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The Prophets in the Old Testament

HOWARD R. MACY

The purpose of this essay is to lay a foundation for discussion of the prophetic role as it relates to Christ. In order to do this, I intend in the larger part of these remarks to give a fundamental outline of the character of the prophet in the Old Testament. But I also want to devote some time to what I consider to be the facts about the New Testament view of Christ as prophet as well as to a few of my own observations from an Old Testament perspective.

The Character of the Prophets

The Old Testament prophets stand out as one of the most interesting and most studied features in Israel's great literature. Some study the prophets for their religious and ethical insights; others use them to schedule the end of the world; still others are captivated by the biographical puzzle they offer or by the great beauty of their literary expression. Ironically, in spite of all the study, a clear picture of the Old Testament prophets still eludes us. Were the prophets an official part of the Israelite cultus or not? Were they ecstatic or not? If so, what does that mean? Did they belong to prophetic bands, or were they independent? How were their prophecies composed and preserved? These and several other questions remain problematic, because of the paucity of evidence and the recognized variety among the prophets.

Although the debate over such questions may be important to progress in Old Testament studies, it is not essential to our discussion and might even distract us. We need, instead, a fundamental outline of the role and mission of the prophet. Here the Old Testament picture is quite clear.

Briefly, the prophet is one who is sent to proclaim the message of the Lord. He is called, commissioned as a messenger, and sent to Israel as a mediator of the divine word. As we shall see, however, the prophet is not a prototype of the Western Union boy.

To say that the prophet was called is to say that the prophet was set apart in a special way, that he was given a charismatic role. This distinguishes the prophet from the others in the triad of offices in Hebrew society; that is, from priest and king. The priesthood was clearly an inherited office, and kingship tended to be inherited, particularly in Judah. (Some feel that the Northern Kingdom preserved the ideal of kingship as a charismatic office, an ideal closer to that of the judge of the pre-monarchical times.) To say that the prophet was called also distinguishes him from one who would choose and train for a profession. The prophet did not, in his youth, collaborate with a vocational guidance counselor to mark out his occupational preferences and to choose the appropriate schools for his training. He did not choose; he was chosen. That is not to say that the prophet may not, in some instances, have had some training. Surely Elisha, for example, learned a great deal from his mentor Elijah, and it may well be that certain traditions common to the prophets were carried by the prophetic bands, "the sons of the prophets."

The records we have from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (chapters 1-3) describe the impelling urgency of the prophetic call. The prophets' own descriptions are, of course, better than any paraphrase:

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord Yahweh seated on a high throne, his train filled the sanctuary above him stood seraphs, each one with six wings: two to cover its face, two to cover its feet and two for flying. And they cried out one to another in this way, 'Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Sabaoth. His glory fills the whole earth.'

The foundations of the threshold shook with the voice of the one who cried out, and the Temple was filled with smoke. I said:
What a wretched state I am in! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have looked at the King, Yahweh Sabaoth.

Then one of the seraphs flew to me holding in his hand a live coal which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. With this he touched my mouth and said: 'See now, this has touched your lips, your sin is taken away, your iniquity is purged.'

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying: 'Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?' I answered, 'Here I am, send me'. (Isa. 6:1-8; all biblical quotations are from JB)

The word of Yahweh was addressed to me, saying: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; I have appointed you as prophet to the nations'. I said, 'Ah, Lord Yahweh; look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child!'

But Yahweh replied, 'Do not say, “I am a child”. Go now to those to whom I send you and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you -- it is Yahweh who speaks!'

Then Yahweh put out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me: 'There! I am putting my words into your mouth. Look, today I am setting you over nations and over kingdoms, to tear up and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.' (Jer. 1:4-10)

(From the "Confessions" of Jeremiah:)

You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me: you were the stronger. I am a daily laughing-stock, everybody’s butt.

Each time I speak the word, I have to howl and proclaim: ‘Violence and ruin!’ The word of Yahweh has meant for me insult, derision, all day long. I used to say, ‘I will not think about him, I will not speak in his name any more’. Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not bear it. (Jer. 20:7-9)

Thus God called, urged, perhaps even forced the prophet to a special office and task. Yet this is not distinguishing enough, for Abraham, Moses, the judges, and others were called as well.

More specifically, the prophet was commissioned as a messenger from God. He was Yahweh’s special spokesman. The need for such a spokesman increased as other divine representatives, the king and the priests, became more derelict in their duty.

One way the Old Testament expresses the prophet’s commission is to point out that the true prophet has been present at and sent from the divine council. We have already seen a brief picture of the council in action in Isaiah’s call, as Yahweh consulted with the heavenly beings around him: “Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?” Isaiah responded willingly, “Here I am, send me.”

The background of Isaiah’s call would not be so clear, however, if we did not have a fuller picture of the divine council elsewhere in the Old Testament and in the literature of the ancient Near East. Among other Old Testament references, two from the prophets themselves will suffice.

The first example arises from a story about Micaiah, a ninth-century Hebrew prophet. It seems that King Ahab of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah were trying to decide whether they should go to war with the Aramaeans to reclaim some lost territory. Jehoshaphat insisted that they seek a word
he said “I will trick him”. “How?” Yahweh asked. He replied, “I will go and become a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets”. “You shall trick him,” Yahweh said “you shall succeed. Go and do it.” Now see how Yahweh has put a lying spirit into the mouths of all your prophets here. But Yahweh has pronounced disaster on you.”

(1 Kings 22:15-23)

Here we have a clear picture of the divine council. In addition we see that Micaiah claimed authenticity for his message because he was in the council and saw what actually happened.

Harsh words from Jeremiah’s tract against the false prophets illustrate further the importance of the prophet’s presence at the council:

‘Yahweh Sabaoth says this: Do not listen to what those prophets say: they are deluding you, they retail visions of their own, and not what comes from the mouth of Yahweh; to those who reject the word of Yahweh they say, “Peace will be yours”, and to those who follow the dictates of a hardened heart, “No misfortune will touch you”.

(But who has been present at the council of Yahweh? Who has seen it and heard his word? Who has paid attention to his word in order to proclaim it?) …

‘I have not sent those prophets, yet they are running; I have not spoken to them, yet they are prophesying. Have they been present at my council? If so, let them proclaim my words to my people and turn them from their evil way and from the wickedness of their deeds!”

(Jer. 23:16-18, 51-22)

Thus do the experiences of Isaiah, Micaiah, and Jeremiah picture the prophet as a messenger sent from the divine council. Several other features of the prophets also point to the messen-
ger role. Most of these messenger earmarks are brief, but often repeated, words or phrases; but their significance is clear, particularly when viewed in light of the wider literature of the Old Testament and of the ancient Near East. A messenger, for example, is typically sent (Hebrew shalach); we find this term commonly applied to the prophets. Another phrase of like significance is God’s instruction to the prophet: “Go and say…” — clearly a formula of instruction to messengers in the ancient Near East, as we know from Ugaritic texts, for example. Frequent phrases which the prophets use to identify the sender of the message include: “Hear the word of the Lord,” “Thus says the Lord” (usually at the beginning of an oracle), and “says the Lord” (more commonly at the end of an oracle). These were formulas used by messengers in the ancient Near East.

We see, then, that even though the prophets did not often claim the title “messenger” as such, their understanding of their mission and their use of standard messenger formulas show clearly that they were indeed messenger figures.

In our culture, to say that one is a messenger does not suggest a very significant role. Yet the Hebrew prophet as messenger was very significant indeed. Perhaps we should view him less as a Western Union boy and more as an ambassador, because a messenger was to be accorded the authority and respect properly due his master. 2 Samuel 10, for example, recounts the story of how the Ammonites fell into David’s disfavor. David sent his messengers to Ammon to offer condolences on the death of the Ammonite king, probably an ally. But the Ammonites suspected espionage. Therefore, rather than showing proper respect, they took the messengers, shaved off half of each of their beards (a beard was a thing of pride for these people), and cut off half of their clothes — lengthwise. In this condition they were sent home very much embarrassed, and the former good relations between Israel and Ammon turned sour. Similar treatment of a modern ambassador would undoubtedly bring similar results.

The prophet was a messenger, a mediator of the divine word. Sometimes he was consulted for that word; sometimes he brought it without invitation. Sometimes he spoke or sang the message; sometimes he lived it through symbolic action. Whatever the circumstances, however, when the prophet mediated God’s message, he was invested with power — precisely because it was the divine word he carried. The word he spoke was a creative word, a powerful word. The word could bring into being and could destroy. That is why it was possible for Jeremiah to be told:

“There! I am putting my words into your mouth. Look, today I am setting you over nations and over kingdoms, to tear up and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jer. 1:9-10)

That is also why a prophet such as Amos could be considered genuinely treasonous when he would speak a word of doom against the state. This was not simply religious ranting; it was a creative, powerful word.

I think it is important to emphasize here that the prophet did not have authority or power because of his office. He had authority only when he had a genuine word from Yahweh. The prophet’s message was not important because he was a prophet. Rather, it was the importance of the message itself which distinguished the prophet as an authoritative mediator. Deut. 18:20 carries a harsh legal warning about the prophet with a counterfeit message: “The prophet who presumes to say in my name a thing I have not commanded him to say, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.”

The content of the prophetic message speaks well by itself; but before quoting characteristic passages from Jeremiah and Amos, let me comment briefly on the general nature of the prophetic message.

Contrary to popular ideas about prophecy, the message of the Old Testament prophets was not basically predictive; that is, it was not predictive for its own sake. It did not intend to satisfy the curiosity of futurologists, astrologers, and the like. The effective power of the predictions which were made hinged on the response of the hearers. Promise and threat were combined.

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tingest; on the people’s behavior. Even though the prophetic word was powerful and was bringing into effect its content, that word could be rescinded.

The content of the message was multiform. Sometimes it was the good news of promise, blessing, victory, or consolation. Sometimes it was the bad news of doom, couched in a lament, a woe oracle, or an indictment. If the prophet brought bad news more often than not, I think it was basically because the prophet came with a warning, a corrective word of God when the other channels of God’s revelation in Israel — that is, priest and king — became clogged.

Scholars used to talk about the prophets as great innovators of “ethical monotheism.” It is clear now that the prophets did not innovate very much, but instead spoke out of Israel’s ancient tradition. They explicitly recalled the mighty acts of God on Israel’s behalf and reminded Israel of her obligations under the ancient covenant. They charged Israel with breaking covenant — the covenant which was the very constitution of Israel as a people. Modern scholars are more inclined to accept the prophets’ charges at face value, because they are recognizing increasingly the antiquity of law in Israel and because the prophetic indictment is, in many cases, a legal form which does in fact presuppose an already existing law or treaty. Thus the prophets were not innovating but harking back to the past.

Not only did the prophets hark back to the past, but they were calling Israel back to her own past — to her faithfulness and loyalty to Yahweh. They were calling Israel to return to God, to repent of her apostasy.

Some of these characteristics of the prophetic message, as well as some of the many crimes of Israel’s disloyalty, can be seen by reading selections from the prophets:

Yes, I will stretch my hand over those living in this land — it is Yahweh who speaks. For all, least no less than greatest, all are out for dishonest gain; prophet no less than priest, all practice fraud.

They dress my people’s wound without concern; “Peace! Peace!” they say, but there is no peace. They should be ashamed of their abominable deeds. But not they! They feel no shame, they have forgotten how to blush, And so as others fall, they too shall fall; they shall be thrown down when I come to deal with them

— says Yahweh.

Yahweh says this: Put yourselves on the ways of long ago, inquire about the ancient paths: which was the good way? Take it then, and you shall find rest. Instead they have said, “We will not take it”. I posted look-outs on their behalf; Listen to the sound of the trumpet! But they answered, “We will not listen”. Then hear, you nations, and know, assembly, what I will do to them. Hear, earth! I am bringing a disaster on this people: It is the fruit of their apostasy, since they have not listened to my words and, as for my Law, they have rejected that. What do I care about incense imported from Sheba, or fragrant cane from a distant country? Your holocausts are not acceptable, your sacrifices do not please me.” (Jer. 5:12-20)

“...And I was thinking: How I wanted to rank you with my sons, and give you a country of delights, the fairest heritage of all the nations! I had thought you would call me: My father, and would never cease to follow me. But like a woman betraying her lover,
the House of Israel has betrayed me — it is Yahweh who speaks.”

A noise is heard on the bare heights: the weeping and entreaty of the sons of Israel, because they have gone so wildly awry, and forgotten Yahweh their God.

“Come back, disloyal sons, I want to heal your disloyalty.” (Jer. 3:19-22)

“Come back, disloyal Israel — it is Yahweh who speaks — I shall frown on you no more, since I am merciful — it is Yahweh who speaks. I shall not keep my resentment for ever.

Trouble for those who turn justice into wormwood, throwing integrity to the ground; who hate the man dispensing justice at the city gate and detest those who speak with honesty. Well then, since you have trampled on the poor man, extorting lies on his wheat — those houses you have built of dressed stone, you will never live in them; and those precious vineyards you have planted, you will never drink their wine.

For I know that your crimes are many, and your sins enormous: persecutors of the virtuous, blackmailers, turning away the needy at the city gate. No wonder the prudent man keeps silent, the times are so evil.

Seek good and not evil so that you may live, and that Yahweh, God of Sabaoth, may really be with you.

maintain justice at the city gate, and it may be that Yahweh, God of Sabaoth, will take pity on the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:7-15)

Perhaps we can best summarize briefly the nature of Old Testament prophecy by returning to our original definition. The prophet is one who is called, commissioned as a messenger, and sent as a mediator of the divine word. And we should add: The purpose of the creative divine word was to bring the people into loyalty to God.

WAS CHRIST A PROPHET?

With this background of Old Testament prophecy, let us turn briefly to the question of Christ as prophet as seen in the New Testament. We may as well begin by setting out the apparent evidence as clearly as possible.

The fact is that it is difficult to assess to what degree Christ is considered a prophet in the New Testament. Clearly, Jesus was often acclaimed as a prophet by the crowds and others who were trying to decide who he was. In a conversation recorded in the Gospels, Jesus asked his disciples who people say he is. They replied, “John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the ancient prophets come back to life.” Jesus asked further who the disciples say he is. They responded, “You are the Christ” (e.g., Lk. 9:18-20). John 7:40 records that people were debating whether Jesus was a prophet, or the Christ, or neither.

Luke 21 records the travel talk of the resurrected Jesus and two disheartened disciples. During the conversation, Cleopas told the stranger that Jesus had proved himself to be a great prophet. Yet, almost as if to establish a contrast, he added, “We had hoped he would be the one to set Israel free.” In the earliest Christian community, Jesus was apparently identified for a time as the great prophet who was to follow Moses. In the sermons of Peter (Acts 3:19-24) and Stephen (Acts 7:37), both men referred to Jesus with the prophecy in Deut. 18:15, 18, about Moses’ great prophetic successor.
Thus there are limited indications that the disciples thought Jesus to be a prophet, though they at times seemed to set Jesus as the Christ over against his being a prophet.

The Gospel writers did not anywhere, to my knowledge, explicitly identify Jesus as a prophet. And there is room to question whether Jesus ever intended that the title of prophet should be applied to him. Jesus did not seem to claim the title directly anywhere, and there are only three instances in which he might have done so indirectly.

The first of these is when Jesus stood in the synagogue and read from Isa. 61:1-2:

The spirit of the Lord has given to me,
for he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and to the blind new sight,
to set the downtrodden free,
to proclaim the Lord's year of favour. (Lk. 4:18-19)

Whether Jesus' proclamation that these words were fulfilled at that time indicated a messianic and/or a prophetic role might be debatable.

The second possible indirect claim to the title prophet followed shortly, as Jesus proclaimed, "No prophet is ever accepted in his own country" (Lk. 4:24, cf. Matt. 13:57).

The third possible reference is also oblique. In Lk. 13:33, Jesus, ignoring pleas that he ought to flee for his life, noted that "It would not be right for a prophet to die outside Jerusalem."

If Jesus did indeed claim to be a prophet, we surely must see it in a context similar to Jesus' meaning when he spoke of John the Baptist as a prophet, yet as much more than a prophet (Matt. 11:9).

This is the direct evidence as we have it, and to my mind it isn't very much. Yet it is easy to see how Jesus' contemporaries and we ourselves might compare him to one of the great prophets. Cleopas, as you remember, had said that Jesus had proved himself to be a mighty prophet in both speech and action.

Surely Jesus' mighty acts — healing, casting out demons, feeding crowds, calming storms — surely these established his authority. In some instances mighty acts were associated with Old Testament prophets and were considered authenticating. Elijah and Elisha are probably most fully known in this regard. Thus Jesus' actions could authenticate him as a prophet in the eyes of many, but the character of those acts probably pointed to an authority beyond that of a prophet.

In his speaking, Jesus was clearly reminiscent of the great Hebrew prophets. Surely he knew them thoroughly. We find in Jesus' teaching clear thematic parallels to the prophets of your land, and in some cases, near quotations. Jesus pointed out, as had Amos and Isaiah, that God requires action, not pious forms. He condemned those who were putting down the widow and the poor. In his sharp indictments against the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus in Jerusalem could easily be mistaken for Amos in Samaria centuries before.

Not only does Jesus' speech remind us of the ancient prophets; his claim was also similar to theirs. He clearly indicated (repeatedly in the Gospel of John) that he was sent and that he was speaking the word of the divine sender (cf. Jn. 7:16-19; 12:49-50; 14:24 and passim).

Yet to cite these parallels is not enough, for Jesus broke the bounds of the prophetic office. In many instances, it seems that Jesus was acting and speaking on his own authority, not with the derived authority of the messenger. Some of the flavor of this comes through in the Sermon on the Mount with the contrast: "You have heard it said, ... but I tell you ...." Or we can see the same statement of authority when Jesus set aside Jewish institutions such as fasting, sabbath observance, laws of separateness, and ceremonial cleanliness. This common assertion of Jesus' authority stands in sharp contrast to the stamp of authority absolutely essential to the prophetic messenger: "Thus says the Lord."

Although Jesus spoke of being sent, he described his role in a different way than the prophets would. Let's read, for example, John 12:44-50:
Jesus declared publicly:

'Whoever believes in me believes not in me,
but in the one who sent me,
and whoever sees me, sees the one who sent me.
I, the light, have come into the world,
so that whoever believes in me
need not stay in the dark any more.
If anyone hears my words and does not keep them
faithfully,
it is not I who shall condemn him,
since I have come not to condemn the world,
but to save the world:
he who rejects me and refuses my words
has his judge already;
the word itself that I have spoken
will be his judge on the last day,
For what I have spoken does not come from myself;
no, what I was to say, what I had to speak,
was commanded by the Father who sent me,
and I know that his commands mean eternal life.
And therefore what the Father has told me
is what I speak.'

Jesus also related a parable which may indicate that his self-understanding was beyond that of the prophetic office. In Luke 20:9-19 he described the struggle of a vineyard owner with his tenants. After having sent servants on three different occasions to collect his share of the product and each time failing, the owner sent his son. The tenants killed the son and became subject to punishment. The scribes and chief priests understood this parable, apparently referring to the prophets and Jesus, well enough to be infuriated and anxious to seize Jesus.

It seems to me — and I admit that this is mainly a subjective interpretation — that Jesus pointed in a different direction than did the Old Testament prophets. The prophets were calling the people back to faithfulness, back to the ancient covenant, back to the old and intended order established by Yahweh. Jesus, in contrast, was calling people forward. He

was recruiting for the kingdom of God which was impinging on them. Though Jesus, too, called for repentance, he was impelling people forward into the new order. And, we should add, he presented himself as an important mediator of the new order.

Jesus in a sense was a prophet, but also much more than a prophet. He was both the herald and the hero of the New Age.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Finally, I would like to make a brief comment about how I feel the Old Testament prophets address us today. Much of what the prophets wrote, concerning social justice and true piety, remains so fresh that it still shocks and stings; many such points could be offered here. Instead, I want to share with you how the understanding of the prophetic role in Israel has deepened my own understanding of ministry in the modern world. The basic concept is this: One does not go unless he is sent. One does not speak unless he is spoken to. On the smaller scale, I have come to appreciate more fully the Quaker ideal about 'speaking in meeting.' The presence of a creative, powerful word depends wholly on our speaking as we are impelled to by God. When we take things into our own hands, we are in a real sense uttering a false message. If we are careful in the matter of heeding the divine word, then we can speak a creative, fresh word in the Society of Friends and in society at large. We can avoid addressing people out of the shallowness of religious fads or conventions of whatever sort. The word we speak must be alive and impelling. This is not a criticism of careful preparation and study. Prophetic speech need not be unrefined or unlearned, but it had better be genuine. Authentic, powerful ministry depends on authentic leading, on having been in God's presence.