

## STUDY THREE

# The Holy Spirit and God's Plan (2)

## The Holy Spirit, the Prophets and Prophecy<sup>1</sup>

In Revelation 19:10 we are told that: 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit [or, Spirit] of prophecy'. This is stated as a general principle. Hebrews 1:1 says that in many ways and at various times *God spoke to the fathers by the prophets*. It compares this with what happens in the last days, 'in these last days he has spoken to us by a [or, the] Son'. Yet that Son is the subject of all prophecies. This is seen in Luke 24:25–26, 44–47. In the gospels Jesus is said to fulfil the prophets by what he is and does, and this claim is made in Acts that he has done these things, whilst the epistles assume the same. First Peter 1:10–12 says quite explicitly that the Holy Spirit, speaking to and through the prophets, was 'the Spirit of Christ'.

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<sup>1</sup> For a full and detailed treatment of this subject see LFS no. 7, 'Prophecy: Its Meaning, Scope and Significance' (*Living Faith Studies—vol. 1*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1997).

## THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We need to see then that the line of prophets spread from Abel to Zechariah (Luke 11:51) and ultimately to John the Baptist, whose ministry we will regard. Without doubt prophecy in a very special way began a different course from Samuel onwards. This is verified by Acts 3:24 and 13:20 (cf. Heb. 11:32). However, as we have seen, the first nominated prophet was Abel. Enoch was also a prophet. The patriarchs had prophetic ministry to some degree. Balaam was a prophet declaring oracles even though he would wish to curse Israel for money. He is forced, prophetically, to divine a glorious future for this people of God, Israel. David at first sight would not appear to be a prophet, but 2 Samuel 23:1ff. makes it clear he was a prophet. Of Balaam it had been said, ‘And the Spirit of God came upon him, and he took up his discourse, and said, “The oracle of Balaam . . .”’ (Num. 24:2–3). Of David we read, ‘The oracle of David, the son of Jesse . . . “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me, his word is upon my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken . . .”’ (2 Sam. 23:1–3). In Acts 2:30, Peter using Psalm 16 says, ‘[David] being therefore a prophet’. In Acts 4:25 another prophecy (Ps. 2) is accorded to David. David, then, was very much a prophet, and many of his psalms spoke of the Messiah–King to come. Our main point, however, is that it was by the Spirit he prophesied (2 Sam. 23:2).

### THE SPIRIT AND THE PROPHETS

There is no true prophecy without the Spirit of God. Pharaoh recognised Joseph’s dreams as prophecy or divination, and this was consonant with Numbers 12:6 where God says He speaks to the prophets in dreams and visions. Hence Pharaoh said Joseph was a man ‘in whom is the Spirit of God’ (Gen. 41:38). In 1 Kings 22:24 the test of the false prophet and the

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true prophet is the one in whom is the Spirit of God. In fact Micah set out the principle, 'I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin' (Micah 3:8). In Isaiah 48:16 the prophet says, either of himself or another, 'And now the Lord GOD has sent me and his Spirit'. In Ezekiel 11:5 the classical pattern is shown of the prophet and the Spirit, 'And the Spirit of the LORD fell upon me, and he said to me, "Say, Thus says the LORD . . ."' When the Spirit came upon the seventy elders they began to prophesy, even though only on that occasion (Num. 11:25). In Acts 2 a similar thing happens when the Spirit falls on the one hundred and twenty, and in that special book of prophecy, the writer is 'in the Spirit on the Lord's day', and it is at that point he commences 'the word of the prophecy' (Rev. 1:10; cf. 1:3).

In 1 Peter 1:10–12 the writer tells us that the prophets prior to Christ were moved by the Spirit of Christ. This, surely, was 'the testimony of Jesus', the same testimony that John the writer of the Revelation is exiled to the Isle of Patmos for. The principle of prophecy is stated in 2 Peter 1:20–21, 'First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no [true!] prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'.

If we add to this such statements as in Zechariah 7:12, that the Lord had sent the law and the words *by His Spirit through the former prophets* (i.e. the action and operations contained within the books from Joshua to Nehemiah), and Nehemiah 9:30, 'Many years thou didst bear with them, and didst warn them *by thy Spirit through thy prophets*; yet they would not give ear', then something of great importance begins to emerge.

It is this: not only is the Spirit the Spirit of creation and sustaining providence, but he is also the Spirit who has to do

with every phase of man's history. Whilst man is dependent upon him for his biological existence, he is at one with God the Creator–Redeemer in making sure that the plan of God is known, and in particular to the covenant people of God, Israel.

The prophecy which he stimulates and controls not only has prediction but warning and exhortation as well. A study of prophetic ministries in Israel's history shows that men of the (prophetic) Spirit were marked out from others. Moses wished that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh, and not confine it to the seventy elders (see Num. 11:29), so powerful was the effect of the Spirit.

Of course there are strange things such as when Saul suddenly becomes as another man when the Spirit grips him. A prophet may even be caught up and translated in a strange manner to some distant place (cf. 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16; Ezek. 8:3; 11:24). If he is caught up, then the Spirit catches him up. It has been observed by some commentators that the later canonical prophets—the major and minor prophets—rather seemed to play down the manifestations of the Spirit, for in fact they were sent with the word of God rather than coming as persons under some possession of the Spirit which we today might call psychic. Yet while it is true they come with the word, it is also true that the earlier prophets came with the word of God. Whilst the *modes* of the prophets may have differed in various generations or epochs, they still experienced the same thrust—the prophets were those through whom the Spirit of God communicated. Hosea 9:7 states that the prophet is the man of the Spirit.



### **THE SUBSTANCE OF THE PROPHETIC WORD**

Each prophet was intended to speak to his own people and their circumstances. As we saw, they brought 'the words and the law', and they warned as well as predicted. It was of great importance that a prophet was present to the people, even though the words of the prophet often caused them to reject him, persecute him, and in many cases kill him. As we have it in 1 Samuel 3:1, 'The word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision'. It was of this matter that the writer of Proverbs spoke: 'Where there is no prophecy [vision] the people cast off restraint' (Prov. 29:18). This makes the ministry of the Spirit, so to speak, indispensable to the exercise of continuous restraint or constraint. The Spirit then must continuously relate to the people in this prophetic manner. Hence the significance of a statement such as 1 Samuel 3:21-4:1, 'And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel', that is, the word now was not so rare in Israel!

However there gradually grew to be a wider word of the Spirit through the prophets. Some call it the eschatological word, for the horizon widens far beyond the times contemporary to the prophet who uttered the prophecy. It even seemed, often, to extend beyond Israel and become universal, and sometimes reached to the end of time and history. None of these great themes was unrelated to Israel's plight at the time of the prophet. If they were under judgement, and going into exile, then there was the promise of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. If they were judged because of their idolatry and impurity, then a time would come when they would be washed and renewed, returned to their own land, and the name of God, far from being profaned, would again be honoured by the (new) holiness of His people.

## THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

So great themes emerge, the themes of the new covenant, the kingdom of David, the renewal of God's people, the greatness and victory of the Messiah, or the Son of man, as also the mysterious, not-easy-to-be-understood references to the Suffering Servant. The latter could possibly be the nation or a person, or even the pure seed, the holy remnant of the elect.

Whatever these great themes, there was an enormous dynamic of hope given through the prophets, and this was the widening ministry of the Spirit as he prepared the covenant people for the events to come.

We would have to be honest and say that few, if any, would have thought of 'the spirit of prophecy' as 'the testimony of Jesus'. Some may have seen much of it as 'the testimony of Messiah'. Certainly a great deal of teaching was given about the Spirit himself. In Isaiah 11:2 he is the seven-fold Spirit (cf. Rev. 5:6; etc.) as well as, at the same time, the Spirit of Messiah. Likewise in Isaiah 61:1-3 he is the Spirit of Messiah, enabling him to do his varied and dynamic work. In Isaiah 59:16-21 God raises up His powerful Intercessor who intervenes for his people. God promises (v. 21) that the Spirit will remain upon His covenant people to all generations, and as a consequence so will His word be for ever in their mouths.

The Spirit is greatly connected with renewal in many of the passages in the book of Isaiah. It is probably to one or more of these that Jesus refers in John 7:37-39 and even, possibly, in John 3:6-10. Such passages are Isaiah 32:14ff., 35:1-10, 43:18ff., and 44:3ff. There are many such renewal passages not connected directly with the Spirit. In Ezekiel 36 and 37 we find such passages, whilst in Joel chapter 2 is the explicit prophecy of the pouring out of the Spirit in 'the last days'. The 'last days' or 'the day of the LORD' are often spoken of graphically, as times of calamity and catastrophe as well as

of restoration. But then they are also the days of Messiah, the days of the new covenant and the days of the kingdom.

With the advent and completion of the minor (canonical) prophets, the prophetic series comes to a close. Does this mean, then, that the spirit of prophecy is not working? The answer is that the substance of the prophets—that is, the prophetic deposit—is now before God's people. It remains now only for the predicted elements to be fulfilled. It is obligatory upon God's people to respond to the exhortations, warnings and admonitions of the prophets, and be people true to the covenant God who is their God of grace.

The prophets then are not a matter of antiquarian interest. Their prophecies are dynamic. The people must anticipate the coming of Messiah or the 'Son of man'. They must prepare for the full restoration of the kingdom which is now in bad shape. They must anticipate the new covenant with its promise of the forgiveness of sins, and they must look to see the universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit of God, that is, 'on all flesh' with the consequent ministry of prophecy from its recipients.

These and other matters must occupy them, and it is true that many of these matters were in the minds of the people of Israel, the Jews of Judea and Galilee. Some of their notions were hazy, some quite awry, and some—for very few—quite clear. It needed the coming not of false messiahs or fierce revolutionary zealots, but the coming of John the Baptist, the last and greatest of all the prophets to appear. He was to be the catalyst who crystallised the expectations of his people. He was to be the true precursor to Messiah himself.



**CONCLUSION—THE OLD TESTAMENT TIMES  
AND THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The theme of the Holy Spirit, prophecy and the prophets really extends, vitally, into the New Testament, and this we shall see. However, as we have observed, the series of the prophets ‘from Abel to Zechariah’, and even more from Samuel to John the Baptist, sealed off a period in which God had worked, all with a view to the need for the coming of Messiah, as also consonant with this, the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant.

If we see the first eleven chapters of Genesis preparing man (and his understanding) for the Abrahamic covenant, then we understand the thrust of salvation history, or, simply, history. If we note the presence of the Spirit in the patriarchs, Israel itself from Egypt to Canaan and then in Canaan, then we will also understand the nature of God’s purposes for His people to be a priest nation among all the nations of the earth (cf. Exod. 19:5–6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9–10).

We see that the Spirit then is the Spirit of salvation history, always acting as the agent of God in the events of history. Some theologians actually call him ‘the action of God’. He is present in the exodus, in the leaders who bring Israel into Canaan, and guards them through the work of the Judges. A king such as David is clearly a man of the Spirit. Whilst the kingdom of Israel in Canaan was filled out by this man, and his son Solomon following, the division of the kingdom, the growth of idolatry, the trust in other lords than the true Lord all seem to speak of the demise of a great people, but their greatness lies not in themselves, but the God who has called them as His elect people. Hence we see the Spirit who will anoint their great and coming Messiah with the sevenfold gifts and graces of the same Spirit. We see that he will be a



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liberator of an order not before conceived. We see the new hope grow in Israel, especially amongst the elect and holy remnant, and all the time, through one means and another, it is the Spirit caring, guiding, exhorting, warning, teaching, predicting, giving birth to the living hope of the one to come, Messiah, the Suffering Servant.

When we see the expectation flow up to, and into, the coming of John the Baptist and then of Jesus, Immanuel, then we know that history is not epoch after epoch of failure, or even failure corrected and compensated for, but epoch upon epoch in which Father, Son and Spirit are surely and purposefully fulfilling the plan of God for man, for time, and for eternity.