Old Testament Prophets As Types for New Testament Leaders

by Francis H. Geis  Member, CBE Front Range Chapter

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “Old Testament prophecy”? Do you have a vivid picture of Elijah, valiantly opposing King Ahab and denouncing the false prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel? Or do you think of the Christmas story, where the scholars of Herod’s court tell the king that the Messiah, in fulfillment of prophecy (Micah 5:2), is to be born in Bethlehem of Judea?

I think most of us, if asked to explain the nature and function of “Old Testament prophecy,” would define it in terms of foretelling—that is, we would say that the prophets had visions of the distant future, in which they predicted such things as the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of His Kingdom on earth; the final judgment; and the new heavens and new earth. And indeed, the true prophets of God foretold and recorded these things in their writings that have been preserved and handed on to us in Scripture. But if we view OT prophecy solely or primarily as prediction, then we have failed to understand the true nature and function of prophecy in ancient Israel.

I. The Prophet As The Communicator and Interpreter of God’s Will

As Dr. Gleason Archer has pointed out, the primary task of the OT prophet was not to predict the future, but “to tell forth the will of God which he had communicated by revelation.” And the following evidence tends to confirm Dr. Archer’s affirmation regarding the primary nature and function of OT prophecy.

First, there is what we may loosely describe as the “etymological” evidence. The Hebrew word שָׁמַע (naba), which means “to prophecy,” has an uncertain etymological source. Some scholars trace it back to the passive form of the Akkadian word nabû, which means “to be called.” However, as Dr. H.E. Freeman reminds us, though the etymology of שָׁמַע may be uncertain, its usage in the Old Testament itself is not. For in a number of OT texts (e.g., Exod. 7:1-2; I Kings 22:8; Jer. 9:27; Ezek 37:10), شָׁמַע denotes the speaker as “one who speaks for another.” Thus the שָׁמַע (Hebrew word for “prophet”) was one who spoke for God. This is confirmed by the Septuagint (LXX), a prominent early Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament produced in Egypt around 300 B.C. It consistently translates שָׁמַע with προφηταὶ, a Greek word which means “one who speaks in behalf of another.”

Secondly, the Old Testament itself contains a wealth of evidence that demonstrates that prophecy was primarily the forth-telling of God’s revealed will to Israel by appointed spokesmen. Consider Moses, the great Lawgiver and Prophet of Israel. The Scripture sums up the uniqueness and importance of his leadership and prophetic ministry in these words: “And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the Lord had said...Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt...” (Deut. 34:5-11, NIV).

Furthermore, Deuteronomy 18:14-22 informs us that not only was Moses the greatest and most influential prophetic teacher of Israel, but that he was also the prototype of all who would fill the prophetic role in Israel, including Messiah the Prophet, who would be “a prophet like Moses,” bearing the same mediatorial relation to the Messianic community that Moses had borne to ancient Israel. As for his literary achievements, no one can dispute that Deuteronomy, the great “Book of the Covenant,” was the greatest and most influential of Moses’ prophetic writings.

Nevertheless, when we examine Moses’ life and prophetic ministry as set forth in the Pentateuch, we soon discover that a very small percentage of his prophetic teaching was concerned with prediction of Israel’s future. Instead, it is very evident that Moses was primarily called and equipped by God to be the supreme preacher and teacher of true religion in Israel; to show Israel how, as God’s covenant people, to worship and serve the LORD their God in true righteousness and holiness. Consider his introduction to the Book of the Covenant (Cf. Deut. 4:1-40), which he addressed to Israel while they were still in Moab. If the text in Deut. 4 makes anything clear, it is that the main thrust of Moses’ prophetic teaching and ministry was to enable the covenant nation to know and fear God, and to instruct them how to faithfully and effectively serve Him in the Promised Land. If this was true of Moses, the prototype of all true prophets in Israel (including the Messiah, the Mediator and Prophet of the New Covenant, cf. Isa. 42:1-7), should we not expect this to be the major thrust of all true OT prophets as well?

The next great OT prophet we note is Samuel whose story is recorded in the early chapters of 1 Samuel. He was the last of Israel’s judges—that is, the last of the charismatic leaders raised up by God to instruct and govern Israel, as well as deliver her from enemy nations, before the establishment of the monarchy. But he was also the first of the great prophets in the period prior to the establishment of the David’s monarchy, who established the first training school for prophets in Israel.

As we examine the record of his prophetic ministry, we find that Samuel served as God’s spokesman to Israel’s priests and first two kings (Saul and David), instructing them and counseling them as to how to obey the LORD in all their religious and civil capacities as national leaders (cf. 1 Sam. 7:2-17; 10:25), as well as rebuking them sternly for apostasy and hypocrisy (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1-21; 13:1-14). Samuel’s primary function as a prophet, as these texts demonstrate, was to be a teacher and preacher of true religion in Israel. He served as God’s advisor to the priests and kings, while remaining a guardian and defender of true religion against the idolatry and apostasy to which the other civil and religious leaders of his day tended. (This is also true of Gad and Nathan, who were his immediate successors; men who may have been trained
the prophetic ministry in his own school for prophets.)

But very little, if anything, is recorded regarding Samuel's foretelling the distant future of Israel. His prophetic teaching is primarily characterized by instruction, guidance, rebuke and exhortation. Now let us consider Elijah and Elisha, the greatest prophets in Israel during the period of the Divided Kingdoms.

As we examine the record in 1 and 2 Kings, we find that these men, like Samuel before them, were divinely appointed guardians and defenders of true religion in Israel against the false religion of Baalism, introduced by the apostate King Ahab. These two prophets boldly confronted the apostate priests and kings of the Northern Kingdom, rebuking them for leading the people into idolatry and pronouncing stern judgments upon them that God carried out to the last letter. Though much is recorded of their performing miraculous signs and of their urgent calls to Israel to repent of its idolatry and to return to the true God of their ancestors, yet very little is said about their engaging in predictive prophecy.

II. The Old Testament's Theology of Prophecy Expounded

This all goes to demonstrate that though predictive prophecy was an important element in an OT prophet's ministry and message, it was not the primary role or function of the prophetic office. The man or woman whom God called to the prophet's office was called to preach and teach the Law; act as guardians against religious apostasy in the nation; and to warn and rebuke the nation when it wandered away from God and His will revealed in the Law given through Moses. This view of prophecy's primary nature and function is set forth by the Old Testament itself. In 2 Kings 17, when explaining why God's judgment fell first on the northern kingdom of Israel and then later on the southern kingdom of Judah, the writer states, "They did wicked things that provoked the LORD to anger. They worshipped idols, though the LORD had said, "You shall not do this." The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets."

"But they would not listen and were stiff-necked as their fathers who did not trust in the LORD their God. They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them...So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence." (2 Kings 17:11-18 NIV)

Note that in the text above, two important facts are stated about the ministry and message of the Old Testament prophets: First, the prophets are clearly portrayed as God's spokespersons to Israel, called and sent by Him to rebuke Israel for its apostasy and idolatry, and to urge the nation to repent and to return to the LORD. Secondly, they are portrayed as those through whom God had delivered "the entire Law" to the nation of Israel. And it is this second fact that calls for further observation and comment.

Strictly speaking, it was through Moses, and him alone, that God had given the Law to Israel; first at Mt. Sinai and then in a second, fuller form at Mt. Pisgah. No later prophet could truly lay any claim to being equal to Israel's great Lawgiver, for as Scripture said no other prophet had arisen in Israel "like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face". And this view of Moses' singular importance as Israel's great Prophet and Lawgiver is still held among orthodox Jews.

Yet the author of 2 Kings tells us that "the entire Law" God had commanded Israel's ancestors to obey had also been delivered to his contemporary generation through His "servants the prophets." At first glance, this assertion would seem to be a glaring contradiction of historical and biblical fact.

However, this "apparent contradiction" is easily resolved once it is recognized that the writer is emphasizing, by means of hyperbole, that the prophets were the divinely appointed guardians and expositors of the Mosaic Law, whom God had raised up to hold Israel's apostasy in check and to perpetuate true religion among the people. The revelation God gave the prophets primarily confirmed and expanded upon that which had originally been given to and written down by Moses.

This relationship between the Mosaic Law and the teaching of the prophets is not some novelty conjured up by this author. No, it is a relationship long recognized by Biblical scholars. J. Barton Payne, a well-known evangelical OT scholar, explains: "Biblical prophecy was based upon, and was a development out of, the Law (Isa. 8:20; Dan. 9:11). God's revelation to Moses was, in fact, qualitatively superior to that granted to the prophets (Num. 12:7) and no subsequent prophet became Moses' equal (Deut. 34:10). Yet new situations would arise that would demand new applications of Mosaic legislation." As E.J. Young points out: 'After the entrance into Canaan (God's elect) would need more detailed instructions as to the way in which the Lord would have him walk.'

"It is significant, in this regard, that Amos 2:10, 11 describes the historical appearance of the prophets as a logical sequel to the previous actions God had taken on Israel's behalf, namely, the deliverance from Egypt, the forty years of guidance in the wilderness, and the bestowal of the Promised Land. Specifically, the inhabitants of Canaan had become addicted to the oracles of spiritists; and it was the need to counteract this evil influence that occasioned the rise of regular prophecy (Deut. 18:14,15). It should be further noted that prophecy first came into prominence in the years that followed the first battle of Ebenezer in about 1090 B.C. Because of this defeat, the Philistines captured the ark (of the covenant), destroyed the central sanctuary of Shiloh, and brought about the death of the high priest Eli. Thus, it was when the established institutions of Israel were in abeyance that God raised up Samuel the prophet to reestablish and to confirm the faith once delivered through Moses. Similarly, throughout the nation's history, the prophets fulfilled the role of guardians of the theocracy."

Dr. Gleason Archer, another well-known evangelical OT scholar, says regarding the link between Moses and the prophets: "In the earliest period, the prophetic function was assigned to the Levitical priests, who were charged with the responsibility of teaching the implications of the Mosaic Law for daily conduct in the practical issues of life. But even the Torah envisioned the possibility of a special class of prophets distinct from the priests
and playing the role analogous to that of Moses (cf. Deut.18—a passage which not only predicts the Messianic Prophet but also establishes the prophetic order as such). As the priesthood became increasingly professionalistic in attitude and lax in practice (as for example Hophni and Phineas, sons of Eli) a new teaching order arose to maintain the integrity of the covenant relationship in the heart of Israel. 

Consequently, I do not think it is stretching the truth too far to suggest that the primary function of prophets in ancient Israel was that of promoting and defending the true revealed religion of Israel, with predictions of the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom being an important auxiliary to their overall message and ministry.

III. Men and Women Whom God Called To Be Prophets

Whom did God call and equip for this important ministry in ancient Israel? As we examine the OT texts, we discover that both men and women were called and equipped by God for prophetic ministry in Israel. Most of us know something about Moses and the other male prophets. So I want to say something about that "great company of women who proclaimed" God's Word in Israel (Ps.68:11 Hebrew text).

Miriam is the first woman in the Bible who is numbered among the prophets of God. She led the congregation in worship after Israel's great deliverance at the Red Sea (cf. Exod. 15:19-21). And Num. 12:2 indicates that she, like Aaron and Moses, taught and instructed the people. So valued and esteemed was her prophetic leadership that, generations later, the prophet Micah used her as an illustration of God's great gifts to Israel—gifts which should motivate the people of Micah's day to return to the Lord their God (cf. Micah 6:1-6).

The next prophet we meet in Scripture is Deborah, whose story is told in Judges 4-5. She was a judge and prophet who God raised up to be "a mother in Israel." As a judge and prophetess, she not only expounded and interpreted the Mosaic Law but also heard and settled various civil disputes. And she was the one who led the people in worship when they celebrated Israel's great victory over the Canaanites at Mt. Tabor. Her renown as a faithful teacher of the Mosaic Law was commemo-rated by later rabbis in the Palestinian Targum on Judges, where they praise her as one who "did not cease to give exposition of the Torah." 

Huldah is the next prophetess Scripture introduces to us. She was a resident of Jerusalem and the wife of the Temple Wardrobe Keeper, Shallum (cf. 2 Chr. 34:14-33). She exercised her prophetic ministry during Josiah's reign, and so was a contemporary of the prophets Jeremiah and Zephaniah. When the long lost Book of the Covenant (i.e., either the Pentateuch as a whole or Deuteronomy in particular) was rediscovered during Josiah's rebuilding of the Temple, the national leaders consulted her. She explained to Josiah's representatives that, just as He had warned in the Law, God would soon judge the nation for its apostasy and idolatry. It was her exposition of the Law that motivated King Josiah to make every effort to purge the land of idolatry and to renew its covenantal relationship with the Lord. Thus, by consulting her and obeying her message, the king and other civil authorities recognized Huldah as a religious authority on equal footing with Jeremiah and Zephaniah. And this record of Huldah's prophetic ministry further demonstrates that prophecy involved inspired exposition and application of the Mosaic revelation.

Finally, among the last of the OT era prophets we meet Anna. Her story appears in Luke 2. She lived in the transitional period between the end of the OT era of Law and the dawning of the promised Messianic Age, like John the Baptist, who was the official prophetic herald of Christ. Luke portrays her as a good and godly woman who "never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37). He also portrays her as a teacher and interpreter of OT Messianic prophecy who, when shown by the Holy Spirit, began to proclaim that the infant Jesus was the Messiah who would redeem Israel and usher in the long promised Messianic Age: "Coming up to them (i.e., Simeon, Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus) at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem." (Luke 2:38).

Now the most interesting thing about these women is that there is nothing in Scripture that in any way downplays or devalues their prophetic ministry, not suggests that by engaging in such ministry they were performing a role in Hebrew society contrary to God's revealed will. Indeed, J. Barton Payne argues that the Mosaic Law itself made a provision for women to participate fully in community worship and to be put in certain civil/religious offices. He states: "Another corollary of the older testament is that of the social rights of women. For in the God of the covenant there is not only 'neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond or free,' but also 'neither male nor female' (Gal. 3:28). In the theocracy of Israel women had, in fact, a position of equality before God which was unique in the cultural patterns of the ancient Near East. Women held every office in Hebrew society: prophetess (2 Kings 22:14; Neh. 6:14), judge (Judges 4:4), even queen (though a wicked usurper, 2 Kings 11:3). Only the priesthood had no feminine representative, perhaps because of the physical exertions required for in the service (cf. 'heave' offerings, Exod. 29:27). ... Women were equally responsible for obedience to the Law (Deut. 31:12; Neh. 8:2) The one stressed exception is that a woman's husband might cancel the wife's vow (Num. 30:6-8). This, however, appears to have been enacted because the welfare of the family as a whole might be involved....Only the males among the Hebrews were required to attend the three annual feasts (Exod. 23:17), but this specification seems to have been a humane concession due to childbirth and to the woman's responsibility for the children (cf. 1 Sam. 2:22). She possessed full rights of participation when she could attend. Her restriction to a separate, lower "court of women" was an inter-testamental and un-Biblical innovation that developed out of corrupted Judaism."

IV. Implications for the Church Today

Now if God could call and equip women for this office and ministry without violating their roles as wives and mothers in ancient Israel, why can He not do so in the Church today?

Indeed, in light of what Joel 2:28-32 has to say about the Messianic Age, the "New Age of Prophecy", these OT women and their prophetic ministries are of typological significance for the
kinds of ministries to which God may call and equip women in the Church. For the Church, according to the Apostle Peter (Acts 2:14-39), is the Messianic community envisioned by Joel 2:28-32. And in this community, according to Joel's prophecy, all members, regardless of age, sex or social standing, will possess the Holy Spirit and be called to be prophetic representatives of the Messiah.

Therefore, evangelicals must answer these questions regarding the roles of women in Christian leadership and ministry: If in the OT God called and equipped women to be civil and religious leaders who were engaged in teaching and counseling ministries to the nation as a whole, without violating their "roles" as wives and mothers, then why does the modern evangelical church continue to refuse to let Christian women share fully and equally in the same priestly and prophetic functions within the new Messianic community—which functions Joel predicted God would both call them to and enable them to do? Moreover, if the Protestant doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" is true, then why does the Church prohibit half of its members from full, equal partnership and participation in public worship and ministry? Either the traditionalist teaching on women's roles in the Church is wrong, or the honorable Protestant doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" (which has Joel 2:28-32 and I Peter 2:9-10 as its biblical foundation) is wrong. Logic and consistent Biblical interpretation demand we decide one way or another.

END NOTES


8. When speaking of "typological significance", I'm referring, of course, to typology and typological interpretation. By typology I mean that certain OT persons, events and institutions prefigure NT persons, events and institutions, with a direct and analogous correspondence between type and antitype. On this G.R. Osborne, a NT scholar, has written the following:

"Type...in biblical times denoted both original model or prototype and the copy that resulted. In the NT the latter was labeled the antitype, and this was used in two directions: (1) the correspondence between two historical situations like the flood and baptism (1 Peter 3:21) or two figures like Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:14); (2) the correspondence between the heavenly pattern and its earthly counterpart, e.g. the divine original behind the earthly tent/tabernacle (Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5; 9:24).

"It is important to distinguish type from symbol and allegory. A symbol has a meaning apart from its normal semantic field and goes beyond it to stand for an abstract concept, e.g. cross=life, fire=judgment. Allegory is a series of metaphors in which each one adds an element to form a composite picture of the message, e.g., in the good shepherd allegory (John 10) each part carries meaning. Typology, however, deals with the principle of analogic fulfillment...Therefore, biblical typology involves an analogical correspondence in which earlier events, persons and places in salvation history become patterns by which later events and the like are interpreted.

It has increasingly been recognized that typology expresses the basic hermeneutic, indeed the attitude or perspective, by which both OT and NT writers understood themselves and their predecessors. Each new community in the ongoing development of salvation history viewed itself analogously in terms of the past. This is true within the OT as well as in the NT use of the OT. ("Typology", The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Baker Book House, 1984).