4:11; 6:2). The

Thessalonians were told to hold firm not to the traditions which were 'prophesied' to them but to the traditions which they were 'taught' by Paul (2 Thess. 2:15). Some elders laboured in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17), and an elder was to be 'an apt teacher' (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. Tit. 1:9), but no elder is said to have the task of prophesying, nor is it ever said that an elder had to be 'an apt prophet'. James warned that those who teach, not those who prophesy, will be judged with greater strictness (Jas. 3:1). Contrary to the views of those who claim that 'charismatic leaders' governed the earliest churches, the evidence of the NT shows that it was teachers (in the role of elders), not prophets, who gave them leadership and direction.

The cessationist position

According to an alternative position within evangelical scholarship, the 'cessationist' position, the gift of prophecy in NT churches always had the same authority as Scripture, contained no errors, but only the very words of God, and therefore ceased to exist in the church around the end of the 1st century, when the canon of the NT was complete. For a defence of cessationism, see the books by R. B. Gaffin and O. P. Robertson listed in the bibliography, and the contributions by Gaffin and R. Saucy to W. Grudem, (ed.), *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*.

Prophecy and prophets in Revelation

Revelation 11 predicts the appearance on earth, for 1260 days, of two remarkable prophets. They will have great power and no one will be able to prevent them from carrying out their task: 'And if any one would harm them, fire pours out from their mouth and consumes their foes; if any one would harm them, thus he is doomed to be killed. They have power to shut the sky ... and to smite the earth with every plague, as often as they desire' (Rev. 11:5-6). Yet the writer also predicts the coming of a powerful 'false prophet' who will work deceptive miracles and ultimately be cast into the lake of fire with the beast and the devil himself (Rev. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10).

The book of Revelation as a whole is, as its name implies, a great 'revelation' from God, and the book itself is the last great prophecy in the Bible. From chapter 4 onwards it points towards the future, describing in sobering yet

magnificent language both the judgments and the blessings which God has ordained. It closes with a reminder that its prophetic words, like the words God gave to the prophet Moses at the beginning of the Bible, and like the words of the prophets and apostles written in the rest of the Bible, are the very words of God, and no one may add to them or take from them (Rev. 22:18-19).

See also: REVELATION.

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PROPITIATION, see ATONEMENT
PROVERBS, see Part 2

PROVIDENCE

The term 'providence' as it is commonly used in theology normally identifies a cluster of