An Overview

The purpose of this mini series is to provide a more Biblical approach to understanding the variety of prophetic roles and how the prophet fits into the scheme of things. I have provided an overview of the types of prophets incorporated in the Bible. Various styles stand out. Perhaps the most interesting thing about these styles is that they are all now accepted as a legitimate part of Biblical history, even if they were questioned at the time. Unlike the standard prophetic church stereo type of today, the Bible is rich in variety. As you would expect, because everybody is a bit different there are different mixes of talents, and some of these different styles overlap, all the same there are some interesting features within these styles, and all of these are still needed today.

Prophetic Variety

• The Private Prophet

Jeremiah and Ezekiel

(Eze 2:6) Do not be afraid...
(Jer 20:14) Cursed be the day I was born!

A number of prophets appear to be very private people that have been asked to play a role much larger than they are; the notable thing here is that for the most part scripture reveals that they chose to remain as private as possible. This closed and private appearance includes a strong element of the vulnerable. When you read Jeremiah it is his vulnerability that stands out, he often gives the impression he would have preferred not to have been chosen.

Jeremiah would have used his private nature as a part of a ministry defense strategy to keep the communication with God open. One of the seldom appreciated inner strengths and secrets of the private person is that they don't need to spend large amounts of time in prayer because the very existence of this inner privacy assists in keeping an ongoing communication with God. Communication with God is a totally natural extension of that privacy, so it does not need the constant hard work and regulated effort that others need to put in. The main difference lies in the ability to do more than one thing at a time. Most people that have an inner peace are able to maintain or develop a level of contemplation in the midst of a busy schedule (even if they are men!). If you don't have to wait for convenient moments, it is easier to find the heart of God. Since the Holy Spirit dwells within us, a private person can develop the closeness of that relationship into character strength, as the intimacy develops. We may need dedicated time as well, but there is ten times more time available in the day for those able to tap into it. The person that needs...
dedicated private time to "switch on" the receiving switch may appear to be more holy or praying more, but this is just an illusion, they may actually be praying much less!

- **The Action Prophet**

**Elijah and Elisha**

e.g. (1 Kings 17:1) Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

The Bible reveals that Elijah and Elisha believed in action rather than words. Their ministry is highlighted with many miracles, some classic action sequences, some violence and very few sermons, in fact compared to any prophet today almost none at all! This lack of the spoken word may in part be attributed to the fact that their ministry is written more as a summary of events, but even so, compared to the action described and results attributed to them, the theology that drives their actions is rarely stated; it is left for the reader to meditate on these things.

Generally speaking their ministry shows that they became confident and almost presumptuous about God's leading, and things really happened when they acted on the word they received. Whether it was bringing down fire from heaven, blinding a whole army, or speaking the word of God to kings they exhibited an air of trust that God would definitely act as revealed. Sometimes this trust was so strong they appeared to be more attached to the next world rather than the one they stood on.

These guys received most of their prophetic content at the moment action or inspiration was required; perhaps because of this, their ministry was notable for a number of 'one liners'. Things that would have been proclaimed with a full chapter and verse of exhortation and warning by others were delivered in just one line or one dramatic verse.

- **The Prophet and Teacher**

**Samuel, Moses, Jesus**

(1 Sam 3:21) The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. (4:1) And Samuel's word came to all Israel.

(Num 5:4) The Israelites did ... just as the LORD had instructed Moses

(Mt 7:29) ... because he (Jesus) taught as one who had authority...

These prophets developed a love of teaching. This was not restricted to analytical teaching alone. A variety of methods was used. The best way of describing prophetic teaching is to describe the intention. I call it corrective teaching, because the mark of a prophetic teacher is that they feel obligated to explain the purpose or intention of the original Scripture or teaching, and then point out the strange way it is currently being applied. In doing this they highlight the vital purpose for the Scripture and remove the mystery, you could say they use the past to point to a more correct future. For example, when referring to regulations enforcing the honouring of parents, Jesus pointed out how the regulations had lost all contact with the original Scripture, he pointed out the intention and compared that with the current practice that allowed the opposite to happen (Mt 15:4).

These guys received much of their prophetic revelation through the word. In contrast much of what passes for 'prophetic teaching' today fails the critical test because it tries to too hard to be politically correct and avoid offence.
So what is real prophetic teaching?

- It is not teaching that ignores or pays lip service to Scripture
- It is not teaching conveniently downloaded from the web because you need something in a hurry (this site is of course acceptable!*)
- It does not use Scripture as an excuse or platform to make a prophetic point
- It reveals the purpose or intention of God
- It does not put on an elaborate show that distracts from the message itself
- It is not clever for cleverness sake (or ear tickling)
  - Jesus often revealed the simple purpose behind a Scripture or law
- It reveals a love of God, and God's purpose
- It is jealous for the purity of God's word

- The Prophet and Judge

Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Deborah

(Ex 18:13) The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people
(1 Sam 17:15) Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life.
(1 Kings 18:40) Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!"...
(1 Kings 19:17) ... and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.

This category is self evident. The problem is that inside the church no one wants to recognize this as a reality today; it’s just too scary a concept. Perhaps the greater reality is that it was just as scary in the days these prophets were alive.

What sets these apart as prophetic judges is that for the most part they were reluctant to step up; they were not ambitious for the job. This is not just a curious observation; it is one of the essential ingredients of a real prophet. There are a number of key indicators here that stand out:

1. They learnt to refuse to take the glory away from God.
2. There is a tension between what they were asked to do and their reluctance to be publicly viewed as people having political influence.
3. They reacted to God’s direct prompting. They believed in not speaking until they were spoken to by God.
4. Unlike all seminars on how to be rich and influence people they deliberately did not establish a long term strategy for how to achieve goals, influence people and promote their ministry. They believed in allowing for the mystery of God’s timing.

This tension helped make them great prophets and judges.
To some extent they appeared to act outside the laws that bind ordinary people, because they never needed to actually pick up a sword themselves to kill anyone.

- The Prophetic Leader

(Or Leader/Prophet depending on which gift is greater)

Moses and Jesus

The prophetic call/gift may or may not be greater than the leadership gift. Some church leaders make regular use of prophetic content in their ministry, though to be honest, many leaders reveal less prophetic insight and gifting than others in their own congregation, the difference is that because of the present day church structure, the leaders are the only ones that have the opportunity of speaking in other places; therefore they have greater opportunity to allow the gift to develop. But opportunities do not guarantee flexibility, they can also set the boundaries your gift
can operate; they may end up limiting a leader to using prophesy occasionally as a gift rather than a ministry.

By contrast Moses and Jesus exceeded all human boundaries; their influence was truly international and still speaks to us today.

- The Visionary Prophet

Daniel, Isaiah, Samuel, Elisha, etc
(1 Sam 3:1) The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.
(3:19) The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground.

These words of 3:19 are precious to all visionary prophets that discover them. In the end they become a catch cry and prayer. It is why they constantly look to ‘see it happen’ before they move on in prayer. The visionary prophet like other varieties becomes jealous for the Lord, that the word will come to pass. The difference is that it is not enough for a visionary prophet to proclaim the word, or teach the word, unless they actually see the word as it were become a flesh and blood reality in the Spirit and in the world; they are disappointed with the result. Consequently they view the standard forms of universal, everything included prayer practiced in church as greatly over rated because there is little expectation attached to it, and not much follow up done.

- The Stand-Up Prophet

Jeremiah and Amos
(Jer 1:17)
(Amos 2:1)

No I didn’t mean a stand up comic; that was a court jester. The stand up prophet was the closest thing resembling the general prophetic style popularized today. Another appropriate phrase for this would be a soapbox prophet, all those that have something to say stand up and deliver it at an appropriate moment and place, or at least in the traditional space provided. This is the standard issue style/model to be found in almost all local churches that tolerate the use of prophetic utterance. The trouble is that there are really only 2 prophetic variations reluctantly accepted today (the other being the leader/prophet). Of course there is a huge difference; these guys were not dependant on any traditional religious organization for their authority.

- The Hidden Prophets

(1 Kings 18:4) While Jezebel was killing off the Lord’s prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.

For those that think that prophets were very rare, this is a revealing verse. It shows that even though being a prophet in the reign of Ahab and Jezebel was likely to result in death, there were still many willing to endure hardship, make a stand for God and be counted. Most people think there were very few prophets in biblical history, but this Scripture suggests that for every one mentioned there were at least a hundred more.

Clearly, being a prophet for the Lord was a very dangerous occupation. Historical study reveals that almost all of those mentioned were unpopular, poor, often hungry, used as scapegoats, considered as dangerous people to associate with, and therefore often the first to be killed when times got tough. What a job outcome, any volunteers?
Where Have They All Gone?

There are many issues raised by this overview of Biblical prophetic styles, but the stand out issue is, where have they all gone?

- **Huge variety**
There is a huge variety revealed by this simple overview. Something must be seriously amiss if we have now been effectively reduced to just two of these types. People are just as diverse as they ever were. People are just as creative as ever. The world appears to be just as corrupt and in need if not more so. There are more people with problems than ever. There are more wars, injustice and human suffering than ever.

- **What went wrong?**
It seems to me that the church is bent on being politically correct when it should really stand up and be counted and be more concerned about being scripturally correct, but then of course a prophet would say that.

Let me tell you a secret – all those other varieties of prophets are still out there today. The trouble is that they can not find a home in the church of today. Many of them may go to church, they may even lead a church, but most of those that do have discovered by trial and error that their variety of prophetic ministry is not really accepted. The things they do and receive from God, may happen just as revealed, but just like the prophets mentioned above, the more public they are, the more they become marginalized from the main stream society and the church. No one likes to be marginalized and thought of as scary, dangerous, or a freak. Therefore the next option as it were, after a number of set backs, is to change tack and go underground. With some effort you can still find a way to do what you did before. It then becomes possible to live life as a real living caring person again.

The irony of all this is that the more powerful your ministry becomes, the more private you need to be to maintain your focus, and the less acceptable it is in church - Hmmm! What a good thing that developed prophetic authority was intended to operate independently of the local church.

_P. I. Editor_

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