

The Final Word

*A biblical response
to the case for
tongues and
prophecy today*

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O. Palmer Robertson

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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Chapter One

Prophecy Today?

**1. THE ORIGIN OF PROPHECY ACCORDING
TO THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Biblical prophecy had its origins in the Old Testament, which is a fact of some significance. Prophecy is not a distinctly New Testament phenomenon, but one which dates back to the most ancient experiences of God's people. But when and where did prophecy first arise? Surprisingly, prophecy did not have its origins in the age of the great eighth-century B.C. figures such as Isaiah, Micah and Hosea. Instead, prophecy began in a much more ancient setting.

Moses was the fountainhead of the prophetic movement in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, Old Testament prophecy reached its point of highest glory with Moses. Contrary to all concepts of an evolutionary development of religion in Israel, the apex of the prophetic movement found its expression in Moses, the original prophet and law-giver in Israel. He played a unique role as mediator of the word of God to the people of Israel.

In the days before Moses, God spoke personally to the heads of the various patriarchal families. The fatherly head

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would then communicate the word of God to his clan. But how was God to communicate his word to a host of over a million people as they came out of Egypt? Would the Lord reveal himself simultaneously to 600,000 heads of families? Or would he continue throughout the subsequent ages of Israel's history to thunder with his own voice from heaven as he did at Sinai?

God's people themselves had strong feelings on this matter. They pleaded with Moses: give us a substitute for this terrifying experience of hearing the thunder of God's voice (*Deut.* 18:16). In response to the plea of the people, God provided a prophetic mediator and established the prophetic office. One man would receive the word of God in the mountain and subsequently mediate the word to the trembling people below. In this way prophecy had its origins.

Several significant conclusions may be reached about the nature of biblical prophecy as a consequence of the circumstances surrounding its establishment. The origins of prophecy reveal matters of continuing significance about the essence of the phenomenon.

a. *The small, simple voice of the prophet substitutes for all the awesome signs of Sinai.* The thunderous voice of God, the lightning, the fire, the smoke, the earthquake, the peal of the trumpet growing ever louder — all these frightening phenomena find their replacement in the voice of a single Israelite speaking among his brothers. Despite its relatively quiet tone, every word of the prophet comes as the very voice of God.

b. *The origin of the truly prophetic word is not to be found in the subjective experiences of a man.* The prophet is not hallucinating when he declares, 'Thus says the Lord.' God's own word has come to the prophet, and its vehicle of

communication is the chosen man's voice. God, not the subjective experiences of man, originates the prophetic word.

c. *The word of the prophet is not primarily predictive in nature.* Moses' main task in delivering the law at Sinai was not to predict the future, but to declare God's revealed will. Not a single prediction is found in the 'ten words', the heart of the revelation communicated through Moses.

The common distinction between the 'forth-telling' of the prophetic word and the 'fore-telling' of the future by the prophet must be understood correctly. From the beginning, the 'telling forth' of God's word was just as much a revelation of the infallible, inerrant and perfect word of God as was his 'fore-telling' of the future. It simply is not the case that the speaking forth of the prophet on various issues of the day was a kind of 'preaching' with diminished authority, while his 'fore-telling' of the future was inspired, inerrant and infallible in its character.

As a matter of fact, the essence of prophetism is always defined in the Bible in terms of this 'speaking forth' of the very word of God, whether or not it involved a foretelling of the future. Occasionally the prophet might predict a future event. Obviously, this kind of insight could occur only by divine revelation. But the essence of prophecy was not determined by the predictive element, but by the nature of the prophet's utterance as being the very word of God.

Geerhardus Vos addresses this subject in his article on 'The Idea of "Fulfilment" of Prophecy in the Gospels'. With respect to the nature of prophecy, he says:

In connection with the foregoing [the idea of the fulfilment of prophecy], the question may be raised, What is precisely the force of the 'pro' in the name 'prophet'? Does 'prophet' mean 'foreteller' or does it

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mean 'forthteller', i.e. 'the one who speaks forth a word revealed to him by God'? In the Hebrew *nabhi* the latter finds expression, and it is, so to speak, an unexpressed circumstance that the word forthspoken in many cases happens to be a 'prediction'.¹

Prophecy should not be defined essentially as a foretelling of the future. Instead, it is the forthtelling of a revelation from God which on occasion also may involve the prediction of future events.

This perspective on the essence of prophecy is important for evaluating the question of the continuation of prophecy today. Obviously, no one can foretell infallibly the specifics of a future event, as was the case in biblical prophecy, unless one has experienced a direct revelation from God. But it is equally true that no one can 'tell forth' the word of God in the prophetic sense apart from experiencing a direct revelation from God. Whether as 'fore-teller' or 'forth-teller', the prophet communicated revelation from God. If a person affirms that biblical prophecy continues today in either of its basic forms, it should be clear that he is expressing belief that revelation continues today. While a contemporary preacher may be 'prophetic' in his pulpit ministry, he is not 'prophesying' in the biblical sense as seen in the history of the origins of prophetism.

d. A further conclusion may be reached with respect to the nature of prophecy on the basis of its origins as preserved in Scripture. *The ultimate goal of God's covenant cannot be realised so long as a prophetic figure must stand between the Lord and his people.*

God's purpose in the covenant was to be one with his people. In establishing a covenant relationship, the Lord binds himself intimately to his people. But that closeness of relationship which God intended by the covenant cannot

be achieved so long as a prophetic mediator must stand between God and the people. So long as a mediator must run from the top of the mountain to the people below, covenantal unity has not been fully realised.

This point is emphasised by Paul in his statement that 'a mediator does not speak of one' (*Gal. 3:20*). The presence of a mediator implicitly suggests a separation of people from one another. Only if God himself should become the one who mediates the divine word could the oneness of fellowship intended by the covenant be fulfilled. Then the need for the intermediary work of the prophetic figure would come to an end.

This perspective on the final goal of prophetism is confirmed by the testimony of the new covenant documents. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the finality of the prophetic revelation as it is found in Jesus Christ. Previously God spoke in many different ways through many different prophetic mediators. But now he has spoken with finality in a Son (*Heb. 1:1*). When the prophetic revelation comes directly through Jesus Christ, then the ultimate goal of the covenant has been realised. Experiencing the revelation of God through the Son means being one with God himself.

2. FOUNDATIONAL PASSAGES ON PROPHECY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The historical context of the origin of prophetism in Israel provides a firm foundation for understanding the true nature of prophecy as it is manifest in subsequent history. This understanding finds significant elucidation in several other foundational passages on prophecy in the Old Testament. Essential to an appreciation of the role of prophetism in the new covenant is this old covenant background. Let us consider the following passages:

A call for freshness, spontaneity and life in worship has been resounding through the churches of the English-speaking world, together with a desire to hear God speaking here and now to his people. Many have called for a return to the pattern of worship found in 1 Corinthians 14, merging the biblical emphasis of the Reformation with the vitality of the modern Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.

Dr O. Palmer Robertson, pastor and seminary teacher, currently Vice-Chancellor of African Bible University in Uganda, argues from Scripture that preoccupation with tongues and prophecy shows a failure to grasp the fullness of New Testament privileges. The Christ of the Scriptures is the Final Word. All the church will ever need is to be found in him.

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