

backbone of the godly kingdom over which David ruled.

The bringing up of the ark

When David became king over all Israel, he immediately did three things: he took the city of Jerusalem and made it his capital (2 Sam. 5:6ff.), he defeated the Philistine threat to his kingdom (2 Sam. 5:17ff.), and he brought the ark into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6). David then set the family of Asaph to sing before the ark, and delivered to them the Psalm that is recorded for our learning in 1 Chronicles 16. The purpose of this psalm was to “shew forth” (v. 23), “preached” in Psalm 40:9, the salvation of God to all nations. So faithful were the men of the house of Asaph that they continued to sing this psalm for over 600 years!

What did the Spirit through David “preach” in this psalm? Notice first the huge emphasis on God and His works and how little space there is for the doings of man. “Yahweh” occurs fifteen times in the twenty-eight verses of the psalm. The emphasis throughout the psalm is on “His name”, “His deeds”, “His wondrous works”, “His

strength”, “His judgments”, “His covenant”, etc. David encouraged Israel to seek their God, to sing His praises (v. 9), to talk about Him amongst themselves (which the Law commanded; Deut. 6:4-9), to speak about Him to the surrounding nations (1 Chron. 16:8,24) and to encourage the people of those nations to glorify Yahweh (vv. 29,30).

What was the result of this “preaching” through the psalm sung before the ark by the family of Asaph? “And all the people said, Amen, and praised the LORD” (v. 36). David had set the example by putting the symbol of God’s Word and His presence at the very centre of the nation, and he then caused one of the most faithful families in Israel to sing before it (initially for *forty years* until the temple was built!) of the glory and might and purpose of their God. Thus, by his personal example and teaching, as their king, he showed them how they ought to think and to walk before their God—just as he had showed his people in the time of his fugitive years in the wilderness. On both occasions the people responded to his preaching and they became more godly as a result. Could we be a similar influence by our example and preaching in the ecclesia?

“And Thou hast also appointed prophets to preach”

Geoff Henstock

Prophets were messengers from God who had to speak His Word faithfully. They sometimes showed flaws and were sometimes reluctant to speak. There were also false prophets. The prophets provide us with examples of instruction and warning of how we should and should not preach.

WHEN GOD called Israel out of Egypt and brought the nation into the Promised Land, He did not leave them to their own devices. By providing the Law of Moses, He provided a framework by which the nation should conduct its affairs as the kingdom of God. To administer that Law God provided a priesthood. They were the ones who maintained the rituals of the tabernacle and later the temple. Ceremonial rituals, however, were only part of their service

as priests; they were also responsible for the education of the nation in the things of God (2 Chron. 23:6; Mal. 2:7). Their ritual duties were intended to present man to God, while their teaching duties presented God to man. Their service, or, more frequently, the dereliction of their service, was closely linked to the spiritual wellbeing of the nation.

Messengers of God

As important as their service was, the spiritual welfare of the nation did not rely solely on the priesthood. As teachers, the priests differed from the prophets God also provided Israel and, sometimes, to Israel’s neighbours. The mission of the prophets “was to keep Israel faithful to the law delivered by Moses, and not to give a new law or

amend the old".¹ Prophets were conduits of messages from God rather than teachers in a didactic sense. As God said through Hosea: "I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied visions, and used similitudes, by the ministry of the prophets" (Hos. 12:10). There were times when prophets were unsure of the meaning of their own utterances and visions (1 Pet. 1:10-12). The examples of Aaron (Ex. 7:1), Jeremiah (1:1), Ezekiel (1:3) and Zacharias (Lk. 1) demonstrate that, in some instances, a man could be both a prophet and a priest, but the roles were fundamentally discrete and not interchangeable.

The word 'prophet' in Hebrew is *nabiy*. It is derived from the Hebrew word *nabi*, which means 'to announce' (*Unger's Bible Dictionary*). Gesenius says this root word means "to cause to bubble up, hence to pour forth words abundantly". He also says, "The essential idea in the word is that of authorised spokesman".² In his *Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Gesenius makes the point that "with the idea of a prophet there was this necessarily attached, that he spoke not his own words, but those which he had divinely received", a distinction reflected in Peter's comment that "no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:20,21, ESV). Although we might tend to think of prophets as authors of prophetic books, it is evident that prophets as spokesmen of God first and foremost delivered God's Word orally. Only some prophets penned Divinely inspired text, and only some of what they wrote has been preserved for our benefit today. Brother Roberts wrote: "Their primary work was not to write books, but to deliver oral expostulations from God to Israel, to bring the nation back into harmony with Himself . . . the prophet's primary work was the work of his own living presence in Israel, and that in the case of the preserved writings, their preservation is something over and above the natural work of their lives".³ They were, then, in essence preachers—Divinely inspired preachers.

It is important that the involuntary nature of the prophetic ministry be understood. Prophets did not control or determine what they said, nor was it proper for them to avoid the task to which God called them. One author has observed of the prophet, "The gifts which he receives are not for his selfish exaltation or edification, but for the good of the community . . . these effects are not the product of human genius or prudence or

experience, but the outcome of communion with heaven and a word from God".⁴

Appreciating the fact that they were mouth-pieces of God rather than self-directed orators helps us to understand the place of prophetesses in the Divine scheme. Prophetesses in Israel did not usurp the teaching role in the ecclesia ordinarily assigned in Scripture to men, because they only acted at the direction of God and not of their own volition.

Thus saith the Lord

True prophets never sought to elevate themselves as individuals. Undoubtedly, many prophets were talented people and many may well have had advanced skills in oratory; regardless of this, however, they always acknowledged that what they said was a message from God and not the musings of their own mind. Thus we have statements such as these from the prophets, confirming both the source of their words and, in Elisha's case, his inability to discern that which God had not revealed to him:

- **Balaam:** "have I now any power at all to say any thing? the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak" (Num. 22:38);
- **Isaiah:** "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken" (1:2); and, "Moreover the LORD said unto me . . ." (8:1);
- **Elisha:** "Let her alone; for her soul is vexed within her: and the LORD hath hid it from me, and hath not told me" (2 Kgs. 4:27);
- **Jeremiah:** "whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD. Then the LORD put forth His hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put My words in thy mouth" (1:7-9);
- **Ezekiel:** "Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with My words unto them" (3:4); and, "I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at My mouth, and give them warning from Me" (3:17);
- **Amos:** "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and

1. Roberts, R. and Walker, C. C., *Ministry of the Prophets: Isaiah*, p. 2 (Brother Roberts wrote this chapter).
 2. Gesenius, H. W. F., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 544.
 3. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.
 4. Deane, W. J., *Samuel and Saul: Their Lives and Times*, pp. 33-34.

a gatherer of sycamore fruit: and the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said unto me, Go, prophesy unto My people Israel. Now therefore hear thou the word of the LORD" (7:14-16).

False prophets

Not all who claimed to be prophets were what they seemed. The Bible speaks of false prophets, "there were false prophets also among the people" (2 Pet. 2:1), and the problems they posed to Israel. The ministry of Jeremiah in particular was troubled and undermined by false prophets such as Hananiah (see Jeremiah 27:15; 28:16; 29:21,26). The Law of Moses was especially severe on those who falsely claimed to be prophets. In Deuteronomy 18 there is a wonderful passage that prophesies of the greatest of all prophets, the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 15-19). That promise is given in the context of a warning that false prophets would arise in the nation: "But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die" (v. 20). The potential for harm presented by a false prophet required a drastic response.

But how was Israel to know whether someone who claimed to be a prophet was genuine? God provided them with a test: "And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him" (vv. 21,22). Jeremiah refers to this very test when confronting Hananiah (28:9). Such a test was very useful, but in some cases a charlatan might fool the unwary with a plausible prognostication which came to pass. God provided for this situation also. In Deuteronomy 13 Israel was told that even if someone appeared to be able to predict the future, they were not to be respected as a prophet if they taught anything contrary to the revealed will of God. Such people were to be executed, so great was the risk they posed to the nation (vv. 1-5). Even a prophet was not to be held in higher esteem than the Word of God.

Flawed prophets

Although some men or women were inspired by God as His spokesmen, this did not mean that they were perfect or infallible. Even genuine prophets are presented as flawed servants. The tragic story

in 1 Kings 13 tells of a "man of God" (clearly a prophet, for in verses 2-5 he met the test set down in Deuteronomy 18) who travelled from Judah to Bethel to deliver a warning to the idolatrous northern tribes. In spite of having been given a strict commission not to accept hospitality while there, he succumbed to the entreaties of an elderly prophet who lied about a revelation from God (v. 18) that overrode the instructions the man of God had received. After the man of God allowed himself to be swayed by this false statement, the elderly prophet became a spokesman for God and declared the punishment that would come upon him (vv. 21,22). Both prophets in this case acted imprudently.

Miriam and Aaron played important roles supporting Moses in the initial phase of his ministry, but later in the wilderness wanderings, when they sought to inflate their role as leaders in Israel, God summarily condemned their action (Num. 12:1-10). The fact that they were prophets did not spare them from the judgement of God. Although both Aaron and Miriam were rebuked by God, only Miriam was rendered leprous, indicating that her claim to leadership of the nation was even more presumptuous than that of Aaron. That her name is mentioned first may indicate that in fact she was the instigator of the joint challenge.

Spiritual leaders

The first man described as a prophet is Abraham, when he was identified to Abimelech as a man who should be respected and protected (Gen. 20:7, the first use of the word in Scripture). Although no writings of Abraham's have been preserved, we must presume God used him as a mouthpiece in the company which developed around Abraham. This was an age when there was no canon of Scripture, but God always provides for the needs of His people.

Later, when there was a written law to which the people had recourse, there were times when the priesthood was so effete or corrupted that God needed to raise up a prophet to provide some spiritual leadership. This was exactly the situation in the days of Eli and his sons, when "there was no open vision" (1 Sam. 3:1). God raised up Samuel to provide the guidance the priests were unable to deliver. Elijah and Elisha were also provided at a time of great spiritual declension. Although they did not leave a written record of their words, they had a profound influence on many, an influence which lived on in the written record of their ministry.

At certain times, then, prophets were able to exercise considerable influence in the nation. When Sanballat and his accomplices sought to undermine the revival under Nehemiah, they posited a scenario in which Nehemiah was conniving to rebel against Persia and make himself a king (Neh. 6:6). To support this usurpation, they suggested that he had arranged for prophets to encourage the returned Israelites to accept Nehemiah as king (v. 7). This was, of course, a fabrication, but the fact that Israel's enemies referred to the influence of prophets testifies to the potential that prophets had to stimulate the nation.

Sadly, the high regard for the influence of prophets assumed by Sanballat was rarely shared by the Israelites themselves. Immediately prior to the captivity, God had appealed to the people through prophets such as Jeremiah, but they had not responded to his message, a situation which appears to have been the norm in their history: "And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by His messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because He had compassion on His people, and on His dwelling place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and misused His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy" (2 Chron. 36:15,16; see also Jer. 7:25-28).

Even after the exile, God reached out to His people in captivity through the ministry of prophets such as Ezekiel and Daniel. The example of Daniel demonstrates that even those who occupy high office in the kingdom of men may be able to preach God's Word. Indeed, their ability to do so might even be enhanced by their circumstances.

Daniel was a preacher both in terms of the delivery of inspired messages and through example. It appears that the faith of Daniel and his three friends provided such a testimony to Nebuchadnezzar that he repented and acknowledged the authority of the God of Israel (Dan. 3:28-30). A similar response is manifested by Darius after Daniel's faithful determination to worship his God in the way appointed (6:25,26); the decree Darius made acknowledged that Daniel's God is the "living God", presumably a recognition that all others are lifeless idols.

Reluctant preachers

Jeremiah felt the burden of opposition from a faithless nation. Not a natural preacher or orator (Jer. 1:6), Jeremiah was tempted to turn his back on the unpopular task he had been commissioned to undertake. He lamented: "I am in derision

daily, every one mocketh me. For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the LORD was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily. Then I said, I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name. But His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (20:7-9).

Jonah was another prophet who was a reluctant preacher. Jonah lived during the days of Jeroboam II, when Israel was at its peak. It seems likely that Jonah would have enjoyed some popularity due to the fulfilment of a prophecy he had made about Israel's prosperity (2 Kgs. 14:25). When he received the commission to take God's Word to Nineveh (Jonah 1:2) he was shocked. If there was any power that had the capacity to threaten the prosperity of Israel it was Nineveh. Why should God wish to redeem the enemy of Israel? Unable to reconcile why God should extend mercy to Nineveh, Jonah decided not to accept the commission, and, instead of travelling to Nineveh, he went to Joppa and took a ship to Tarshish (1:3).

God's will cannot be thwarted so easily. Through storm and a great fish, God intervened in Jonah's life to give him another opportunity to comply with His will. In Jonah 3:2 the command to 'preach' to the Ninevites was repeated. Jonah complied on that occasion and his preaching was well received. In Jonah 4 we see the prophet still unable to come to terms with what God was doing through him. Why should God wish to extend mercy to Nineveh? It made no sense. Given his popularity at home, surely it would have been a better use of his abilities to preach to Israel? Such might have been Jonah's logic, but God had objectives of which Jonah was unaware.

Brother Philip Hinde makes a case for Jonah being seen as a type of the Apostle Paul. Having noted the similarities between the work of Elijah and that of John the Baptist, Brother Hinde goes on to suggest that there may also be similarities between the work of Elisha and that of our Lord Jesus Christ. If that is so, Brother Hinde suggests it might be possible to extend the parallel:

"In Jonah we have a man who had been prepared for his work. He set off in direct opposition to the way in which God intended him to go, and on his way was arrested by divine intervention, with the result that for three days and three nights he was cut off from the world of men. He was saved out of water, and sent to the Gentiles, who gladly received the word of repentance which Israel had rejected.

Even then, Israel failed to respond, and so pronounced its own judgement. Surely the counterpart to Jonah can easily be seen in the apostle Paul and in his work among Jew and Gentile, as brought before us in the pages of the New Testament".⁵

Jonah also may be seen as a type of Peter, who was in Joppa when he received the message to take the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10). Through a dream, Peter was given instruction about what was ahead, and he struggled with the wisdom of what was revealed. In the end, he cooperated with the command to preach to the Gentiles and he enjoyed considerable success. Afterwards, however, Peter manifested misgivings about the extension of grace to Gentile believers; in Antioch he was reluctant to share fellowship with Gentile members of the ecclesia, and Paul was obliged to rebuke him (Gal. 2:11-14), just as God had set Jonah straight when he expressed his misgivings in relation to Nineveh (Jonah 4:10,11).

Conclusion

The Old Testament prophets provide inspiration for all who would preach the Word in season and out of season. While not inspired messengers,

we must be careful that our preaching is always consistent with Word of God, lest we be aligned with the false prophets of old. Daniel, Jeremiah and Jonah in particular present valuable lessons for preachers in the last days. Do we use the opportunities God provides us to preach, if not in word then at least through example? Are we weary of the unresponsiveness of those to whom we preach? Are we tempted to cease preaching? Have we decided that there is no need to preach the gospel to certain people because of some preconceived prejudice? If so, we need to fan the embers of God's Word in our hearts so that they blaze into a fire that cannot be quenched. We need to remember that God will have mercy upon whom He will have mercy. It is not for us to determine that God's Word should not go forth as He directs, nor would we wish to be agents frustrating the proclamation of that Word.

"Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried; but the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand" (Dan. 12:10).

5. Hinde, P., *The Divided Kingdom*, p. 55.

"Preach the Word", then, because it contains the testimony which God has given concerning the kingdom, and all things related to it—preach the law and the testimony, for if men believe not Moses and the prophet's writings, how can they understandingly believe the words of Jesus; for "all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning him" . . .

But the workman who preaches the word is to divide it rightly. No workman is approved of God who doth not do this. He is to "study" to divide the word of truth rightly. It requires study, and much study, too, or its right division cannot be discerned. If this be neglected, the preaching or writing will be mere confusion, and the word quoted unintelligible. The hearer or reader must study as well as the speaker or writer, or the subject will be obscure to him, no matter how lucidly presented. There is a right division, and a wrong division of the word . . .

To rightly divide the word of truth is, first to study it without bias, or subjection to uninspired authority, or antiquity. Attend to what is written, as a child listens to a story. Study history, and ask questions, and be thankful for all the information you can get, even if you have to pay for it. While you are engaged in this pursuit, do not imagine that you are a workman. It is not easy to become a workman in such an age as this. The great names in theology, so much applauded by the world—a world that has been "wondering after the Beast" for more than twelve centuries—were not even apprentices; they were students of the classics and systems of divinity, not students of the word. If they had been, they would never have written such foolishness as passes current with their names. No; it is the result of much time and labour to become adequately proficient for a right division of the word. Men who do not understand the prophets, have no scriptural pretensions to workmanship in the word. They can neither preach it, nor divide it. When a man comes to understand the gospel of the kingdom, believing and obeying it, he has then qualified himself to lay the foundation in others.

John Thomas, *The Faith in the Last Days*, pp. 246-8