

Jesus the Prophet, Part 1

As the Hebrew author accurately describes, in Old Testament times God talked to the prophets in various manners (Hebrews 1:1). It is our goal in this study to try and look at the overall picture of the prophets in the Old Testament. This will help us to have a better framework to understand Jesus as a Prophet

We will study the two main terms used to describe prophets in the Old Testament:

Seer

This word describes the prophets ability to see things. One way to view prophets then is that they are people who are able to see with more than just their eyes. They are able to see what is unseen. They are able to look at things that they should not be able to look at, because the Spirit of God grants it to them. The best example of this is in 1 Samuel 9:9. We see that seer is used in conjunction with the word prophet:

(Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he said, "Come, let us go to the seer," for today's "prophet" was formerly called a seer.)

We see here that a Seer was someone who could inquire of God and receive an answer. As we read further in the account of 1 Samuel 9 and 10 we see the vision of the seer (Read both chapters for the full context of what Samuel does here). In this account, Saul is looking for his lost donkeys. Samuel is able to "see" multiple things that could only be explained by God showing Him:

1. What had already happened to the donkeys (9:19-20)
2. God has chosen him to be king (10:1)
3. Two men near Rachel's tomb and what they would say (10:2)
4. Three men meeting him at the Oak of Tabor (10:3-4)
5. The meeting with the prophets at Gibeath-elohim and the Spirit of the Lord coming upon Saul (10:5-7)

The predictions show that Samuel was able to see things that others could not. He was even able to see how future events would unfold. This power could only come from God. So when all these things came to pass (1 Samuel 10:9), the only explanation was that Samuel spoke for God. As such, he could pass on messages that God needed His people to hear. He should be listened to to find out God's will. That's why people went to inquire of God through such a man (1 Samuel 9:9).

Prophet

The term prophet is the one we are most familiar with and use most commonly today. It is one who is inspired. They have the gift of God's spirit, and they speak on behalf of God to tell mankind His message. The best illustration that we have of this is in the book of Exodus. In Exodus 7, God describes what a prophet is, but that description is given in the terms of man:

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land.’ (v. 1-3a)”

Here we see that a prophet is the official spokesperson. When God first tasked Moses with going before Pharaoh, Moses was afraid that he was not eloquent enough to speak. God responds that his brother Aaron could speak on his behalf. Now we see that this is the relationship that God has with the prophets. Moses has a message of foretelling and judgement for Pharaoh. Yet he will not be speaking the message to Pharaoh directly. Instead he will give that message to Aaron, and Aaron will go before Pharaoh and tell him what Moses has to say.

God's prophets acted on His behalf the same way. In Deuteronomy 18:15-22, we are told that God will raise up prophets like Moses. The Israelites actually ask for there to be prophets, because they were too terrified of the Lord's presence in Horeb. They did not want to be in direct contact with Him anymore (v. 16). So God was going to send prophets as the go between. And just like Aaron and Moses, God would give the words that needed to be said to the prophets, and they would be His mouthpiece (v. 18) Because they were not speaking on their own behalf, but on behalf of the Lord, God would bring judgment on those who refused to listen to their message (v. 19).

The Characteristics of the Prophets

There are quite a few differences among the prophets. Some of them spoke plainly. Some were given apocalyptic visions. Others had their lives used as a metaphor for the message God wanted to portray. Despite the various methods, there are some common characteristics that we can see among the prophets.

They taught God's will for the people

God did not leave His people guessing on what they were expected to do. Starting with Moses, he laid out very specifically how the Israelites needed to live and how to please God. In Psalm 19, David talks about how great it is that he has the word of God because it is able to guide His path. God used the prophets so that His people knew how to conduct themselves.

They brought a message of judgment

When the prophets speak, they always warn about judgment. From the beginning, God knew that his people would have a tendency to wander. So in the Law he let them know of the curses that would come if they refused to follow His Law (Deut 28:15-68). However, God did not just have the prophets talk about the need for repentance in the future. Much of the prophetic letters that we see in the Old Testament are the prophets trying to convince people that judgment is coming upon them. They preach primarily to Judah and to Israel, but God also sends His prophets to the other nations that are in sin. He calls on these people to repent. They have the word of God and they know how to live according to it. Instead they choose to follow idols and serve themselves. God will only allow the disobedience to continue for so long, and then His judgment will come.

They brought a message of repentance

In God's message of judgment, He also sends a call out to His people to repent. Sometimes if they repent the judgment of God will not come. Other times their repentance may be too late, but will ward off further judgment. God also uses judgment to bring about repentance. As painful as the judgment that comes in this life may be, God wants His people to repent before the final judgment. In all these instances, the prophets of God are preaching a very simple message: repent of your sins and turn back towards God.

Their message was often rejected

As noted above, God constantly warned His people of judgment. He also urged them to repent and forestall the judgment. And yet we see in scripture that their message was rejected repeatedly. In particular we see the evil kings of Israel and Judah refused to listen to the prophets. One king was frustrated by having the prophet Micaiah come before him because "he would not prophesy good, but evil (1 Kings 22:18)." The kings and the people did not want to hear the word of the Lord. Instead they wanted prophets that would prophesy good news for them, regardless of whether it was true. As God said in Jeremiah 5:31, the prophets prophesied falsely, and the people loved to have it so. They refused to listen to God. Furthermore they grew to despise and then to persecute the prophets of God. Here's what Hebrews 11:32-38 says about them:

"And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned,

they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

Questions:

1. What is a seer?
2. Why was that term used to describe a prophet?
3. How did Samuel’s actions toward Saul show that Seer was an accurate description?
4. What does the term prophet indicate?
5. Describe the different relationships that God used to describe Pharaoh, Aaron and Moses. How does this help us to better understand prophets?
6. According to Deuteronomy 18, why did God use prophets to communicate with the Israelites?
7. Find an example of a prophet teaching God’s will to the people.
8. Find an example of a prophet warning of an upcoming judgment
9. Find an example of a prophet encouraging his listeners to repent
10. Find an example of a prophet being rejected