

Prophesying Daughters  
January 31, 2021  
Luke 2:36-38; Acts 2:16-21, 21:8

This week's Bible Study lesson marks a transition from studying the Call of Jesus to considering the Call of others in the New Testament. The various passages chosen by the lesson-writer have one thing in common: they consider women in the role of prophesy. This is a very unusual topic for study in the scriptures, and the passages are few in number. So, I will spend some time on background, first considering what "prophesy" may mean, then women as prophets in the Old Testament, and finally take a closer look at the passages we have before us.

The popular conception of "prophesy" is looking into the future, but that's really more the function of a "seer." The word takes on a wide range of meanings. The most common Old Testament understanding is that a prophet speaks a message from God that he is charged to deliver. Often that message speaks of what is to come, giving prophets the reputation of seeing the future. For example, God told Jonah to prophesy that Nineveh would be destroyed after 40 days (Jonah 3:4). The prophesy in Joel that is quoted by Peter in Acts 2:16-21 is another example, though without the precise timing that was given in the Jonah prophesy.

But sometimes prophesy is less about the future than seeing what God is or has been doing in the present. I can think of no better example than the prophet Miriam, Moses's sister, when she sang, "**Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.**" (Exodus 15:21). In this, Miriam looks at what has happened, and sees God's intervention at the Red Sea on behalf of His people. (This message is elaborated further in the "Song of Moses" in vs. 1-18, but the Miriam passage is believed the earlier.)

Sometimes prophets were even credited as manipulating the future by their enemies. For example, the prophet Elijah had prophesied a drought and famine in Israel (I Kings 17:1). When he finally confronts King Ahab, he is accused of being "you troubler of Israel," as if it was Elijah doing this on his own. Elijah makes clear that it is Ahab who is the source of the trouble (I Kings 18:18-19). In that day, too, the word "prophet" applied more broadly. When we read about the "450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah who are feasted at Jezebel's table," that would have included the musicians and some other temple servers of the gods at the heathen temples in the capital city of Samaria.

In ancient Israel prophets also had a formal role in the anointing of kings, first Samuel, who anointed Saul and David, then others later. This act recognized the king's role as an intermediary between God and the people of his kingdom. On occasions a priest sometimes did the anointing instead. In the case of Solomon, both the high priest and a prophet participated (I Kings 1:34). Elijah was charged with anointing not only a new king of Israel, but also of Syria (I Kings 19:15-16). The prophets were a unique institution in the ancient world at that time, confronting kings who otherwise had supreme power. That is what Elijah was best known for. Starting with Elisha, and followed by Amos, Hosea, and others, prophets went and spoke not to the king, but to the people. (It was as if God had given up on the Israelite monarchy in Samaria.) With the Exile, the monarchy was destroyed. In the persons of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and then others, prophets continued to speak for God, now to the people of the former Kingdom of Judah, the Jews.

By the first century, the belief was common that the voice of prophesy had gone out in Israel. The Jews had by then written scriptures. They did not see the need for prophets. There were some historical persons in this interim who did claim to be prophets, but were not later accepted as such. The writings considered to be scripture included The Law (the Torah) and The Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve – the minor prophets). So, John the Baptist's appearing as a prophet was remarkable – the first in 400 years since the last prophet mentioned in scripture. Then, just after that, Jesus appeared. Maybe God had not put an end to prophesy after all!

The words “prophet” and “prophesy” in the New Testament are used somewhat differently. Paul lists the gift of “prophesy” in his list of “gifts of the spirit” in his letter to the Corinthians well before Acts was written. The earliest proclamation of the Church, Peter's address at Pentecost in our reading from Acts 2, quoting Joel, includes that there will be prophesy. Prophesy was a “gift” given to some. A few New Testament prophets were named, notably Agabus in Acts 21:10, the very next verse after the mention of Philip's four daughters. Luke focuses on the predictive aspect of prophesy with Agabus. In contrast, Paul seems to mean by prophesy the building up of understanding and faith in the Church, in preaching among other things. I Corinthians 14 is an extended discussion of prophesy, especially as compared to speaking in tongues. (See especially verse 22.) The connection between prophesy and faith is also made in Romans 12:6. So, just as in the Old Testament, the prophet's role is in promoting an understanding of God: His word, and how to live and act consistent with what God expects of us.

Of women named in the Bible, quite a few are prophets. Miriam is one of just five pre-monarchy named prophets, the others being Abraham, Moses, Aaron and Deborah. It would seem that the word “prophet” would have been applied to Deborah in her own day, and perhaps to Mariam. Abraham is called a prophet in God’s dream to Pharaoh, and Aaron was assigned to be “Moses’s prophet” because he did not want to speak himself. Moses was more of a national leader, as Joshua, rather than being prophets of the type more common later, but consistent with expectations of the Messiah, also seen as a prophetic role. Deborah, though called a prophet, also served as a “Judge” during pre-monarchy times. But after the monarchy, we only see briefest glimpses of women in prophetic roles. The “Wise woman of Tekoa” of 2 Samuel 14 is said to have spoken the words Joab gave her to speak to David, but her own wisdom shines through the story. The “Wise Woman of Abel-Beth-Maachah” (2 Samuel 20:14 ff.) seems to be the last independent woman leader mentioned in the Old Testament, as with the start of the Monarchy, social and governing structures became more rigid. Even so, Isaiah’s wife is mentioned as being a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). The lesson writer mentions two others.

The two New Testament mentions of specific women in a prophetic role are both from the evangelist Luke, first in the gospel, and later in *Acts*. He mentions the prophet Anna in Jerusalem when Jesus was taken to the Temple as a baby (Luke 2:36-38). We don’t know whether Anna was known as a prophet in her own time. Probably not. But she fits very well the role Paul describes, as teaching consistent with faith. As well, Luke probably uses the word “prophet” for her prophetic word in understanding God’s work, even into the future. The fact that Anna is from the tribe of Asher is amazing. Asher along with Simeon and Reuben disappear from the record except very occasional brief mention occasionally after *Joshua* and *Judges*. Of the Lost Tribes, Asher was the most remote from Jerusalem, and the most unlikely to be represented in the New Testament. Anna represents the hope in Jesus Christ for even for the most thoroughly obscure lost in history.

The second passage mentioning specific prophets is the too brief mention in passing of the “Deacon” Philip’s four daughters. Philip was one of the seven appointed to wait on tables as reported in Acts 6:1-6. He is best known for teaching and baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8, 26-40). That story ends with Philip reaching Caesarea. We hear nothing more of him in Acts until Paul (with Luke in company) pass through Caesarea and stay with Philip for at least several days, more likely some weeks, on their way to Jerusalem, about 20 years later, about 58 A.D. (Acts 21:8-15). Luke, the author of Acts, would have been there as well and would

have had opportunity to get to know these four daughters, though he gives us no details of the nature of their prophesy. That in itself is significant. “The absence of any statement as to what the daughters of Philip did or said is a sign that here we have the account of an eyewitness. In fiction a new character is introduced only in order to do or say something.” (Lake and Cadbury, quoted in *Exegesis on Acts, Interpreter’s Bible*, 1954, vol. 9, p 278.)

So, Luke, who was interested primarily in telling Paul’s story by this time in Acts, can’t help himself but to remark on these four young women, even though they are peripheral to the story he wants to tell. We don’t know what they did, but they clearly impressed Luke, despite their presumably young age, and maybe especially because of their young age. Perhaps he saw in them a fulfilment of Joel’s prophesy, but if so, you’d think he might have said a bit more. He does mention that they are unmarried. That would make sense if Philip was relatively young when he became a Deacon; it has been only twenty-some years since the Resurrection. His daughters would likely be at most twenty or so if he had married after settling down in Caesarea. We can only speculate about such details. The fact that they can be said to prophesy means that they must have spoken up, rather than remain silent in the background. They must have done so in the presence of others, no small thing in the presence of people like Paul and other leaders of the Church who may have visited. Alas, Luke moves on with Paul to Jerusalem, and we hear no more about them. Except...

I found this: “Saint Hermione of Ephesus is a 2nd-century Christian martyr venerated by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. She was the daughter of Saint Philip the Deacon.” She died in 117 A.D. (Wiki). Also: “The Greek Menaon, an annual calendar that preserves the memory of martyrs and saints, claims that two of the daughters were called Hermione and Eutyichis. It states that these two daughters went to live in Asia Minor after the death of the apostle John who lived his last years in Ephesus. Eutyichis is said to be buried in Ephesus...” or possibly Caesarea. (<https://margmowczko.com/philips-prophesying-daughters/> Jan. 26, 21) From the same source (from the ancient Church father Papias): “...People travelled great distances to visit these female prophets and listen to their accounts of the early decades of the church.” Also, “There is no doubt that Philip’s four daughters were highly esteemed. The daughters held a prominent place in the early church and were ‘renowned.’” There are sources that identify the other sisters, but sources are not consistent. Names include Mariamne, Eukhidia (likely same as Eutyichis ?), Irais, and Chariline. If you want to name a baby girl, how about these?

If you are interested in more about these daughters of Philip, take a look at <<https://www.markcarlson-ghost.com/index.php/2016/09/17/philips-daughters-prophets-names/>>.

I must say that I like the sense of the words “prophet” and “prophesy” that we get in the New Testament. God pours out gifts to each of us, as well as other talents and interests, and puts each of us in different circumstances. It is gratifying to me that there are among us those who may be able to see what God is doing in our own day, and give thanks for it, and even call our attention to it. It might be as simple a matter as a musician choosing a particular solo for an occasion led by God’s guidance. It may be that someone is particularly moved to speak a word of encouragement to someone when it is most needed. In this sense, prophesy isn’t just something we read about in the Bible. It is a gift we can ask for, and it is a gift, when received, that can be expressed without being extraordinary. We just wouldn’t, in our day, call it prophesy. That would be confusing in our modern culture, and possibly offensive to people like Moslems and (I believe) Jehovah’s Witnesses, who believe that there can be no more prophets.

Also, consider all of the people in the Bible who did things that would qualify as “prophesy” in this sense, but were not explicitly called prophets. The young Mary, Jesus’s mother, is an example, in the “Song of Mary” (Luke 1:47-55). Her cousin Elizabeth says, “Blessed are you among women ...” (Luke 1:42). Both show remarkable insights into what is happening. God is not stingy with his gifts of insight and prophesy. (Cindy points out that the baby John leaped in the womb when Mary entered. But, then, he was identified as a prophet. He was just proving that early! Very early.)

These women who we read about were not prophets because of high birth, or having a privileged position in society. They did these things against expectations, and were held in high regard for what they did. They were a blessing to others, and as such, an example to us of faithful living under God’s guidance. For that we give thanks.

*Prayer: Gracious God, you are the Lord of all humanity. Open our eyes to the gifts and strengths that all people bring. Expand our perspectives to acknowledge mentors of every gender and race. Amen.*