



**Study guide for
APOSTLES AND PROPHETS**

The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Entry: "Apostles" Hans Dieter Betz

APOSTLE.

An apostle in the NT is an envoy, an ambassador, or a missionary. In the NT the term "apostle" is applied to one who carries the message of the gospel.

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- A. Definition and Origin
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A. Definition and Origin

The early Christian title of apostle, although well attested in the NT and other early Christian sources, presents a number of still unresolved problems. The noun "apostle" (apostolos) is originally an adjective derived from the verb *apostellō* ("send"), found in the NT with a considerable range of meanings. The basic concept is that of the sending of messengers or envoys; an apostle can also be called *angelos* ("messenger," e.g., Luke 7:24; 9:52) or *kēruks* ("herald," e.g., 1 Tim 2:7, 2 Tim 1:11; cf. Mark 1:45; 2 Cor 5:20). Apostles can be human or divine, sent by human or divine authorities.

The original adjective *apostolos* is attested only infrequently in Greek literature, referring to an envoy or a bearer of a message in a general sense (e.g., Herodotus 1.21; Plato, Ep. 7.346a). This technical meaning conforms to the Aramaic *sel aḥ* (Ezra 7:14; Dan 5:24; cf. 2 Chr 17:7–9; for references and bibliography, see Spicq, 1982). In the Hellenistic era, the concept of the divine envoy was applied by Epictetus to the ideal cynic (Diss. 3.22.3; 4.8.31), but the term *apostolos* does not occur. Christianity, therefore, appears to have picked a secular term and made it into a specific office and title.

In addition to evidencing a bewildering range of applications of the title of apostle, the NT and the early patristic literature also attempt to define it. Since scholarship is still divided on many of the questions, the following definitions must be seen as part of the argument and not as final answers.

The basic definition given by Origen (Jo. 32.17, ed. Preuschen 1903: 453, line 17) is simple: "*Everyone who is sent by someone is an apostle of the one who sent him.*" The concept involves legal and administrative aspects and is basic to all types of representatives, envoys, and ambassadors. In the area of Christian religion, the term "apostle" can refer to a messenger, human or divine, sent by God or Christ to reveal messages or to reveal the message of the gospel. Origen's definition, although later, is grounded in the NT itself; e.g., John 13:16: "Truly, truly I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than the one who sent him" (cf. also Matt 10:40–42; Gal 4:14). More specific is the definition given in Acts 1:21–22, according to which an apostle must be "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us ..." Paul mentions (2 Cor 12:12; cf. Rom 15:19; Acts 5:12) the practice of the apostle legitimating himself by "the signs of the apostle" (*ta sēmeia tou apostolou*): i.e., "by signs and miracles

and wondrous deeds.“ In the Petrine traditions, the task of the apostle is seen as transmitting the words of the prophets and of Jesus to the church (2 Pet 3:2; cf. the prophetic function of the apostles in Jude 17). Paul did not conform to any of these definitions, a fact that explains his position as an outsider and the difficulties he had obtaining recognition.

B. Apostles as Missionaries

Chronologically, in the earliest use of the term in the NT, *apostolos* is an administrative designation for envoys, delegates, and representatives. Their title and function are given in 2 Cor 8:23 (cf. Phil 2:25) as “envoys of the churches“ (*apostoloi ekklēsiōn*), that is, envoys appointed and sent out by the churches to represent them (see Betz 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 Hermeneia, 73, 81, 86). In other places, the term “apostle“ is understood in a more religious sense as a missionary and preacher of the gospel. Acts 1:21–26 and 13:1–3, passages describing the appointment of different types of “apostles,“ show that such appointments did not exclude divine intervention and authorization. The tasks of these apostles could vary but they seem to be centered in the proclamation of the gospel and the founding and administering of new churches (see 1 Cor 9:5, 12:28; Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; Rev 18:20; Did. 11:3–6). Rom 16:3–16 includes a long list of greetings, among them the two apostles Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7). Perhaps the name “Junias“ was corrected by scribes to replace Junia, a female name; such a correction would indicate that a woman (here possibly a married couple like Prisca and Aquila in 16:3, and Philologus and Julia in 16:15, although none of them is called apostle) could serve as a missionary apostle (see BAGD: 380, s.v. *Iouñias*; Schüssler-Fiorenza 1983: 160–204).

C. Jesus' Disciples as Apostles

A different concept of apostle is presupposed when the title is attributed to former disciples (*mathētai*) of Jesus who had been witnesses of his resurrection (Matt 10:2, 28:16–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:47–49; John 20:19–23; cf. 1 Cor 9:1). There are, however, complications. The decisive passage, 1 Cor 15:3–7, cites a composite formula combining different terminological usages (see Conzelmann 1 Corinthians Hermeneia, 251–60): v 5 names Cephas, Peter and the Twelve, v 7 includes James, the brother of Jesus (not called apostle in Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 9:5; see Betz Galatians Hermeneia, 78), and “all the apostles“ without clarifying how they are related to the “500 brothers“ (v 6) not called apostles. At a later stage, the gospel writers, especially Luke, identify the disciples of Jesus during his life on earth with the apostles and the Twelve, creating the concept of the Twelve Apostles (see Matt 10:1–2; Mark 3:14 with variant readings; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:23–26; Klein 1961). Originally, either in the earliest church or in Jesus' life-time, the Twelve (*hoi dōdeka*) were a separate institution (see 1 Cor 15:5; Acts 6:2) representing the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28; see Sanders 1985: 98–106). While their number was fixed, the names in the lists of the apostles vary to some extent (see Mark 3:16–19; Matt 10:2–4; Luke 6:14–16; Acts 1:13, 23, 26; for later lists, see NTApocr, 35–79; cf. also Mark 14:10, 43 and parallels; John 6:71, 12:4, 20:24; Acts 6:2). Luke's concept of the Twelve Apostles in effect limits the number to the disciples of the historical Jesus and denies the title of apostle to Paul (except Acts 14:4, 14, where Barnabas and Paul, owing to a pre-Lukan source, are called apostles). For Luke, the Twelve Apostles are the leaders of the Jerusalem church (see especially Acts 4:35–37; 5:2, 27–32; 6:6; 8:1, 14, 18; 9:27; 11:1; 15:1–6, 22–23; 16:4 [the last time apostles are mentioned in Acts]). Consequently, Luke does not call the missionaries apostles.

D. Paul as Apostle of the Gentiles

The origins of Paul's concept of apostleship are still shrouded in mystery. In early Christianity the term was controversial, as can be seen from the NT. Paul's letters reveal some developments. In accordance with an earlier stage of the tradition, Barnabas and Paul served as missionary “apostles“ (cf. Rom 16:7; Acts 13:2–4; 14:4, 14; 1 Thess 2:1–7). Paul's bold attempt to rank himself alongside Cephas and the Twelve (1 Cor 15:3–10), however, met

resistance, especially in the churches not founded by Paul, causing fierce debates about what constitutes apostleship. These debates reflect the fact that Paul's own interpretation of the title and office rested on rather different theological presuppositions by which he gave apostleship a completely new interpretation. This can have occurred only at a somewhat later time, not at the beginning of Paul's ministry. At the conference in Jerusalem (Gal 2:8; see Betz Galatians, 98–99; Lüdemann 1984: 76–77; 1980–83, 2: 62–63), and even in the prescript of the early letter of 1 Thessalonians (cf. also Phil 1:1; 2:25; Phlm 1), he did not call himself apostle (cf. its ambiguous usage in 1 Thess 2:7). The title appears as Paul's self-description in an epistolary prescript first in Gal 1:1, perhaps as a result of the conflict in Antioch (2:11–14), and then becomes standard (1 Cor 2:7; 2 Cor 1:1; Rom 1:1; then Col 1:1; Eph 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1, 11; Tit 1:1; differently 2 Thess 1:1).

Paul's reinterpretation of the concept questioned fundamental assumptions held by the church before Paul. He rejected the idea that having known the historical Jesus personally was a valid criterion (2 Cor 5:16). Indeed, the gospels point out that those who knew Jesus best during his life on earth—his disciples and his family—came to understand his message only after the resurrection. On the other hand, if witnessing the resurrection was the criterion, Paul qualified as an apostle, since he too had a vision of the risen Lord (Gal 1:16; 1 Cor 9:1–5; 15:1–10). If founding churches was the criterion, Paul had worked more in this task than everyone else (1 Cor 15:10). Looking back at his mission, he calls himself the “apostle of the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13; cf. 1:5–7, 13–15). When Christ appeared to him and called him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15–16), Paul took this call to mean that he was given a unique role in salvation history. In Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1, Paul claims to be a “called apostle” (klētos apostolos), analogous to the former disciples of Jesus (cf. Mark 1:16–20 and parallels; 6:7; Matt 10:1, etc.). Not appointed by human authorities (Gal 1:1, 12) but by the risen Christ himself, he came to regard himself as the personal representative (mimētēs) of Christ on earth (1 Thess 1:6; 11:1 Phil 3:17; see Betz 1967). This fact implied that Paul's entire physical and spiritual existence was to be understood as an epiphany of the crucified and resurrected redeemer (Gal 6:14, 17; 2 Cor 2:14–5:21; 6:4–10; 12:7–10; 13:3–4; Phil 3:10). His missionary campaigns were to be regarded as a decisive phase prior to the parousia, in which the gospel had to be preached “from Jerusalem in a wide curve as far as Illyricum” (Rom 15:19) and indeed as far as Spain (Rom 15:24). This mission, when completed, would be regarded as the “offering of the gentiles” in which he officiated as the chief “celebrant” (Rom 15:16). In the Last Judgment, Paul expected to present his gentile churches unblemished and pure to Christ (1 Thess 2:10–12; 5:23; 1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14; 11:2; Phil 2:15; furthermore Col 1:22; Eph 5:27).

Paul's concept of apostleship, while not conforming to the common criteria as exemplified by Luke-Acts, effectively changed these criteria, a process reflected in the NT. In this reinterpretation, other influences came into play. Widengren (1950; for bibliography, see Betz Galatians, 75) pointed to notions in Syriac Gnosticism that may have contributed to Paul's concept of apostleship. Betz (1972) showed that Paul was influenced by the Socratic tradition in which Socrates was seen as a messenger sent by the deity. Whatever influences there may have been, however, Paul, through his debates and struggles, and through his own suffering and death (cf. Col 1:24), defined the concept of apostleship in a radically new way that also determined its understanding and application in the post-NT era.

E. False Apostles

Paul's claim to apostleship reflects a more general confusion about the question of who was truly an apostle. Was James, “the brother of the Lord,” an apostle (see Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 9:5; see Betz Galatians, 78)? The evidence is ambiguous. Contrary to Acts 14:4, 14, Paul himself evidently avoided attributing the title to Barnabas (cf. Gal 2:1–10, 13; 1 Cor 9:6). Paul sometimes mentions other missionary apostles whom he apparently considers to be inferior in status when compared to himself (see B, above). When he ridicules his opponents as “false

apostles“ (pseudapostoloi, 2 Cor 11:13) or “superapostles“ (hyperlian apostoloi, 2 Cor 11:5; 12:11), he unfortunately does not reveal their names. That these opponents had even less respectful titles for him is suggested by the term “miscarriage“ ektrōma, 1 Cor 15:8). The struggle over the definition and criteria of true and false apostleship (see also Rev 2:2), in analogy to that over true and false prophecy, raged well into later church history as part of the battles against heresy (see *NTApocr*, 35–74; furthermore Heresy and Orthodoxy in the NT).

F. Christ as Apostle

Peculiar is the fact that only Heb 3:1 calls Christ an apostle: “Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession“ (see Braun *An die Hebräer HNT*, 71–74, 78). This, however, appears to be a late application of the term which may have older roots (cf. Matt 15:24; Luke 4:18, 43). The Fourth Gospel still contains what seem to be traces of an older usage. We find here not only the definitive statement of 13:16 (cited above, A) but also, through the terminology of sending (apostellō), the description of Christ’s entire mission. Jesus Christ, the Logos and Son of God, was sent by God into this world (3:16–17, 34; 5:36–38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21; cf. 1 John 4:9, 10, 14). In turn, Jesus sends out his disciples (4:38; 17:18; 20:21). They are called the Twelve, not apostles (6:67, 70–71; 20:24). It seems that the Fourth Gospel, without offering reasons, studiously avoids the title of apostle, while presuming the concept and terminology of sending. Perhaps the matter is related to the general similarity between Johannine christology and Pauline apostleship, a similarity which may reflect the still unexplained relationship between Johannine and Pauline Christianity.¹

¹ Hans Dieter Betz “Apostles” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Edt. David Noel Freedman, (New York, Doubleday, 1992) 1:309-311.

New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic.

Entry: "APOSTLE" A. C. Clark

APOSTLE

It is no exaggeration to say that different understandings of apostleship are of key significance for ecclesiology. To be 'apostolic' has frequently been seen as central to the nature of the universal church, as in the phrase 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' from the Nicene Creed. But in what sense or senses is the church apostolic? Because its leaders stand in a direct line of apostolic succession through the *laying on of hands? Because it is true to the gospel as proclaimed by the original apostles of Christ and now enshrined in the NT Scriptures? Or because local churches are established and receive guidance from apostles today who function with their teams to give guidance and equip churches for Spirit-empowered discipleship and mission?

The early church

The emphasis by Luke in Acts on the crucial significance of the Twelve as witnesses to Christ's resurrection and authoritative teachers, together with Paul's repeated insistence in his letters on his authority as an apostle of Christ, led to an acceptance of the Twelve and Paul as having special, non-repeatable offices. The wider NT use of the word 'apostle' for pioneer missionaries (e.g. Andronicus and Junia, Rom. 16:7), though reflected in the Didache (Syria, c. 95; the textual history is complex), was soon lost.

The need to combat growing *Gnostic influence in the latter part of the second century, with a stress on esoteric tradition secretly handed down, led to the compiling in the period 180–200 of 'succession lists' of bishops in the major cities. The main aim was to safeguard the apostolic message. The Apostles' *Creed, which in its full form stems from c. 700, is based on the Old Roman Creed of this period. Gradually in the third century the emphasis changed from a stress on an open succession of teachers to the significance of a personal succession of bishops going back to the apostles.

Apostolic succession

Churches today which emphasize the importance of a personal episcopal apostolic succession of bishops hold that Christ entrusted the obligation to transmit and preserve the 'deposit of faith' (the experience of Christ and his teachings contained in the doctrinal 'tradition' handed down from the time of the apostles, the written portion of which is Scripture) to the apostles, who passed on this role by ordaining bishops after them. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are seen as his passing on of *authority to them, his personally appointed delegates. This understanding is seen as being developed by the Apostolic Fathers. 1 Clement (written to the church at Corinth) defends the authority and prerogatives of a group of leaders in the church deposed and replaced by the congregation on its own initiative. The letter argues that the apostles appointed 'bishops and deacons' as successors, expecting them to appoint their own successors in turn (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). So such church leaders were not to be removed without cause and due process. Tony Lane comments that this emphasis on the importance of due order in the church reflects 'traditional Roman values as well as biblical influence' (A Concise History of Christian Thought, p. 8). In the letters of Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century, the bishop is seen as a focus of unity against both schism and heresy. In the early third century Tertullian, the father of Latin theology, writes as follows: 'Let them produce the original records of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning in such a manner that [that first bishop of theirs] shall be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the apostles or of apostolic men' (The Prescription against Heretics, ch. 32). Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, developed further the significance of the apostolic succession, which protected the belief and inter-

communion of the churches through the early centuries of persecution and international expansion.

Churches of the Catholic tradition hold that bishops form the necessary link in an unbroken chain of successors to the office of the apostles. The outward sign by which this connection is both symbolized and effected is the laying on of hands by the bishop at ordination. Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians hold that the power and authority to administer the sacraments, with the exception of baptism and matrimony, is passed on only through the sacrament of Holy Orders, and that an unbroken line of ordination of bishops to the apostles is necessary for the valid celebration of the sacraments today.

Roman Catholics, of course, see the pope as the successor to Peter, providing apostolic jurisdiction and leadership for the whole church, while for Anglicans the bishop (who for Anglo-Catholics and others shares in authority because of the link with apostolic succession) provides a focus of unity within a diocese. Apostolic succession is also claimed by the Anglican communion and some Lutheran churches. However, in his papal bull of 1896, *Apostolicae Curae*, Pope Leo XIII denounced Anglican consecrations as 'absolutely invalid and utterly void' because of changes made to the rite of consecration under Edward VI. The theory of sacramental grace still stands as a barrier to greater organizational church unity.

While the Roman Catholic Church asserts that Christ gave Peter a unique primacy among the apostles, which has been passed on in the office of the papacy, in Eastern Orthodox belief and practice all bishops are equal, with even the ecumenical patriarch seen as first among equals. Orthodox theologians see this as continuing the ancient practice of the church, which considered the Roman pontiff to be first but not superior to the rest of the bishops.

Apostolic teaching

In Reformed understanding, Christ gave a special gift of remembrance, understanding and teaching to the original apostles (see John 14:26; 16:12–15). This gift enabled them to write or to oversee the NT Scriptures, which provide the doctrinal foundation for the whole church of subsequent history (see *Scripture, doctrine of). (Peter is seen, for example, as standing behind Mark's Gospel, and Paul behind Luke-Acts.) It is difficult to understate the importance of this stress on apostolic teaching for evangelical theology. Apostolic succession for them, as for most Protestants, is the faithful succession of apostolic teaching. There have, however, been different understandings of the apostolic authority 'to bind and to loose' (Matt. 16:19) or to forgive sins (John 20:23–23). Most Protestant churches would deny that the apostolicity of the church rests on an unbroken episcopacy.

Apostles today

The twentieth century saw the development of the idea of a continuing apostleship. The Apostolic Church, a Pentecostal denomination tracing its origins to the Welsh Revival of 1904–5, now has over 6 million members in more than seventy nations. It is not a part of oneness Pentecostalism (denying the Trinity), which also terms itself apostolic. Many other churches of widely varying churchmanship also include the adjective 'apostolic' in their name, with varying significance. This is especially common with some Black majority church denominations. There is a sociological link here with the role of the leader or prophet in African traditional religion and life.

For Restorationism, a branch of the charismatic movement, the fivefold ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher (see Eph. 4:11) are of major significance. It is argued that there are apostles today in the sense of foundation-laying ministries, continuing gifts of the ascended Christ. Often these are seen as being essential to the well-being of churches, providing links between local congregations and enabling them to benefit from the training and

international links which apostolic ministries and teams provide. There is an emphasis on networking and building relationships, with church planting and social concern being seen as key activities. While in many Western countries such apostles with their teams may seem to be of marginal significance, in areas of the world where the church is growing rapidly they are frequently widely influential.

Since the Second Vatican Council many in the Roman Catholic Church have placed greater emphasis on the apostolate of the whole church, including the laity. The 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' is seen as a communion of churches whose validity is derived from the apostolic message it professes and the apostolic witness it lives out as much as through any personal apostolic succession of duly ordained bishops.

Sent on a mission

For many, the term 'apostolic' speaks primarily either of office and tradition, or of a body of doctrine to be defended. But the original meaning of 'apostle', based on the Jewish shaliah concept, is of one chosen and sent with a specific commission as the fully authorized delegate of the sender, to teach and act in his name and by his authority. Just as the original apostles were commissioned by the risen Lord to proclaim the gospel to all nations, so today Christ continues to send his people into all the world to make disciples and establish churches. For the apostle Paul, as Jimmy Dunn has emphasized (*The Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 571–580), apostolic authority is always subservient to the gospel, exercised to build churches up rather than to dominate them, willing to contextualize, accepting of a particular sphere of ministry, and ready to suffer as Christ did. Such perspectives are greatly needed in cross-cultural mission today, so that empire building may give way to humble, Spirit-dependent ministry that truly builds up the church.²

² A. C. Clark "APOSTLE" in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*. 2nd edit. Ed: Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell, T. A. Noble, (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2016) 54-56

Prophets and Prophecy: a Biblical-Theological study

Below is a reading from Appendix A in 'The gift of prophecy in the New Testament and today' by Wayne Grudem ³

1. INTRODUCTION

Prophecy is the most common means God used to communicate with people throughout biblical history. The story of prophecy is the story of God speaking to people through human messengers from Genesis to Revelation, and thus it is the story of God's varying relationships to his people and to 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 is present to relate personally to his people.

The basic principles regarding prophets and prophecy are indicated in the Pentateuch, especially in connection with Moses, but the full establishment of a regular office of prophet together with bands of secondary prophets does not come until the later historical books and the prophetic writings. In the Gospels, Jesus is seen as a great prophet, but much more than a prophet. Acts and the Epistles describe a gift of prophecy given to Christians which has lesser authority but much wider distribution, and prophecy is seen as the most valuable of the Holy Spirit's many gifts to the church. The Bible closes with a sobering yet magnificent picture of the future in the prophecy of Revelation.

2. PROPHECY AND PROPHETS IN THE PENTATEUCH

While New Testament 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" (Hebrew: *nābî*) in the Old Testament is found 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, a theme that is revisited later in the Old Testament (see below).

a. A messenger empowered by the Spirit of God

The essential nature of a prophet as a messenger of God is described in terms of 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" (Ex. 7:1-2, RSV).

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 conception of the prophet as a messenger of God pervades descriptions of prophets in both the Old and New Testaments.

³ Taken from Appendix A in the revised addition of 'The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today' Wayne Grudem, (Wheaton, Ill: Crossword books, 1988, revised in 2000) pgs. 272, 273-6, 290-1. Also found The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, Gen Eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester, England IVP 2000) under "Prophecy and Prophets," Wayne Grudem pgs. 701-710.

The Spirit of God is necessary to empower true prophecies, for it is only when the Lord places on the seventy elders some of the Spirit's empowering which has been on Moses that the seventy elders are able to prophesy (Num. 11:25).

b. The prophet's message is not his own

What was implicit in the analogy of Moses and Aaron speaking to Pharaoh (Ex. 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, RSV). Even greedy and rebellious Balaam could not change that, for he said, "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, RSV).

c. The uniqueness of Moses

Moses has a more direct relationship to God than any other prophet in the entire Old Testament. 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. 34:10, RSV)

While other prophets were named in the Pentateuch, such as Abraham, Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Balaam (Num. 22:38), and the seventy elders who prophesied (Num. 11:25), no prophet is seen to be 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, RSV). Although this expectation found partial fulfillment in many subsequent Old Testament prophets who spoke the words of the Lord, it was ultimately a messianic prediction that found fulfillment in Christ (John 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:22; 7:37).

d. the expectation that someday all of God's people would prophesy

The existence of an initial group of secondary prophets (the seventy elders who prophesied with Moses, Num. 11:25) provides a pattern for subsequent bands of prophets later in the Old Testament (see below) and also provides an expectation that someday 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, RSV). Here Moses longs not just for the prophetic gift but even more for the widespread personal relationship to God that the gift would indicate, for he knows by experience that prophets walk close to God. This expectation is repeated in Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28-29) and finds initial fulfillment in the New Testament church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-18).

e. The problem of false prophets

Since a prophet can only speak God's message, not his 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. 13:15; 18:20), that prophet "shall be put to death" (Deut. 13:5, RSV). However, contrary to much popular misunderstanding [and also contrary to what I earlier wrote on page 24 of this book!], there was no death penalty simply for speaking a false prophecy, for Deuteronomy 18:20 only requires capital punishment 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 were known 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 might even work a “sign or wonder” (13:2, RSV), 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 you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 13:3, RSV).

3. PROPHECY AND PROPHETS IN THE POST-PENTATEUCHAL HISTORICAL BOOKS AND THE WRITING PROPHETS

a. Established, primary prophets

Just as in the Pentateuch Moses was established as the primary prophet of God, so in subsequent Old Testament history there are prophets such as Samuel (1 Sam. 3:20), Gad (1 Sam. 22:5), Nathan (2 Sam. 7:2), Elijah (1 Kings 18:22), Elisha (2 Kings 2:15), Isaiah (2 Kings 20:1), Jeremiah (2 Chron. 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, RSV), and the Lord “let none of his words fall to the ground” (v. 19, RSV). The text frequently notes that such primary prophets were attested by miracles (1 Kings 18:24, 3839; 2 Kings 5:3, 14), the truth of their predictions (1 Sam. 19–20; 1 Kings 14:18; 16:12), and their loyalty to the one true God.

b. Secondary bands of prophets

In addition to “established” prophets who had recognized positions of leadership, there were several secondary bands of 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 Kings 18:4), and the bands of prophets or “sons of the prophets” in Bethel (2 Kings 2:3, RSV), Jericho (2 Kings 2:5, 7), and Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38).

These bands of prophets are not viewed as false prophets but as servants of the one true God who are affiliated with true prophets such as Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7) or Obadiah (who hides them from wicked Jezebel, 1 Kings 18:4). Therefore these secondary prophets must have received some kinds of messages or revelations from God, for this was the essential requirement for being called a “prophet.” (They had special knowledge from God that he would take Elijah on a certain day, for example—2 Kings 2:3, 5). However, none of their prophetic utterances are 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 or Elijah. The wider distribution of prophecy to these bands of prophets foreshadows the outpouring of prophecy to “sons and . . . daughters . . . menservants and . . . maidservants” (Acts 2:17-18, RSV) in the New Covenant.

The involuntary “prophesying” and physical restraint that affected Saul and his messengers (1 Sam. 19:20-24) stands as 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 musical accompaniment of prophecies but not involuntary ecstatic experience).....

c. Women as prophets

Several women are named as prophets in the Old Testament. Already in the Pentateuch we read of Miriam (Ex. 15:20), and subsequent books mention Deborah (Judg. 4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28), and the wife of Isaiah (Isa. 8:3). (There is also a woman false prophet, Noadiah, in Nehemiah 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 Old Testament ministered privately to individuals rather than publicly to large groups; thus, Deborah rendered private judgments (Heb. *mishpat*, Judg. 4:5; see also 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22). The activity of women as prophets was distinct from the activity of the Old Testament priests, who were exclusively male and who had the responsibility of teaching God's laws to the people (Mal. 2:7; cf. Deut. 24:8; 2 Kings 12:2; 17:27-28; 2 Chron. 15:3; Neh. 8:9; Hos. 4:6; Mic. 3:11), and was also distinct from the activity of kings, who ruled the people. Thus, the Old Testament also foreshadows the New Testament encouragement of women to prophesy in churches (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5) but not to teach or govern the whole church (1 Cor. 14:33-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:2).

d. Other names for prophets

Other names applied to the prophets include "man of God" (1 Sam. 2:27; 9:6; 1 Kings 13:1-10; 17:24; etc.) and "seer" (this English term translates two different Hebrew words which seem to be nearly synonymous: *rō'ēh* in 1 Sam. 9:9, 11; 1 Chron. 9:22; 29:29; etc., and *chōzēh* in 2 Sam. 24:11; 2 Kings 17:13; 1 Chron. 21:9; etc.). Another common title is God's "servants" (1 Kings 14:18; 18:36; Jer. 25:4), and God himself calls them "my servants the prophets" (2 Kings 9:7; 17:13, RSV; cf. Amos 3:7), a title which suggests that God would regularly send them to accomplish various tasks for him.

e. How did prophets receive messages from God?

The Old Testament records various means of receiving a message from God, including frequent visions (1 Sam. 3:1, 15; 2 Sam. 7:17; Isa. 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 in 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," RSV), and Joel 2:28 promises dreams in connection with the outpouring of a prophetic gift in the future.

The most common means of communication from God to a prophet was a direct verbal message. Several times it is simply said that God put his words in the mouth of the prophet (Isa. 51:16; Jer. 1:9; etc.; cf. Deut. 18:18). At times the message is called a "burden" (Hebrew *māssā'*, Isa. 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, KJV), suggesting that a heavy sense of responsibility and perhaps reluctance was felt by the prophet who received such messages. In over a hundred cases we are simply told, without further explanation, that "the word of the LORD came to" the prophet (1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4; 24:11; Isa. 38:4; Ezek. 1:3; Jonah 1:1; etc.). On several occasions 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 Kings 20:4, RSV; cf. 1 Kings 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 Kings 19:9-10; Jer. 1:11, 13). Finally, in many long sections in the writing prophets, we are simply presented with the content of the prophet's message, 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, RSV), 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 evoke an amazing picture of personal friendship with God, a claim that is made explicit in the cases of Moses (Ex. 33:11; Deut. 34:10) and Abraham

(2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; cf. James 2:23). Because a prophet is in such close communication with God, he will often just “know” things about a situation that he could not have seen with his natural eyes alone, but that had to be revealed by God. (1 Kings 14:4-6; 2 Kings 5:25-26; 6:12; 8:12-13; note Elisha’s surprise that there was something the Lord had not told him in 2 Kings 4:27). In light of such a close personal relationship between God and the prophets, it is remarkable that the New Testament epistle of James sees Elijah’s prayer life as a pattern for Christians to imitate (James 5:16-18).

f. 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 Old Testament.

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 Kings 11:30-31); Elisha had King Joash shoot an arrow symbolizing victory over the Syrians (2 Kings 13:15-18); Jeremiah smashed a potter’s vessel to symbolize irreparable judgment coming to 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 add unforgettable impact to the message, for the actions themselves were one form in which the message came.

g. The authority of the prophetic message

The prophets’ words throughout the Old Testament 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 Kings 14:18; 16:12, 34; 17:16; 22:38; 2 Kings 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.

Because the prophets’ words are words of God, the people have an obligation to believe and obey such words. To believe God is to believe his prophets (2 Chron. 20:20; 29:25; Hag. 1:12), for the words of the prophets are the very words of God (2 Chron. 29:25). 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 Kings 20:36; 2 Chron. 25:16; Isa. 30:12-14; cf. Deut. 18:19).

Because the words that claimed such divine authority were also recorded in the written Old Testament Scripture, these passages 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 a New Covenant situation) also to obey.

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

All the kinds of messages needed for a relationship between God and his people are included in the words of the prophets. In a wide variety of circumstances, prophets delivered to the people the words that God sent for each specific situation.

The message from God could include specific guidance about a particular course of action (1 Sam. 22:5). A frequent kind of guidance was to declare God’s choice of a king or another prophet, and to couple that declaration with the physical symbolism of anointing with oil to establish the person in such an office (1 Sam. 15:1; 16:13; 1 Kings 19:15-16; 2 Kings 9:3-10). In some cases, individuals even went to a prophet to inquire about guidance from God (1 Sam. 9:9; 1 Kings 22:7; 2 Kings 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 Chron. 24:19; Neh. 9:30; and frequently). In the context of such warnings, the prophets declared God's law to the people (2 Kings 17:13; Dan. 9:10; Zech. 7:12), which is consistent with the dual role of Moses in earlier days as both primary lawgiver and primary Old Testament prophet. The rebuking and warning activity of the prophets over many generations is summarized in 2 Kings 17:13 (RSV):

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).

Not all promises of blessings were conditioned upon the people's obedience, however, for extensive portions of the writing prophets predict that the Lord himself will act at a future day first to bring back his people from exile (Isa. 35:10; 51:11; Jer. 30:10), and then someday to establish a new covenant in which God would 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 New Testament (see Matt. 2:23; 4:14; etc.) and many not mentioned as well (see Luke 24:27). Ultimately, the prophets predict a renewed earth with the Lord himself reigning as king (Isa. 65:17; 66:22).

Finally, prophets interpret the events of history as they occur, telling the people God's perspective on what is happening. This is seen frequently in the writing prophets, and is also evident in the function of prophets as the official recorders of the history of the kings of Israel (1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 32:32). We should not think of this activity as a mere recording of facts that was separate from the prophets' frequent ability to understand God's purpose in and God's 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 actions. The prophets often gave God's interpretation of events in the historical narratives that we have, and we may therefore suppose that such divine interpretations of events also characterized the "rest of the acts of" various kings which are said to be recorded in the books of various prophets (2 Chron. 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 a personal relationship to his people.

i. 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 delivering songs which God had revealed for the people to use in worshipping him (1 Chron. 25:1-3; cf. 1 Sam. 10:5). Whenever such songs declared what God had done in the life of the people, and offered him praise for it, they would be another example of the prophet's task of giving God's interpretation of current or past history.

In a somewhat distinct role, prophets are sometimes seen as highly effective intercessors, praying for specific situations (1 Sam. 12:23; 1 Kings 13:6; 2 Kings 20:11; 2 Chron. 32:20; Jer. 27:18; 37:3; 42:4; Hab. 3:1; cf. Gen. 20:17; Ex. 32:11-14). Because prophets have a close

relationship with God, it is not surprising that he would hear their prayers and that they would be closely involved in this other component of a relationship between God and his people.

j. False prophets

It seems that there were always false prophets alongside the true—in fact, as we saw in Deuteronomy, God allowed false prophets in order to test the people’s hearts (Deut. 13:3). However, God also gave guidelines to help his people know which was which. False prophets prophesy for personal gain (Mic. 3:5, 11) and tell the people only what they want to hear (1 Kings 22:5-13; Jer. 5:31); their predictions do not come true (1 Kings 22:12, 28, 34-35; cf. Deut. 18:22); their “miraculous signs” are inferior or nonexistent (1 Kings 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 therefore they had no message from him. In fact, it is the definition of a false prophet that he is someone who has not received a message from God, but simply prophesies out of his own mind (Neh. 6:12; Jer. 14:14-15; 23:16-40; 27:15; 29:9; Ezek. 13:2-3; 22:28; cf. Deut. 18:20).

The New Testament counterparts to the false prophets are “false teachers” who speak “false words” and bring in “destructive heresies” to the church (2 Pet. 2:1-3, RSV).

k. Frequent opposition to the prophets

True prophets were sometimes received and followed by the people of Israel, 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 Chron. 36:16, RSV; cf. 2 Chron. 16:10; 25:16; Isa. 30:10; Jer. 11:21; 18:18; 20:2, 7-10; 26:8-11; 32:23; 36:20-26; 37:15-38:28; Amos 2:12; 7:12-13). Sometimes they were even killed (2 Chron. 24:20-21; Jer. 26:20-23). In the New Testament, Stephen summarized this by saying, “Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?” (Acts 7:52, RSV). In enduring such persecution patiently while being faithful messengers for God, these prophets also foreshadowed Christ himself and gave a pattern for later Christians to imitate (Luke 13:33; 1 Thess. 2:15; James 5:10).

l. Prophecy as a sign of God’s favor

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. When God gave prophecies, he still had a relationship with them. On the other hand, when prophecy ceased, it was a sign that God had withdrawn his favor from people who had strayed far from him (1 Sam. 3:1; 28:6; Lam. 2:9; Isa. 29:10; Hos. 9:7; Mic. 3:7). This helps us understand how the extensive outpouring of the gift of prophecy at the inception of the New Covenant was an indication of his abundant favor on the New Covenant church (Acts 2:16-18), and how the presence of a functioning gift of prophecy was a sign of God’s blessing on a church (1 Cor. 14:22).

4. PROPHECY AND PROPHETS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT WISDOM LITERATURE

Very little is said about prophets in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament—there are only four explicit references to prophecy (Ps. 51, title; 74:9; 105:15; Prov. 29:18), plus a reference to Moses as the “man of God” in the title to Psalm 90. The important role of prophecy in rebuking sin and encouraging obedience is emphasized in Proverbs 29:18 (RSV): “Where there is no prophecy [or “prophetic vision,” *chazōn*], 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 favor and presence: “We do not

see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long.”

5. PROPHECY AND PROPHETS IN THE GOSPELS

Many of the themes begun in the Old Testament continue into the New Testament, but they are further developed. We are reminded many times in the Gospels how the predictive prophecies of the Old Testament pointed to Christ and now find their fulfillment in him (Matt. 2:23; 4:14; 26:56; John 12:38; 17:12; 19:36; etc.). Jesus is seen as the “prophet like Moses” who was long awaited (John 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:2-24; cf. 7:37), but Jesus is not often called a prophet explicitly, and even when he is called a prophet, 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 any Old Testament prophet. 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 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, RSV; cf. Acts 3:18; 10:43; 26:22; Rom. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:10). Moreover, while the Old Testament prophets were messengers who declared, “Thus says the Lord,” Jesus is himself the author of the message, who has the authority to declare, “But I say to you” (Matt. 5:28, 32, 44). In fact, Hebrews 1:1-2 (RSV) makes explicit the contrast between many kinds of revelation that came through the Old Testament prophets and the far superior, single revelation that came “in these 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 Old Testament 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 accompany the coming of Christ, 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 known by their fruit and by their false doctrine (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22).

6. 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 New Testament 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, RSV). This was not an isolated event but one that signified the beginning of a much more widespread and frequent personal communication between God and his people, and in this way it also signified that there would be a deeper intimacy of relationship between God and all of his people as part of the rich blessings of the New Covenant.

Although several definitions have been given for the gift of prophecy, a fresh examination of the New Testament teaching on this gift shows 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 and explanation for this understanding of the gift of prophecy.

a. The New Testament apostles are the counterparts to Old Testament prophets

Many Old Testament prophets were able to speak and write words which had absolute divine authority and which were recorded in canonical Scripture. In the New Testament there were also people who spoke and wrote God's very words and had them recorded in Scripture; however, Jesus no longer calls them "prophets" but uses a new term, "apostles." The apostles are the New Testament counterparts to the primary, established prophets in the Old Testament (see 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Cor. 13:3; Gal. 1:8-9, 11-12; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:8, 15; 2 Pet. 3:2). It is the apostles, not the prophets, who have authority to write the words of New Testament 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 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; 3:2; etc.).

b. The meaning of the word "prophet" in the time of the New Testament

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 another term was appropriate to speak of a small group who would have authority to write New Testament Scripture. Another reason is that the Greek word *prophētēs* ("prophet") at the time of the New Testament generally did not have the sense "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 "spokesman." Titus 1:12 uses the word in this sense, where Paul quotes the pagan Greek poet Epimenides: "One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.'"

c. The apostles as "prophets"

Of course, the words "prophet" and "prophecy" were sometimes used of the apostles in contexts where the apostles were giving a "prophecy"—contexts that emphasized a special revelation from the Holy Spirit that was the basis of what they said (so Eph. 2:20; 3:5; and Rev. 1:3; 22:7), but this was not the ordinary terminology used for the apostles, nor did the terms "prophet" and "prophecy" in themselves imply divine authority for their speech or writing any more than Paul's calling himself a "teacher" (2 Tim. 1:11) implies that all "teachers" in the time of the New Testament 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 a limited group of prophets with them) who received the special revelation of the Gentile inclusion in the church (3:5). However, these verses have no direct relevance to the question of understanding the gift of prophecy as it functioned not in the "foundation" but in the rest of the church—in thousands of ordinary Christians in hundreds of local churches at the time of the New Testament. In the remaining New Testament passages, the words "prophet" and "prophecy" are used more commonly to refer to ordinary Christians who spoke not with absolute divine authority but simply to report something that God had brought to their minds.

d. The gift of prophecy in ordinary Christians: Indications that it did not carry the same authority as Scripture

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 toward Paul, but Paul disobeyed it. He never would have done this if this prophecy contained God's very words and had authority equal to Scripture.

Acts 21:10-11: Here 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 (21:32). The verb used by Agabus in 21:11, *paradidōmi*, requires the sense of voluntarily, consciously, deliberately giving over or handing over something to someone else—but that sense is not true with respect to the treatment of Paul by the Jews: They did not voluntarily hand Paul over to the Romans! The prediction was not far off, but it had inaccuracies in detail that would have called into question the validity of any Old Testament prophet.

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, RSV). If the Thessalonians had thought that prophecy equaled 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 from the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13; cf. 4:15). But when Paul tells them to “test everything,” it 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 is something that could never have been said of the words of an Old Testament prophet, or the authoritative teachings of a New Testament apostle.

1 Corinthians 14:29-38: More extensive evidence on New Testament 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, RSV), he suggests that they should listen carefully and sift the good from the bad, accepting some and rejecting the rest (for this is the implication of the Greek word *diakrinō*, here translated “weigh what is said”). We cannot imagine that an Old Testament prophet such as Isaiah would have said, “Listen to what I say and weigh what is said— sort the good from the bad, what you accept from what you should not accept”! If prophecy had absolute divine authority, it would be sin to do this. But here Paul commands that it be done, suggesting that New Testament prophecy did not have the authority of God’s very words.

Paul suggests that no one at Corinth, a church that had 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?”

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. These passages also warn that prophecies today should never be prefaced with, “Thus says the Lord,” for that is claiming an authority that New Testament prophets do not have.

e. A spontaneous “revelation” made prophecy different 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 could bring something spontaneously to mind so that the person prophesying would report 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, RSV). Here he uses the word “revelation” in a broader sense than the technical way theologians have used it to speak of the words of Scripture—but the New Testament elsewhere uses the terms “reveal” and “revelation” in this broader sense of communication from God which does not result in written Scripture or words equal to written Scripture in authority (see Matt. 11:27; Rom. 1:18; Eph. 1:17; Phil. 3:15).

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, RSV). 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 work for the conversion of unbelievers as well, Paul encourages this gift to be used when “outsiders or unbelievers enter” (1 Cor. 14:23, RSV).

Why did Paul value prophecy so highly (1 Cor. 14:1-5, 39-40)? Apparently because it functioned effectively in “building up the church” (1 Cor. 14:12, RSV), 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, RSV). Even though it must be tested and should never be received as authoritative “words of the Lord” like the words of 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 interpretation of people’s hearts and the events surrounding them. In this way it was a vivid example of the genuine personal relationship between God and his people.

However, Paul did not think that all that went under the title “prophecy” in the ancient world was like Christian prophecy. The Corinthians had previously been led astray to “dumb idols” (1 Cor. 12:2, RSV), and Paul was well aware of demonic spiritual power at work in pagan temples, for he said, “what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God” (1 Cor. 10:20, RSV). 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*.² Aune lumps true Christian prophecy, which is empowered by the Holy Spirit, together with pagan prophecy, which is not, and considers them together as one general religious phenomenon in the ancient world. Aune fails to consider the possibility that we can distinguish true from false prophecy on the basis of willingness to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). No New Testament writer would have adopted Aune’s perspective, nor should evangelical scholars today.

f. 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 New Testament 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 would call “Bible teaching” or “preaching” today.) The distinction between teaching and prophecy is thus quite clear: If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, containing interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in New Testament terms) a teaching. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a prophecy.

So prophecy understandably has less authority than “teaching,” and prophecies in the churches are always to be subject to the authoritative teaching of Scripture. Timothy

was not told to prophesy Paul's instructions in the church; he was to teach them (1 Tim. 4:11; 6:2). The Thessalonians were not told to hold firm to the traditions which were "prophesied" to them but to the traditions which they were "taught" by Paul (2 Thess. 2:15). Among the elders, therefore, were "those who labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17, RSV), and an elder was to be "an apt teacher" (1 Tim. 3:2, RSV; cf. Titus 1:9)— but nothing is said about any elders whose work was prophesying, nor is it ever said that an elder has to be "an apt prophet." James warned that those who teach, not those who prophesy, will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1). Contrary to the views of those who claim that "charismatic leaders" governed the earliest churches, the evidence of the New Testament shows that it was teachers (in the role of elders), not prophets, who gave leadership and direction to the early churches.

g. The cessationist position

In contrast to the view of the gift of prophecy presented above, an alternative position within evangelical scholarship, the "cessationist" position, holds that the gift of prophecy in New Testament churches always had Scripture-quality authority, had no errors, contained only the very words of God, and therefore ceased to exist in the church around the end of the first century, when the canon of the New Testament was complete. For a defense of cessationism, see the "Bibliography for Appendix 1" for books by R. Gaffin and O. P. Robertson, as well as the "cessationist" and "open but cautious" positions by R. Gaffin and R. Saucy in W. Grudem, ed., *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*.

7. PROPHECY AND PROPHETS IN REVELATION

Revelation 11 predicts two remarkable prophets who will appear on the earth for 1,260 days at a time that is yet future. They will have great power and no one will be able to stop them: "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, RSV). Yet there is also the prediction 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 therefore the book itself is the last great prophecy in the Bible. From chapter 4 onward it points toward the future, describing in sobering yet magnificent language both judgments and blessings God has ordained for a time yet to come. It closes with a reminder that these 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 throughout the rest of the Bible, are the very words of God, and must not be tampered with (Rev. 22:18-19).

For Further Reading

On Apostles

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