

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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Why

Prophecy?



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HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED HOW QUICKLY an outspoken, faith-filled believer can become a mumbling skeptic at the mere mention of certain topics? One such topic almost certain to get that reaction from time to time is Bible prophecy. Many in the Church today feel the topic has little relevance to our modern lives, even though the writers of the Bible gave the subject an inordinate amount of attention. According to the *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, there are 1,239 prophecies in the *Tanakh* (OT) and 578 in the Writings of the Apostles (NT) for a total of 1,817 prophetic messages expressed in 8,351 verses. That means prophecy constitutes nearly one-third of the Bible's 31,124 verses. Since the Bible is our guidebook for life, God obviously intended for prophecy to influence us in some way. But how? And why? Is prophecy still relevant? If so, why is it seemingly so unimportant to countless Christians around the world?

Why NOT Prophecy?

The prophets often spoke in a form of poetic allusion that may have rung true to the original audience, but leaves many modern readers scratching their heads in confusion. As a result, of the 10 least read books in the Bible, six are among the minor prophets, with Obadiah holding the dubious distinction of being the least read book in the entire canon of Scripture.

Further, of the top 100 most-cited Bible verses in systematic theology, only nine come from the *Tanakh* (OT). And finally, it has been suggested that the ratio of *Tanakh* to Writings of the Apostles (NT) sermons in the Church today is an alarming one to 10. It would seem that some pastors are perhaps as confused as their congregants. I have had the opportunity to discuss the importance of prophecy with many pastors around the world, very few of whom preach on the topic regularly and many not at all. The most common reason given is that they themselves are not convinced of the relevance of prophecy for today's Church and don't feel equipped to delve into a subject so immense, with the potential to offend or even frighten the flock.

Message or Messenger?

Most Christians today think of a prophet as one who can foresee the future and tell us what is going to happen and when. That shouldn't surprise us, since *Thesaurus.com* defines prophecy as

“a prediction,” “the foretelling of what is to come” or “a divinely inspired utterance.” The prophet then is the messenger, the one chosen to speak to the people on God’s behalf and convey His message, whatever it might be. The prophet’s task was to perceive the Word of God and speak it forth in obedience. The message was primary; the messenger secondary.

Judaism, however, takes a slightly different view. According to the Milstein Edition of *The Prophets* from the *Artscroll Series*, throughout the ages there were nearly as many prophets among the Jews as there were Israelites who left Egypt! Yet the prophecies of only 48 men and seven women have been recorded in the Scriptures. Even among those 48, in some cases very few of their prophecies are recorded. What does this say about the prophets’ role? Is it fair to say that the 53 whose prophecies are recorded were greater people than those who went unnoted?

It is clear, the author continues, that a prophet is not necessarily sent on a specific mission to deliver a message for eternity or even to his or her own generation. Essentially, a prophet is an individual who has purified his or her mind and nature to the point where he or she is able to receive the outpouring of God’s spirit upon himself or herself. The earlier prophets were thus called

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seers because they were divinely granted deeper insight, which enabled them to provide spiritual and practical guidance to the people. It wasn't until much later—when there was a need to send prophets to admonish the Jewish people—that the word *navi* (נביא), which means preacher, became the general appellation of a prophet.

It is very important to remember, the author notes, that even those prophets without such a mission, who never delivered a message on behalf of God, were by no means unimportant to the community. They made a crucial contribution to the people simply by their presence as personalities so closely in communion with God and by providing guidance to their contemporaries. It was from them that people gained advice and direction, an understanding of the challenges and obligations they faced and a true interpretation of the happenings of their time. They inspired their contemporaries to go in God's way, and their significance in the overall history of the Jewish people cannot be overstated. In this paradigm, the messenger is primary; the message secondary.

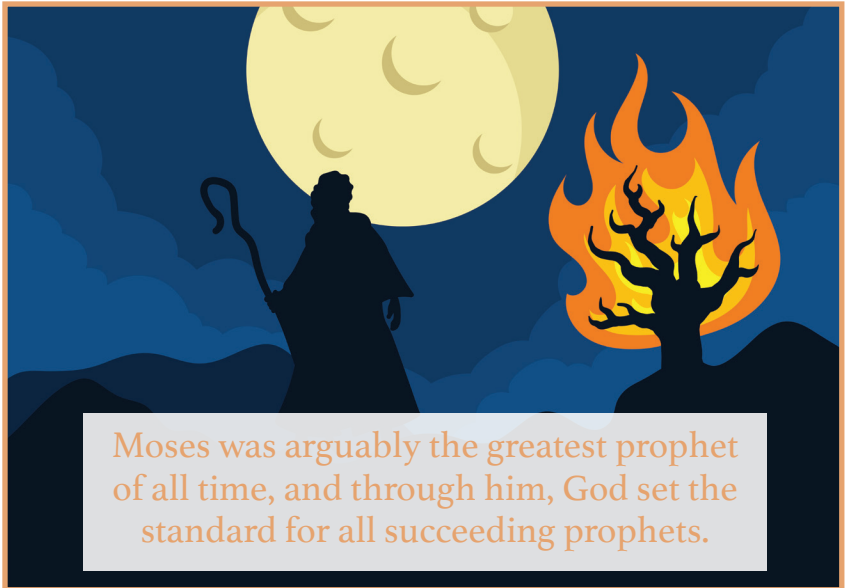
What did a Prophet Look Like?

Moses was arguably the greatest prophet of all time, and through him, God set the standard for all succeeding prophets. They would share characteristics that were critical to their ability to follow in his footsteps, whether they were called to deliver His words of correction to the nation or to encourage others through lives of intimate relationship with Him. In his book *Prophecy Past and Present*, author Clifford Hill delineates eight specific attributes of the prophet.

1. *They were sent*, and they knew it. They were messengers, not orators reciting God's words and making up their own speeches. Each could point to a specific personal encounter whereby they were called into the ministry of the prophet. For Moses, it was the burning bush (Exod. 3); Isaiah stood in the presence of the Lord and faced his own uncleanness (6:1–8); Jeremiah traced his call to his birth (1:5). They knew they were in God's service and not man's, and therefore, they were responsible to God and God alone for the message they brought.

2. *They were under God's authority*. Unlike the priests who oversaw religious rituals or the scribes who copied and

interpreted the Law, the prophets alone had the authority to cry, “Thus saith the Lord.” God gave them that authority because they were *under* authority. In Jeremiah 26:9, Jeremiah is asked why he is bringing a message of destruction. His response in verse 12 is simple but profound: “*The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house...*” In 2 Chronicles 18:12–13, we are told of Micaiah, who was being taken to speak to the king. On the



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way, he was cautioned to make sure he brought a “good” message. His response was, “...*whatever my God says...*” (v. 13). The prophets could not change the message for the convenience or comfort of men, no matter how powerful those men might be. For them, there was no authority greater than God’s.

3. *They were men and women of absolute obedience.* Once they had received a message from the Lord, there was no room for discussion. The consequences for anything other than 100% obedience in delivering it were profound. 1 Kings 13 relates the story of an unnamed prophet who fearlessly confronts the king, proclaiming the word of the Lord and faithfully following God’s instructions even down to the refusal of food or drink afterward. Yet on his way home, he strays from his instructions in one seemingly minor detail and the result is disaster and death.



*The Lord GOD has spoken!
Who can but prophesy?
Amos 3:8b*

4. *They were totally committed and would not be silenced.* Regardless of the opposition they faced—the threats, physical violence, intimidation or even imprisonment—they were compelled to fulfill their calling. “*The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?*” (Amos 3:8b).

5. *They had to be people of tremendous faith* to perform the tasks God gave them to do, and their faith was forged in the furnace of experience. They could trust the Lord because He had proved Himself faithful in every situation. They staked their lives on their understanding of His unchanging character. They had entered into the very throne room of God; they had heard His voice, and their faith could not be shaken.

6. *They were people of great compassion.* They spoke with tenderness of God’s love for the nation of Israel and recognized that even in the harshest of His prophetic messages, it was because of His love that He spoke so urgently when Israel was headed for disaster. The prophets were mirrors of a God who always longed to save His people and not condemn them.

7. *They were men and women of prayer,* identifying with the sins of the people and pleading with God on their behalf. They wept over the sins of the nation, sometimes arguing with God in defense of the Israelites. They often reminded Him of His

promises and pled with Him to deliver the people, not because of their own merit, but for the sake of His name among the nations. They were the Lord's intercessors for His chosen nation.

8. *They were patriots*, which *Dictionary.com* defines as "a person who loves, supports, defends his country and its interests with devotion." Their patriotic actions, however, were inspired by the fact that God had inextricably linked Himself to the nation of Israel. Their relationship with God meant they had to love, support and be devoted to His Land as well. They recognized that God's reputation was at the heart of every controversy He had with His people. His relationship with them was the movie screen on which He would reveal Himself to the entire world, and they knew their prophecies *would* see fulfillment. The people *would* be dispersed and then regathered. The nation of Israel *would* be reestablished. They staked their lives on it because they were patriots.

They were not leaders *per se*, in that they had no responsibility for Temple worship or for governance. They had no priestly functions, no political power and no party of followers. They were ordinary men and women who loved God passionately and were committed to living every moment of their lives in His service. They were often lonely, sometimes on the run and afraid in the face of great danger, but they had no interest in the approval of men. They desired only to be God's instruments of love, His voice to the world.

A Contrast Develops

With the advent of Christianity, a contrast developed between two different types of prophecy: one being the ministry of the prophet as we see in the *Tanakh* (OT); and the other the gift of prophecy that Paul said was available to all believers. However, the purpose of prophecy did not change. In the *Tanakh*, God spoke through the prophets in order to give guidance and direction to the nation of Israel. Particularly in times of crisis, they called the nation back to the center of His will so that Israel could fulfill its call as a light to the nations.

Similarly, the Writings of the Apostles (NT) make it clear that prophecy was the means through which God gave guidance and direction to the early believers in Jesus (Yeshua) as well, sometimes using a prophetic word to warn the young Church of

impending danger or difficulty. Paul was warned prophetically more than once, receiving divine guidance as to what specific actions he should take to save his own life. As such, prophecy was an integral part of the everyday life of the early Church. As the apostles spoke forth the Word of God revealed in the *Tanakh*, they functioned in the role of the prophet.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul also instructs the believers in Corinth to earnestly seek after the individual *gift* of prophecy and then spends a significant amount of time in several of his epistles teaching the young Church how to rightly use that gift. Clearly, the pattern God had set millennia before of using those in intimate relationship with Him as His spokespeople would continue.

As 21st-century Christians, we live as a part of a Church and in a world that are both desperate for true, divine revelation. Unfortunately, much of what is being recognized as prophecy today may not be the expression of God's heart at all, but rather the ideas of men. The Church has been constantly bombarded with timelines and conspiracy theories, leaving many Christians skeptical as to the value of prophecy in their lives today. A lack of



understanding of the true value of the prophetic and the deeply committed life of the prophet has left many in the Church unable to distinguish the mere words of men from a true and powerful declaration of the heart of God.

About the Message...

God has never stopped speaking to His children. His voice can be heard in the majesty of creation, in the laughter of a child, in the whisper of a loved one, the roar of thunder and a still small voice. And just as He did millennia ago, He continues to speak to us through His Word and through other believers. Clifford Hill gives the following list of tests to determine whether a message is from God or man.

1. Weigh each word against the Word of God. *Always* compare its content, its spirit and heart, to the revelation we already have. Any word of prophecy we might receive must line up with Scripture, or it is, indeed, a false prophecy.

2. Pray diligently that the Lord will give a witness of the Spirit, bearing testimony to the truth or falsity of a word.

3. Stand in the counsel of the Lord to hear His voice. Like Jeremiah, be willing to wait in silence, allowing Him to bring understanding.

4. Any legitimate word from the Lord will glorify Him. It will never be boastful, drawing attention to the messenger.

5. Remember, God's desire is always to save and not condemn. A look at the Hebrew prophets shows us that God's words are conditional, allowing for repentance and returning to Him.

6. In ancient Israel, a prophet was judged by the fulfillment of the word he brought. If his prophecy was not fulfilled in the time frame he gave, it was clearly not from God, and he was a false prophet. The same criteria apply today.

7. Finally, the prophets of old were men and women of unquestionable integrity. As a matter of fact, the moral character of the prophet was a major test applied by the Israelites and the early Church as well. We should do the same.

Clearly, God set no limit on the relevance of the remarkable prophecies we find in the Bible. They are as important today as they were when they were spoken millennia ago. I believe that in them He is giving insight and instruction regarding both the message and the messenger.

The Messenger

We are told in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, *“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* God would have us look to those ancient prophets and their commitment to life with Him as an example for our own lives. He would have us be an equally remarkable group of followers to be His expression to the world. He is looking for a listening people; an obedient people that will give 100%, 100% of the time; a courageous and faithful people who will not falter in their trust, regardless of the circumstances they encounter; a people filled with the fear of the Lord, committed to Him at all costs, willing to lay down their lives as were the prophets of old; a people under His authority, recognizing that they will answer to Him and Him alone for every word spoken in His name; a people of passionate love and deep compassion, knowing Him so intimately that no voice but His will be heard.

The Message

We are truly living in remarkable days, and whether we like it or not, God Himself encourages us to be aware of what is happening around us. It is important for us to know what the prophets have said about the days we are living in and then for us to be, God says, sober and vigilant, watching for the fulfillment of those prophecies. As we see them, we are not to be fearful, discouraged or depressed. Instead, God tells us to be filled with joy as we recognize that His coming really is drawing near!



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Finally, there is really no other mechanism as effective in establishing the validity of Scripture than that of prophecy fulfilled. If our faith ever waivers, all we need do is open the Bible and read what the prophets foretold about the return of the Jewish people, their reestablishment in their ancient homeland, their prosperity and strength as a nation, the deserts in bloom and the ancient cities rebuilt. All of this and more is happening in our lifetime. We are seeing the fulfillment of words spoken thousands of years ago by men and women who were called by God to hear His voice and speak His message. Prophecy is not only relevant today, it is incredibly exciting! What could be more relevant than to watch the God of the universe proving His faithfulness before our very eyes? It also comes as a call for us to become patriots of the same order as the prophets: loving, supporting, interceding for, advocating for and standing with those whom God has chosen as the apple of His eye (Zech. 2:8). As this becomes the reality in which we live, we will become the revelation of the nature and purpose of God to this generation as we radiate His glory to the world around us.

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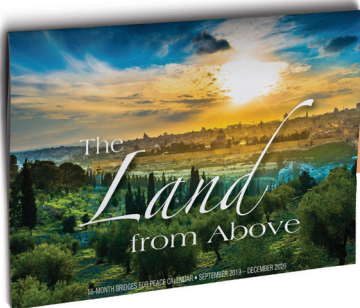
Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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