

Jesus the prophet. Prophecy in the New Testament

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Resume

In the study last week, I made much of the vantage point of the prophets in the Old Testament. It is important that we pay due attention to the word of God given to Israel in the Ten Words and the Mosaic laws as the prophets must have that as their anchor point. This is not to deny revelation as this must be the way the prophets come to speak the words of God. The vantage point of the Old Testament prophets differs from the New Testament prophets and this is where we are getting to in this study.

Jesus the Prophet

In this study, we are going to see Jesus as the prophet and the way it changes the whole perspective of prophecy in the New Testament. For a start we need to see again the promise God made to Moses.

¹⁵ “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. (Deut. 18:15-18)

This is the promise God made to Moses. ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen ...’ (Deut. 18:15). Towards the end of Moses life, this prophet had not been raised yet. ‘And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face’, (Deut. 34:10). Throughout the history of Israel, many prophets had arisen but there was none like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face.

Moses was the prophet of prophets in the Old Testament. He was chosen by God to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, an event that resonates in the minds of the Israelites ever since. Their national psyche is founded on that event. Moses was instrumental in delivering the Ten Words to Israel and that was written in tablets of stone by the finger of God. This is a statement of who their God is and it is also foundational in the relationship with their God. Moses then delivered the Deuteronomic code, a series of moral and ceremonial laws to Israel and these were the standards that they needed to observe as they embarked on nationhood. These events prepared Israel to become a great nation through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed by God. This is the way in which God would fulfil His promise to Abraham.

However, the promise that God would raise up another prophet suggests that what was done through Moses would not be the final fulfillment. This promise was repeated (v. 18) and this prophet would speak all that God had put in His mouth. The words were to be the authoritative words of God and Israel was commanded to listen and to heed what was said. This promise is the other instalment in the process of God's fulfilling His promise. We know that there is only one that fill this description and that is Jesus the Messiah.

The writer to the Hebrews confirmed that the coming of Jesus is the final instalment in the process of fulfilling God's promise. He wrote,

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Heb. 1:1-4)

God has spoken to Israel in the past through the prophets, but they did not listen. In this final instalment the

words of God came through His Son, Jesus, who is truly divine in every way that God is. Not only was Jesus the creator, He is also the redeemer, making possible the new creation. In speaking the final words of God, Jesus is the prophet *par excellence*. Not only did Jesus speak the words of God, He ushered in the Kingdom of God.

So, the apostle John echoes these words of Jesus which showed the intimacy of the relationship with the Father.

¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. ²¹ For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. ²² For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:19-24)

All that the Son does and all that the Son says carry the authority from the Father Himself. The Adamic fall brought estrangement from God and death to all humankind. The words from the Son of God brought life and the restoration of the relationship with God. This is the fulfilment of God’s purpose and promise.

The teaching and deeds of Jesus were not lost on the people who witnessed them.

¹⁹ And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, (Luke 24:19)

¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” (John 6:14)

⁴⁰ When they heard these words, some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet.” ⁴¹ Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee? ⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” (John 7:40-42)

Now whether these remarks were made with the full understanding of Jesus as the Prophet of God or whether the remarks resulting from merely seeing the deeds that Jesus did does not matter. What matters here is a testimony to the world that Jesus is indeed the prophet.

Now that the final word has been spoken by Jesus, the Son of God, where does prophecy leave us today? We need to note that Jesus was not only the prophet but He is also the subject of prophecy. The prophecies of the Old Testament find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

Prophecy in the New Testament

We have seen that the prophets of the Old Testament looked forward to the coming Messiah (Jesus) and now that Jesus had come and fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies, we need to look at the way prophecy is altered in the New Testament.

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.”

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (Matt. 11:2-13)

‘For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John’. John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets fulfilling the words of Malachi.

⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” (Mal. 4:5-6)

John the Baptist marked the end of an era when they looked forward to the new work of God in their midst. Jesus burst onto the world stage and began the new era though hardly anyone knew about it. John was the forerunner preparing the way for Jesus. When John died, his discipline went over to Jesus. We see a discontinuity here but also a continuity. All prophecies points to Jesus and now that He has come, prophecy about Him would cease because He is the fulfilment of all prophecies. He is the Prophet *par excellence*. So where does this leave prophecy in the New Testament?

We need to note that the Law and the prophets were not done away with by the coming of Jesus. The church was built upon the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, Christ being the cornerstone. The Law and the prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus. Unlike the days of old when they look to the commandments and the law, we now look to Jesus who is the fulfilment of the law. We also have the gift of the Spirit poured out upon all humankind on the Day of Pentecost. There is now the internalisation of the law written upon the tablets of our hearts by the Spirit of the living God.

³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor. 3:3).

This is our new vantage point from which we look to the Day of the return of Christ. Here I am going to quote a summary by James Krieg as he puts it so well.

The Old Testament prophets spoke from their vantage point, and they looked both backwards and forwards. They looked back to the great acts of God in the Exodus, and to the Law given at Sinai, and they called people to hear the Law and to abide by the terms of the Covenant the LORD had made with them through it. And they looked forward in that they declared to the people what the LORD would do in light of His covenant with them - both His judgements for their disobedience, and His coming salvation in which he would, ‘put the Law within them and write it on their hearts.’ (Jeremiah 31:33)

So, the prophets never spoke from nor into a ‘vacuum’. They knew the Law and they spoke to a people who had the Law; they knew the promises and they spoke to a people who lived in the unfolding of those promises. And the Spirit took what they knew and enabled them to speak the Word of the Lord in a way that enabled the people to see what He was doing and what He would do when He sent the Messiah.

Prophecy in the New Testament follows this same pattern - looking back and looking forward - but now the vantage point has changed. The view backwards is not to Mt. Sinai and the Law, but to Mt. Calvary, and the Law fulfilled in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. John the Baptist pre-empted this when he said to his disciples, ‘Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ...I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.’ (John 1:29,34). Prophecy now flows from the reality of the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus. And the view forwards is to the fulfilment of the promise of the new heavens and earth at the return of this Jesus, and the call to God’s people today to live in anticipation of that day.

So, prophecy today is enshrined in the person of Jesus Christ, ‘the Alpha and the Omega, ... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’ (Rev. 1:8). Just as the Old Testament prophecies pointed to Christ, and now that He has come, all prophecies are now centred on Him. This is what John wrote at the beginning of his revelation.

¹ The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (Rev. 1:1-3)

All prophecies have their origin in the word of God and here John tied it to the testimony of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. The testimony of Jesus Christ is all that is borne by Jesus. So, it is all about Jesus and all that He has done and achieved in His coming. These events culminated on the cross and vindicated in His resurrection. John continued later in his revelation and wrote,

⁹ And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." ¹⁰ Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. (Rev. 19:9-10)

'For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy'. All prophecies are about Jesus. The old looks forward to Him and the new commences with Him. From here He takes us home to the Father in the 'marriage supper of the lamb'. Thus, we should not see a rigid separation between the prophets of old and Jesus. Together they brought into perspective the whole spectrum of events for the redemption of creation restoring it to the rightful worship of God.

Yes, it is true that the writer to the Hebrews pointed out that Christ is superior to the Old Testament prophets.

¹ Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, ² who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. ³ For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. ⁴ (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) ⁵ Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, ⁶ but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. (Heb. 3:1-6)

However, the writer to the Hebrews was pointing to the fulfilment that is in Jesus. All that had taken place in the past, i.e. the salvation story in the Old Testament, was the route taken towards the fulfilment. They are nonetheless vital to the process, without which the whole story falls apart, like a story with an ending but without a beginning. It is like the way some people today take the doctrinal statement. It needs to be true to the words of scripture, but that is not an end in itself. That statement is kind of a road map for us to proceed. Of course, it needs to be accurate, but the end of it is Christ taking us into God's house. Like all prophetic words, it must lead on to our life in Christ. And the writer to the Hebrews rightly finishes by saying, 'And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope' (Heb. 3:6). We must not mix up the map which leads to our destination with the destination itself. We must not mix up the shadow and the reality.

Before I finish this section on New Testament prophecy, again I like to take another paragraph from James.

True New Testament prophecy doesn't have as its focus the political machinations of the kingdoms of this world, nor the breakthrough that I need to experience in order to prosper or flourish; but the breaking in of the Kingdom of Heaven in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ: it's the testimony of Jesus that the Kingdom of God has arrived and that we must repent and believe the Gospel. Any prophet who doesn't point you to that, is just a 'dreamer of dreams' - do not listen to them!

What is so different about the prophetic word in the New Testament period. We need to look at the Day of Pentecost. Joel's prophecy is a prophecy about prophecy.

¹⁷ "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;

¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

...

²¹ And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' (Acts 2:17-18, 21)

The Spirit was poured out onto everyone, not just a few, so that they shall prophesy. That is to say that prophecy, understood as speaking the words of God, still has a place in the New Testament period until today. If we disregard this, then we will have to disregard the pouring out of the Spirit onto all people. The reason for this outpouring is that they can call upon the of the Lord (Jesus) and be saved. We know from Paul's writing in Romans that it is the Spirit that enables us to call God Father. Just as the Old Testament prophetic message is to call people to repentance, in the same way the prophetic word in the New Testament period is to lead people to salvation. We have noted that the prophetic message in the Old Testament period pointed to Christ. Now that the victory has been achieved through the cross, Christ will build His church. The prophetic word is now directed to this end, the marriage of the bride (*church*) and the lamb (Rev. 21). Thus, the pouring out of the Spirit was to enable the prophetic word (prophecy) to be brought to the ends of the earth in preparation for this event. We take an event in Acts to illustrate this point.

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:1-3)

This was a new stage for the church at Antioch. The Spirit was directing the church to send Saul and Barnabas for the proclamation of the word to Asia Minor. Gathered in their midst were prophets and teachers. It does not seem that they were two groups of people, but one, prophets-teachers, much like what Paul wrote in Ephesians, shepherd-teachers (Eph. 4:10). The roles of prophet and teacher are merged into one, as both of necessity must speak from the Word, i.e. Christ.

So, we see that prophecy in the New Testament takes a different end point from the Old. Perhaps this table will help to see the difference.

	Old Testament	New Testament
Looking back	Exodus and the Law	Christ, the fulfilment of the law
Looking forward	The coming Messiah	The coming marriage of the bride and the lamb

These anchor points will help us to see what Paul means when he encouraged us to desire the gift of prophecy. This will be our last study next week.