



The Story Of Salvation
NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010
Andrew Klynsmith and Hendrik Schoemaker

True and False Prophets.

The Prophet

In the Hebrew Bible there are seventeen books which are called the Latter Prophets. The term ‘latter’ speaks primarily of their place in the canon rather than of their chronological position. These prophets are sometimes called the writing prophets because their authors wrote or recorded their utterances. There were many other prophets who are mentioned in the Old Testament, but who left no literary remains, like Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, etc.¹ Mostly because of their size, the Latter Prophets are subdivided into the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), and the twelve Minor Prophets, whose writings could all be included in one large scroll, “the Twelve-Prophet Book”. Daniel, usually viewed as one of the Major Prophets in the English Bible, actually appears in the third division of the Hebrew Canon called “the Writings.” As a mouthpiece or spokesman for God, the prophet’s primary duty was to speak forth God’s message to God’s people in the historical context of what was happening among God’s people. The broadest meaning is that of forthtelling; the narrower meaning is that of foretelling. In the process of proclaiming God’s message, the prophet would sometimes reveal that which pertained to the future, but, contrary to popular opinion, this was only a small part of the prophet’s message. Forthtelling involved insight into the will of God; it was exhortative, challenging men to obey. On the other hand, foretelling entailed foresight into the plan of God; it was predictive, either encouraging the righteous in view of God’s promises or warning in view of coming judgment. So the prophet was the divinely chosen spokesman who, having received God’s message proclaimed it in oral, visual, or written form to the people. For this reason, a common formula used by the prophets was, “Thus says the Lord.”²

The single most important passage in the Torah concerning the Prophets is found in Deuteronomy 18:9–22, which needs to be closely looked at.

So how are God’s people to know and discern what God is going to do? There is a clear answer to that. God will raise up a prophet like Moses. At Mount Horeb, when God revealed himself to Moses, Israel asked for a prophetic mediator (Deut 5:22–28; 18:16). He was the mediator of God’s law when God first announced it and thus is a paradigm

¹ A comprehensive list of the non-literary prophets can be found in Ian D. Pennicook’s *The Story of the Acts of God*, (Blackwood: New Creation Publication, 1994), p. 83.

² J. Hampton Keathley, III, [The Prophets of Israel Viewed as a Whole](http://bible.org/seriespage/major-prophets), (<http://bible.org/seriespage/major-prophets>)

for subsequent prophets. Such mediation in the subsequent history of Israel led to false prophets. The only acceptable prophet in Israel is the person that God himself raises up to communicate his words to his people. This prophet will be a fellow Israelite, one who will be thoroughly acquainted with all the traditions and claims of Israel's covenant and its history. The text seems to assume a single prophet in time to come, though it is possible in the perspective of Deuteronomy that the verse envisions a succession of prophets, each of whom re-enacts the role of Moses, something like the "apostolic succession" in the New Testament,

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 that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets" (2 Kings 17:13).

God's people are to heed the prophet, [especially THE Prophet, Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 3:22–23)]. This crucial imperative suggests that the prophet shall be one who issues covenant requirements, statutes, and ordinances. That is, the prophet is the one who will assure that Israel remains completely loyal to covenant and summons Israel to obedience.³

According to Jeremiah the hallmark of the true prophet was that he had stood before the Lord of Glory in the midst of his deliberative council of angels,

For who has stood in the council of the LORD
so as to see and to hear his word?

Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it? (Jer 23:18).

As stated above such a prophet was Moses. He is the exemplary prophet *par excellence* (paradigm for prophet), who was entrusted with all God's house and God spoke with him face to face—clearly (Num 12:7–8; Deut 34:10–12). The Spirit of God or the Spirit of Wisdom was upon him (Num 11:17; Deut 34:9). He only proclaimed what the Lord had commanded him to say (Deut 18:18; 1:3; 5:7; cf 1 Kings 22:14).

God's words to Jeremiah were a joy and the delight of his heart (Jer 15:16). To announce the Day of the Lord with its immeasurable blessings would be rapture. To be a prophet can also be lonely and miserable. It is a high calling but also brings bitterness (Rev 10:9–10). To announce the Day of the Lord would also bring unspeakable woe and would be distasteful to him and repulsive to others.

Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!

Why do you want the day of the LORD?

It is darkness, not light;

as if someone fled from a lion,

and was met by a bear;

or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,

and was bitten by a snake.

Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it? (Am 5:18–20)

³ Brueggemann, Walter, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), pp. 194–195.

The prophets were persecuted and were lonely figures. Jeremiah suffered insults (Jer 15:15) and is carried off to Egypt against his will (Jer 43:1–7). Hosea was dismissed as a fool or a madman (Hos 9:7). Amos is rejected as a prophet for hire and told to go back where he came from (Am 7:12). Isaiah, according to tradition, had his life ended brutally. Jesus said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” (Lk 13:34). The prophets alienate the wicked as well as the pious, the cynics as well as the believers, the priests and the princes, the judges and the false prophets. The prophet’s duty is to speak to the people, “whether they hear or refuse to hear” (Ezek 33:6–7). His main vocation is “to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (Mic 3:8), to let the people know that it is “evil and bitter...to forsake the LORD your God” (Jer 2:19), and to call upon them to repent, but they do not (Jer 25:4–7).

And though the LORD persistently sent you all his servants the prophets, you have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear when they said, “Turn now, everyone of you, from your evil way and wicked doings, and you will remain upon the land that the LORD has given to you and your ancestors from of old and forever; do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, and do not provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm.” Yet you did not listen to me, says the LORD, and so you have provoked me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm (Jer 25:4–7).

The word of judgment of God through the mouth of the prophet seems sometimes horrendous. Ezekiel speaks for all the prophets when he says,

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? (Ezek 18:23)

Every word of judgment is in itself an exhortation to repentance. Almost every prophet brings words of comfort, promise and hope of reconciliation along with words of condemnation. He begins with a message of doom; he concludes with a message of hope. His essential task is to declare the word of God to the here and now; to disclose the future in order to illuminate what is involved in the present.⁴

The prophet must bear testimony that the word of judgment he speaks is a divine word. He is the mouthpiece of God. The true prophet only speaks what he has heard himself from God. In speaking, the prophet reveals God. This is the marvel of a prophet’s work: in his words, the invisible God becomes audible. Divine power bursts in the words. The authority of the prophet is in the Presence his words reveal. The prophet is a witness, and his words a testimony – to God’s power and judgment, to God’s justice and mercy (Ex 34:6–7).⁵

There are two staggering facts in the life of the prophets and are his lot in life. On the one hand he is chosen by God, on the other hand rejected by his fellow men. The word of God so clear to him is unintelligible to them (Isa 28:9–13). What baffles the prophet is the difference between the power and impact of God and the immense indifference, unyieldingness, sluggishness and inertia of the human heart. God’s thunderous voice is shaking heaven and earth and man does not hear the faintest sound. The Lord roars like a lion (Amos 3:8). His word is like fire, like a hammer which breaks a rock in pieces (Jer 23:29) and the people go about unmoved, undisturbed, unaware. The prophet is scorched

⁴ Heschel, Abraham J., *The Prophets*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 12.

⁵ Heschel, p. 22.

by the word of God— Jeremiah says, “within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones” (Jer 20:9) but the hearts of the people are asbestos, fireproof (Jer 20:7–8). They say to the prophets, “Do not prophecy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophecy illusions...let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 30:10–11). How is it possible not to see the majesty of the Lord (Isa 26:10), not to sense that the whole earth is full of His glory (Isa 6:3), not to understand God’s sign in the happenings of history? Men’s heart is so hard,

O LORD, your hand is lifted up,
but they do not see it (Isa 26:11)

God’s cry echoes throughout Israel’s history “Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always” (Deut 5:29). But God’s people are called foolish, senseless, they have eyes and do not see, ears but do not hear, disobey the instructions of the Lord, are stubborn and silly as a dove.⁶ They are destroyed for lack of knowledge (Hos 4:6). The Lord set watchmen over the people, saying: “Give heed to the sound of the trumpet!” But they said, “We will not give heed” (Jer 6:17). How abysmal stubbornness can be. Man raises up his own despots – idols, lies, perversions; he labours to prepare his own judgments leading to disaster. Is he insane?⁷

False prophets.

Does “thus says the LORD” guarantee a true prophet from a false one? How do God’s people know that it is God’s word to them? The false prophet gave the people the words they wanted rather than the truth they needed. The true criterion of prophecy is the truth.

An appalling and horrible thing
has happened in the land:
the prophets prophesy falsely,
and the priests rule as the prophets direct;
my people love to have it so,
but what will you do when the end comes? (Jer 5:30–31)

The problem of false prophecy was a real one in Israel, especially towards the end of the monarchy. Examples are Micaiah versus about 400 prophets in 1 Kings 22 and Jeremiah, who prophesied doom versus Hananiah who prophesied peace in Jeremiah chapters 27–29. In 1 Kings 22 the king of Israel had 400 prophets in paid employment who told the king what he wanted to hear, i.e. to go into battle. In contrast Micaiah had seen and heard the deliberations in the heavenly court (1 Kings 22:19–22) and was well aware of the Lord’s intentions and predicted failure in battle.

Back to Deuteronomy 18

Two kinds of false prophets are identified in verse 20,

But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.

⁶ Deut 29:4; Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2; Isa 43:8; 30:9; Hos 4:16; 7:11.

⁷ Heschel, pp. 12, 18, 188-190.

Those who claim to have a message from God, i.e. those who speak falsely in the name of the Lord and those who turned to other gods and speak messages in their name.

From this passage and stories just mentioned the critical issue the people faced was the fact of differing prophetic words all claiming to come from the Lord. The true prophet is the one who has been in the “divine council” and who proclaims, “Thus says the LORD”. The false prophet is one who has not been given such a word, but pretends he/she has and so speaks his/her own words. For this see Jeremiah 23:21–32.

True and false prophecy.

Deuteronomy 18:21 puts forward the problem, “You may say to yourself, “How can we recognise a word that the LORD has not spoken?” But 18:22 has the answer,

If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it pre-sumptuously; do not be frightened by it”.

This is stated negatively. The rule is rather simple and stated positively reads: Only the authentic word or prophecy proclaimed in the name of the Lord coming true, coming to reality is a message spoken by Yahweh. History is in God’s control; history is both announced and effected by God’s word. The authentic divine word is the one that is worked out in history.⁸

But Deuteronomy 13:1–5 throws up another decisive factor to distinguish between a true or false prophet. Even if the word of the prophet comes to pass that in itself does not proof that he is a true prophet, because the word could never be a true word from the Lord if the result is that God’s people break his commandments and follow other gods, forsaking the Lord. In this passage the criterion is that true prophecy leads to following Yahweh, that is, to adhere to covenant.

“The authentic divine word on the lips of the prophet is one that is confirmed by history and consistent with all the Lord’s other words as set forth in the Mosaic instruction and focused in the demand for exclusive worship of the Lord”.⁹

This principle of fulfilment we find also on the lips of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22, “whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak.” (verse 14) and, “If you return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me” (verse 28). Ezekiel writes: “When this comes—and come it will!—then they shall know that a prophet has been among them (Ezek 33:33). Jeremiah gives another twist to Deut 18:22 by only including prophecies of peace whereas in Deuteronomy it includes messages of woe:

The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet (Jer 28:9)

⁸ Miller, Patrick D., *Deuteronomy*. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 153.

⁹ Miller, p. 154.

There is a grim warning too. Any prophet speaking a word in his own name or the name of another god and presuming to speak in God's name must be put to death (Deut 18:20). Prophecy is a very serious business indeed!

Not only are two kinds of prophets identified in Deuteronomy 18, but also two kinds of listeners:

“you shall heed such a prophet” (verse 15), i.e. you shall listen to him and do what he says.

“anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable” (verse 19). The disobedient listener hears but does not bring into practice what is said.

The prophet's task is to speak God's words but is not accountable for his hearers' refusal to do what God says. See Ezekiel 33:1–9, 30–33!