

Prophecy Then and Now

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In Messianic Jewish congregations, we encounter a variety of beliefs and attitudes about prophecy. I don't mean biblical prophecy; we all believe in that because we all believe the Bible. No, I mean contemporary prophecy – words ostensibly received by revelation today, and spoken in the Name of the Lord today.

Some of us came to the Lord amidst supernatural manifestations and, having experienced the supernatural at least once in our lives, it is easy for us to believe in, and be relaxed about, prophetic words that are, after all, supernatural. For others of us who have not had supernatural experiences or may have been disciplined in churches and congregations that were skeptical or even hostile to the supernatural, accepting prophecy may be less easy. [Ephesians 4:11](#) tells us that prophecy is a "gift of the Holy Spirit," and you are probably aware that there are leaders in the Body of Believers who contend that the gifts were only for "biblical" times and are not for today.

There is, of course, the other side of the coin – those who are quick to proclaim supernatural gifts where there are none, and even the few who are willing to falsify manifestations of the Holy Spirit; thankfully, there is no one like that at Ohev. More likely, some of us may be overly skeptical of the supernatural because somewhere in our past we were misled or defrauded. I confess that I am careful about supernatural claims for that very reason.

Let me tell you of an incident that occurred when I was a relatively new believer; it is not about prophecy, but about another manifestation of the supernatural; the principle, however, is the same. I once attended a church service where people occasionally fell to the floor and remained immobile. When the pastor concluded his message, congregants lined up to receive prayer, and when the pastor laid hands on them, each, in turn, fell to the floor. I stood back in amazement and asked someone standing near me what was going on. "Oh," he said, "They're being slain in the Spirit! They're receiving healing from God." Well, I wasn't convinced, so I decided to do some investigating. When I saw a pre-teen boy go down after he was prayed for, I approached him and asked him what he had experienced. "Not much, he replied." "So what made you fall down," I asked? "Oh," he said, "The pastor kept pushing on my head and everyone else fell down, so I did too." As you can see, that incident made an impression on me.

Now don't get me wrong. I believe that God's power can overcome a person and cause him to fall, and I have known some entirely trustworthy people who have fallen in the Spirit. I believe in God's supernatural power; it's just that I have seen false manifestations as well, so while I am respectful, I am also cautious. Now prophecy is a very special gift; in fact, I call it the "granddaddy of all the gifts" because all the other gifts of the Spirit make use of it. What I mean by that is that the essence of prophecy is the ability to hear God's voice, and operating in the other gifts also requires hearing God's voice.

So far as I can tell, the first person in the Bible to be called a prophet was Abraham, when God said to Avimelekh:

".. return the man's [meaning Abraham's] wife to him now. He is a prophet, and he will pray for you, so that you will live. But if you don't return her, know that you will certainly die- you and all who belong to you" (Genesis 20:7) .

So what did it mean for Abraham to be a prophet? Abraham heard God and spoke with God, but so did Avimelekh. In the Garden of Eden, it was common for Adam and Eve to speak with God, and one way to understand the Garden is that it was a place where one could commune with God continually and naturally. But Adam (and through him mankind) was banished from the Garden, for we read in Genesis 3:23-24:

Therefore ADONAI, God, sent him out of the garden of 'Eden to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. So he drove the man out, and he placed at the east of the garden of 'Eden the k'ruvim and a flaming sword which turned in every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.

The "life" "of the tree of life" was life with God; therefore when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, their normal life with God – their ability to hear God and speak with God about everyday matters – ceased. So! Were Adam and Eve prophets during the time they lived in the Garden of Eden? Was Noah a prophet when, years later, he heard God's voice and conversed with Him? Was Avimelekh a prophet for the same reason?

I would say "yes" for Noah, and "no" for Adam, Eve, and Avimelekh, and here is why. A prophet is a person who can not only hear God's voice, but is instructed by God to convey His words to those who cannot (or sometimes can but do not) hear. Adam, Eve, and Avimelekh heard God's voice and conversed with Him for their own purposes; it was part of their relationship with Him. Noah, on the other hand, was instructed to build an ark and was told by God:

"Come into the ark, you and all your household; for I have seen that you alone in this generation are righteous before me." (Genesis 7:1)

Noah was required to repeat what God told him to his household – not only for their survival, but for the survival of mankind; that, in my opinion, is what made Noah a prophet. And it is the same with Moses who, years later, heard God's voice, received the *Torah*, and gave it to the Israelites. By Moses' time, very few individuals had the ability to hear God's voice and, those who did have the gift, possessed it – not for themselves – but to help their fellow Israelites communicate with God.

And so it was with all of the "Old Covenant prophets," and even with Saul who was able to temporarily prophesy when he came under the influence of the Holy Spirit (1 Samuel 10:6-13). And let's not forget my all-time favorite prophet Hee-Haw! That's my name for Balaam's donkey that, you recall, saw an angel in his path that Balaam could not initially see, and spoke warnings to Balaam to save him (Numbers 22:9-35).

Well, that's how it was under the Old Covenant but, even that early in human history, God revealed that he would be sending us a very special prophet, after which, things would change radically. It is recorded in Deuteronomy 18:18-19, which reads:

'I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I order him. Whoever doesn't listen to my words, which he will speak in my name, will have to account for himself to me.'

The test of the legitimacy of a prophet was spelled out clearly in Deuteronomy 18:21-22, which says:

'You may be wondering, 'How are we to know if a word has not been spoken by ADONAI?' When a prophet speaks in the name of ADONAI, and the prediction does not come true- that is, the word is not fulfilled- then ADONAI did not speak that word. The prophet who said it spoke presumptuously; you have nothing to fear from him.'

The penalty for prophesying falsely was pretty unforgiving in those days, for in verse 20 we read:

'But if a prophet presumptuously speaks a word in my name which I didn't order him to say, or if he speaks in the name of other gods, then that prophet must die.'

Years went by, and we come to Jeremiah's prophecy of a New Covenant, which we find in Jeremiah 31:32-33a(33)-34a:

"For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra'el after those days," says ADONAI: "I will put my Torah within them and write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will any of them teach his fellow community member or his brother, 'Know ADONAI'; for all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest;"

Jeremiah not only prophesied that there would be a New Covenant, but that through that Covenant, ordinary people would come to possess the chief attribute of a prophet, which is knowing God intimately via the Holy Spirit.

And that, of course, brings us to the New Covenant that was brought by Yeshua, and made permanent by the Holy Spirit's coming upon men at *Shavu'ot*. I contend that Yeshua (and not the Holy Spirit) initiated the New Covenant because, had the New Covenant not been available to Yeshua's contemporaries, He could not have said any of the following:

John 10:27-28a: *"My sheep listen to my voice, I recognize them, they follow me, and I give them eternal life."*

Mark 16:15-18: *Then he said to them, "As you go throughout the world, proclaim the Good News to all creation. Whoever trusts and is immersed will be saved; whoever does not trust will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who do trust: in my name they will*

drive out demons, speak with new tongues, not be injured if they handle snakes or drink poison, and heal the sick by laying hands on them."

Mark 14:24: *He said to them, "This is my blood, which ratifies the New Covenant, my blood shed on behalf of many people."*

The New Covenant was more fully developed on the *Shavuot* following Yeshua's death, that some call "Pentecost." Just prior to that, Yeshua walked the earth in His risen form, taught His disciples for forty days and, before He departed to be with His Father, instructed His disciples to remain in Jerusalem; He said:

"Now I am sending forth upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been equipped with power from above." (Luke 24:49)

The disciples did as Yeshua directed them, and remained in Jerusalem. Finally,

The festival of Shavu'ot arrived, and the believers all gathered together in one place. Suddenly there came a sound from the sky like the roar of a violent wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire, which separated and came to rest on each one of them. They were all filled with the Ruach HaKodesh and began to talk in different languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak. (Acts 2:1-4)

Amazed and confused, they all went on asking each other, "What can this mean?" But others made fun of them and said, "They've just had too much wine!" Then Kefa stood up with the Eleven and raised his voice to address them: "You Judeans, and all of you staying here in Yerushalayim! Let me tell you what this means! Listen carefully to me! These people aren't drunk, as you suppose- it's only nine in the morning. No, this is what was spoken about through the prophet Yo'el: 'ADONAI says: "In the Last Days, I will pour out from my Spirit upon everyone. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my slaves, both men and women, will I pour out from my Spirit in those days; and they will prophesy." (Acts 2:12-18)

That is how it began, and the Holy Spirit has indwelt believers and enabled us to prophesy ever since. Some prophecy is given in tongues and some in native languages that are understood. Some prophecy is given publicly, and some privately. But mostly, when we hear God's voice, it is not for others, but for our own guidance, in which case we call it "revelation." Revelation, or the ability to hear God's voice, is available to each and every one of us and, now and then, God will call on one or another of us to prophesy as well. At Ohev, we call it "Giving a word."

Although all New Covenant believers have the ability to hear God and from time to time prophesy, not all are gifted to be prophets. Prophets in the New Covenant function differently than prophets under Moses, as we may see in Ephesians 4:11-13:

Furthermore, he gave some people as emissaries, some as prophets, some as proclaimers of the Good News, and some as shepherds and teachers. Their task is to equip God's people for

the work of service that builds the body of the Messiah, until we all arrive at the unity implied by trusting and knowing the Son of God, at full manhood, at the standard of maturity set by the Messiah's perfection.

So you see, while all New Covenant believers are able to prophesy, the special function of the New Covenant prophet is to use his or her prophetic gift to equip the body for God's work of service. That is different than under Moses.

You may recall that earlier, I referred to prophecy as "the granddaddy of all the other gifts;" well, I derive my understanding of it from the passage in Ephesians that I just read. Emissaries (apostles) need to hear God's voice to know how to lead intercongregationally. Evangelists need to hear God's voice to guide them on how to present the Good News to unbelievers. Pastors need to hear God's voice to guide them on how to counsel their flock. And teachers need to hear God's voice to understand and be able to convey the deep and sometimes hidden meaning of the Scriptures.

When words are brought forth here at Ohev, because we all have access to the Holy Spirit, it is all of our responsibilities to discern the accuracy of what we have heard, and to reject what we deem mistakenly-given or incorrect. The Bereans took this responsibility seriously, for we read in Acts 17:10-11:

But as soon as night fell, the brothers sent Sha'ul and Sila off to Berea. As soon as they arrived, they went to the synagogue. Now the people here were of nobler character than the ones in Thessalonica; they eagerly welcomed the message, checking the Tanakh every day to see if the things Sha'ul was saying were true.

We also read in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22:

Don't quench the Spirit, don't despise inspired messages. But do test everything- hold onto what is good, but keep away from every form of evil.

How then should we test what we hear? First ask, does it line up with what is written in Scripture? That is the first and most basic test. Then ask, does the Spirit within us bear witness that the word is both true and has come from God? A word can be true, and yet God may not have spoken it at that particular time. Finally, is the word edifying and consistent with other things we know? 1 Corinthians 14 has much to say about prophesying with tongues and interpreting tongues, but verses 29-33 has this to say about prophecy in general:

Let two or three prophets speak, while the others weigh what is said. And if something is revealed to a prophet who is sitting down, let the first one be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, with the result that all will learn something and all will be encouraged. Also, the prophets' spirits are under the prophets' control; for God is not a God of unruliness but of shalom.

Sometimes God speaks to us, but what He says is for us only and not for the rest of the body. If that is the case, we shouldn't speak it. Sometimes God gives us a word for the body, but the

timing or occasion is not right. If that is the case, we shouldn't speak it either. Notice that the 1 Corinthians Scripture says "*the prophets' spirits are under the prophets' control;*"

At Ohev, we allow any member to bring forth words (provided that they are non-directive). If anyone has a word that is directive (e.g. "God says that Ohev should double Rabbi Rudolph's salary"), that word is clearly from God! Well, maybe not, so such directive words should be given to the elders for their discernment before they are spoken. We at Ohev believe that it is a proper role of the elders to judge prophecy for the safety of the community, and we will sometimes ask a member to stop prophesying for a season and pray for discernment. We derive our understanding of this authority from Hebrews 13:17, which says:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your lives, as people who will have to render an account.

There is much more that I can say, but I will close with this advice. Develop your gift of hearing God's voice in small groups such as your *chavurot*, where your words can be discerned and mistakes corrected by your friends whom you trust. In the New Covenant, the ability to prophesy has been made available to everyone, and we therefore need no longer fear the penalty of law for miss-hearing God. Over time, your accuracy and confidence in hearing God will increase, and you will be emboldened to share what you have heard more broadly. Then, when you do share, preface your words with "I believe I heard God say .." or something similar that invites the discernment of your elders and fellow congregants.

Thank you for listening to this message that I believe God gave me, and that I humbly offer for your discernment.