

Prophets and Moses  
March 7, 2012  
Deuteronomy 18:15-22

We begin a new quarter with a focus on prophets and prophesy. This should be interesting and enlightening. It is also such a huge subject that we will barely touch it. But, whatever jewels of insight we may gain, we are that much ahead. We begin by considering Moses. Moses may be the least typical prophet of all! All of the prophets spoke on behalf of God. As *Deuteronomy* describes in verse 18:17, God says, “... **I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything I shall command.**” We can read for some prophets how this word was received from God. Ezekiel describes in *Ezekiel* 3:1-3 how God’s word was delivered to him by God on a scroll which he ate. More commonly God delivered his words by speaking them to the prophet, as in *Elijah* 6:9-13, *Jeremiah* 1:1-10, and in many other prophetic writings. Moses received his call to speak and act for God at the burning bush in the wilderness, after he had fled from Egypt.

Moses, like many other prophets, spoke God’s word (with Aaron) to a king. Speaking God’s word to the powerful was a frequent role of prophets, perhaps best exemplified by the prophet Elijah confronting King Ahab. In Moses’s case, that king was Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. The message was that God demanded that Pharaoh release the Israelites from slavery, and allow them to exit Egypt, into the wilderness. What is different, very different, is that Moses then became the leader of the Israelites over the next forty or more years. Yet, at the same time, Moses was prophetic, in that he spoke to the people the words of the Lord. He did so more extensively than any other prophet, if we accept all of the commandments and ordinances in *Exodus* through *Deuteronomy* as coming from Moses. When these all became committed to writing is a different issue; the Pentateuch seems to have reached its final form during the Exile, though parts were undoubtedly written earlier. Joshua was also a national leader of the nation in the same sense as Moses. He is described primarily as leading the military campaigns to occupy Canaan. He did speak of the Lord and the Lord’s requirements, especially in his farewell address (Joshua 23). Joshua didn’t speak truth to power, because he was the power, or rather, God was, and he was God’s servant.

The closest parallel to Moses is probably Mohammed. Like Moses, he is said to have received God’s word, and recorded it, the Koran. He then led his followers on a campaign of conquest. In doing so he founded a religion which has lasted now

more than a millennium, about the same length of time between Moses and Jesus. Like the nation founded by Moses, Mohammed's theocracy was very much "of this world." That was what the Jews expected of Jesus. God had different plans.

There just isn't space here to get into the Moses story in detail. If you are interested, I gave a message at Grace Chapel in Bear Creek on August 25, 2019 which focused on Moses. It mostly looked at how Moses came to be God's servant at Mt. Sinai. <<http://www.jbgilmer.com/Messages/Holy%20Ground.pdf>>. (If you can't access this and would like a paper copy, please just let me know.)

Today's lesson is at the other end of the story, Moses's farewell address. That's primarily what *Deuteronomy* is. Moses is presented as delivering these words on the Plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Canaan, east of Jericho. Moses reviews the Israelite story and points out the Israelites' obligation of obedience to God's covenant with them (Chapters 1-4). Moses then reviews the Ten Commandments (Chapter 5) and expounds on the blessings of obedience and the curses for disobedience (Chapters 6-11). Laws for when the Israelites occupy Canaan are the largest middle section (Chapters 12 to 26). That is followed by the renewal of the Covenant, and the blessings from obedience and curses consequent to disobedience (Chapters 27 to 30). *Deuteronomy* concludes with the appointment of Joshua, the Song of Moses, and Moses's death and burial (Chapters 31 to 34).

The particular passage chosen by our lesson writer (Rev. Mary Lindburg) is from the middle section of *Deuteronomy*. Chapter 18 is part of those various laws and provisions for the future, once the Israelites are in Canaan, the "the Promised Land." The passage addresses the prophet that God would raise up after Moses. The use of the article "a", in "a prophet", might seem to imply some particular prophet. That could mean Joshua, but it might mean someone further into the future, perhaps Jesus. Or, despite the article "a," this passage could be applicable to all prophets, as the lesson writer assumes. The passage describes that a prophet speaks for the LORD. It assumes that what is spoken is about future events, as a seer. In that sense that the prophet's word can be tested. If the foreseen event happens, the prophesy is validated. If it doesn't, the prophet is false, worthy to die.

The word "prophet" appears about 300 times in the Old Testament, and applies to a remarkable range of characters. I Samuel 9:9 tells us, "**Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, 'Come, let us go to the Seer'; for the one who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer.**" A seer was someone who looked into the future. Indeed, prophesies often did so.

The office of “prophet” was unpredictable and infrequent in earlier times, or perhaps better said, as God provided. Moses is only referred to explicitly as a prophet after the fact. Miriam is the first “prophet” in the Bible to be recognized as such, in Exodus 15:20-21, “The Song of Miriam.” Interestingly, she doesn’t speak of the future. The Song of Miriam instead speaks of the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea, and sees it as God’s providence, not just an unusual act of nature.

After Joshua, during the time of the Judges, prophets would occasionally come forth in time of crisis. For the first three judges, Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar, no prophet is mentioned as having a role. Then, when the Israelites are being oppressed by King Jabin of Hazor, Deborah appears. She is explicitly referred to as a “prophetess.” She does not lead the Israelite army herself, but calls on Barak, by the word of the LORD, to do so (*Judges* 4:4-7). Prior to Gideon receiving his calling to be a liberator and judge, an unnamed prophet appears to tell the people that they have not followed the Lord (*Judges* 6:7-9). Skipping over a few others, later Samuel becomes a prophet and then a judge over Israel. His appearance is in response to oppression by the Philistines, as well as in response to the corruption of Eli’s sons Hophni and Phineas. So, before the monarchy, prophets appeared speaking for God and inspiring others to act to throw off foreign oppression.

Then, during the monarchy, prophets anointed kings as directed by God. So it was that Samuel anointed both Saul and David. That was new. Normally, kingship was inherited. When David’s son Solomon was to become king, he was hastily anointed by the prophet Nathan, as well as the High Priest (*I Kings* 1:32-34).

Prophets more often are seen confronting the king, the king presumably chosen by God, when he deviated from what God expected. Samuel ended up speaking against Saul, the first Israelite king (*I Samuel* 15). The books of *Kings* are filled with prophets telling kings what they don’t want to hear, often prophesying a catastrophe as a consequence of the king’s actions. The story of the prophet Micaiah is a case that very precisely fits the description of the Deuteronomy passage (*1 Kings* 22:13-28). He prophesied King Ahab’s death. He was jailed pending Ahab’s return from the battle, the test of his prophesy. Ahab indeed was killed, despite his disguise. Some later prophets bypassed the king, and went directly to the people. Amos and Hosea are examples. It was as if God gave up on the monarchy. Again, the message was a plea for repentance, and coming back to God, with doom forecast if the prophet’s voice was not heeded. Jeremiah’s prophesies are another example. Indeed, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians.

Also during the time of the kings, the term “prophets” was sometimes used more broadly of groups of people who traveled about fulfilling some sort of prophetic role. The earliest example of that is Saul, who briefly joined such a group in frenzied prophesy (1 Samuel 10:9-13). The prophet Elisha is associated with and apparently led a company of prophet (2 Kings 2:3, 7, 15-18; 4:1, 38ff., 6:1-7). In Elijah’s time earlier, such companies were known as well (1 Kings 18:4, 20:35-36). This was not just a matter of prophets of God. Ahab and Jezebel are said to have 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah (1 Kings 18:19). It would seem that, at that time, the word “prophet” had a meaning of anyone who spoke words on behalf of a god, perhaps also including priests. In that sense, we would today call the choir members and lay readers prophets in that sense. Usually we exclude this meanings when we think of prophets and prophesy.

In exile, the prophetic voice changed. Ezekiel and later Isaiah (of the Exile) in Babylon, and Jeremiah in Judea, both held out hope to the people. There was no king; the people were captive or scattered. Amidst the desolation, with kings and all governance destroyed, prophets continued God’s work and the identity of the Judeans, later Jews, as God’s people. When the exiles returned, prophets appeared now and again. They were no longer going to kings; there were no kings. They did speak to the leaders as well as the people. So, throughout the history of Israel and Judah to the returned Jewish exiles, the prophets were there, but not under the control of authorities, as the priesthood was. They answered only to God.

Returning to the scripture lesson, let’s take a look at the test of validity: **“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 presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.”** (Deuteronomy 18:22). It was said of Samuel, **“As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.”** (1 Samuel 3:19-20) A prophet speaking in the name of the Lord was at some risk. Suppose the king or the people took the prophet’s message to heart and repented, and the Lord then set aside the predicted catastrophe? This was the situation Jonah found himself in at Nineveh (Jonah 3:10 to 4:3). He was afraid that God would leave the people of Nineveh unpunished. But, why was he prophesying, except that they might be saved?

When Amos’s prophesies were brought to the attention of the King, he said, **“I am no prophet nor a prophet’s son, but the son of a herdsman, and a**

**dresser of sycamore trees,”** (Amos 7:14) But then Amos goes on to describe why he is speaking. **“... and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”** (Amos 7:15) Maybe Amos was reluctant to wear the title of “prophet.” But he had a mission given by God to prophesy, and he did so in courage, knowing the dangers. Interestingly, even Amos, the bringer of prophecies of doom, also brought to the people a message of hope at the end, after those prophecies had been fulfilled. **“I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the lord your God.”** (Amos 9: 14-15).

So, this has been a bit of a whirlwind tour of prophesy in the Old Testament. The point here is that the various prophets appeared in many ways, with messages of both doom and hope, what God might do in the future, as well as what he was saying about the present. The constant was that the prophet spoke a message from God. That message called for obedience to the principles of the Covenant God made with Israel. Or, in Miriam’s case, recognized God’s mighty act of saving his people in anticipation of the Covenant. What we will do in the upcoming quarter will just be a sampling. We can’t look at all the prophets, or even all of the actions of any one. For example, the Jeremiah passage we will look at predicts doom, but I most remember and treasure from Jeremiah the following passage:

**The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)**

The Prophets are a blessing that sustained God’s people, the Israelites and the Jews, and now us as Christians. We can listen and give thanks.

Prayer: *Faithful God, may we be reminded to love strongly with all our heart and soul. Amen.*