The Characteristics of True Prophets

By Mark Mayberry
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Introduction

What is a prophet? What is prophecy? What are the characteristics of true prophets?

The Hebrew word *nabi*, occurring 314x in the OT, refers to a “a spokesman, speaker, or prophet” [Thomas 5030]. According to the TWOT, “the essential idea in the word is that of an authorized spokesman” [Harris, p. 544].

The Greek noun *prophētēs*, occurring 144x in the NT, a compound of *pro* [before] and *phēmi* [to declare], refers to “a prophet (an interpreter or forth-teller of the divine will)” [Thomas 4396]. Louw & Nida define it as “one who proclaims inspired utterances on behalf of God” [53.79]. BDAG say it refers to “a proclaimer or expounder of divine matters or concerns that could not ordinarily be known except by special revelation” and is specifically defined as “(1) a person inspired to proclaim or reveal divine will or purpose, prophet; or (2) by metonymy, the writings of prophets.”

The Greek verb *prophēteuō*, occurring 28x in the NT, derived from *prophētēs* [4396], means “to foretell, tell forth, prophesy” [Thomas 4395]. BDAG say it means “(1) to proclaim an inspired revelation, or prophesy; (2) to tell about something that is hidden from view, tell, or reveal; (3) to foretell something that lies in the future, foretell, or prophesy.”

Identification

• True prophets served as God’s mouthpiece, i.e., His spokesman (Exod. 4:10-16; 6:28-7:2; Jer. 1:9-10).
• True prophets were inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Sam. 23:1-2; 1 Chron. 28:11-19; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).
• True prophets accurately related the past, spoke to the needs of the present, and offered precise predictions of the future (Isa. 41:21-29; 42:5-9; 43:8-13).
• True prophets communicated God’s will by various means and measures (Num. 12:1-8; Joel 2:28-29; Matt. 17:1-8; Heb. 1:1-4).

Noble Examples

• Abraham (Gen. 20:7)
• Moses (Deut. 34:10-12)
• Samuel (1 Sam. 3:19-21)
• Saul (1 Sam. 10:5-6, 10-12; 19:23-24)
• Gad (1 Sam. 22:5; 2 Sam. 24:11)
• Nathan (2 Sam. 7:2; 12:25; 1 Kings 1:8, 10, 22-23, 32, 34, 38, 44-45)
• Ahijah the Shilonite (1 Kings 11:29; 14:2, 18)
• Jehu (1 Kings 16:7, 12)
• Unnamed Prophets (1 Kings 18:3-4, 13; 20:13, 22)
• Elijah (1 Kings 18:22, 36)
• Elisha (1 Kings 19:16; 2 Kings 3:11)
• Micaiah (1 Kings 22: 7-8, 13)
• Sons of the Prophets (2 Kings 2:5)
• Jonah (2 Kings 14:25)
• Isaiah (2 Kings 19:2)
• Shemaiah (2 Chron. 12:5)
• Iddo (2 Chron. 13:22)
• Oded (2 Chron. 15:8)
• Jeremiah (2 Chron. 36:12)
• Haggai (Ezra 5:1-2)
• Jesus Christ is the greatest example of One who holds the prophetic office (Deut. 18:15-19; Acts 3:19-26; Heb. 1:1-2)

**Characteristics**

• True prophets enjoy a divine commission, proclaiming the message that God put in their mouth (2 Sam. 7:1-7; Jer. 1:4-10; Ezek. 1:1-3).
• True prophets evidence consistency, accurately foretelling the future, proclaiming a message that is consistent with the remainder of divine revelation (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:20-22; Isa. 8:19-20).
• True prophets present a complete message, proclaiming all that God commanded, omitting not a word (Jer. 1:17-19; 26:1-6; 42:4-6).
• True prophets offer a corrective message, destroying and overthrowing all that is evil, building and planting that which is good (Jer. 1:9-10; 25:4-7; 44:4-6).
• True prophets evidence courage, neither fearing or being dismayed because of the opposition of sinful men (Ezek. 2:1-7; 3:4-11; Mic. 3:5-8).

**Cost & Consequences**

• True prophets were persecuted (2 Chron. 36:15-16; Matt. 5:11-12; Acts 7:52; Heb. 11:32-40; James 5:10).
• True prophets were threatened (2 Chron. 25:15-16; Jer. 26:7-8).
• True prophets were mistreated (Jer. 37:21; 38:6, 9).
• True prophets were beaten (Jer. 20:1-2).
• True prophets were arrested (Jer. 37:13-14).
• True prophets were imprisoned (1 Kings 22:26-28; 2 Chron. 16:10; Jer. 32:2-3).
• True prophets were killed (1 Kings 19:10, 14; 2 Kings 9:7; 2 Chron. 24:20-21; Neh. 9:26; Matt. 23:37).
Conclusion

While the prophetic office is now historical (1 Cor. 13:8-10; James 1:25), the message of those who spoke by inspiration is preserved in the Holy Scriptures (Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Pet. 3:1-2).

Like the prophets of old, we must be willing to endure affliction (Heb. 11:32-40; James 5:10-11).

As was the case with King Ahab (1 Kings 22:1-40), and the Israelites of old (Isa. 30:9-17), many today want a soft, smooth, self-serving message; yet true disciples will study to show themselves approved unto God (2 Tim. 2:15), and will faithfully preach the word, reproofing, rebuking, exhorting, with patience and instruction (2 Tim. 4:1-5).