

A Prophet Like unto Me

Deuteronomy 18:15-22

I had the pleasure a few weeks ago of visiting with Dr. Palmer Robertson, who had been my Old Testament professor in seminary some 36 years ago. I was, of course, a very young man at the time which made him, as an experienced professor, from my perspective, old. I now realize that he was only in his mid-40's then, and he remains in rather good health now in his 80s. It's amazing what the passing of time does with our perspective of who is old! He and his family now live in Winston-Salem.

I remember well Dr. Robertson's teaching on the covenants, and I remember also his teaching in a class simply entitled "Old Testament Prophets." It was the most demanding class I had in seminary. And one of the most memorable. I remember at the very outset of that class an emphasis on our passage before us this morning. I even went back and read some of my class notes from 1984.

This passage is one of the most important passages in the whole Bible with regard to the whole nature of prophecy. Last week we looked at all the rivals to the prophets, from verse 10, the "one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead." Those are dangerous rivals, to be sure. Nine of them are identified. And they are an abomination, according to verse 12. For they are ways in which God's people seek to determine the future. That is a seemingly insatiable desire among fallen mankind, to be like God in the ability to know the future, even to determine the future. But only God has that power.

Is. 45:5 "I am the Lord, and there is no other; There is no God

besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, 6 That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; 7 I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things."

Isa. 45:18 "For thus says the Lord, Who created the heavens, Who is God, Who formed the earth and made it, Who has established it, Who did not create it in vain, Who formed it to be inhabited: "I am the Lord, and there is no other. 19 I have not spoken in secret, In a dark place of the earth; I did not say to the seed of Jacob, 'Seek Me in vain'; I, the Lord, speak righteousness, I declare things that are right. 20 "Assemble yourselves and come; Draw near together, You who have escaped from the nations. They have no knowledge, Who carry the wood of their carved image, And pray to a god that cannot save. 21 Tell and bring forth your case; Yes, let them take counsel together. Who has declared this from ancient time? Who has told it from that time? Have not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides Me, A just God and a Savior; There is none besides Me."

That is the God who sends his own prophets to speak his own words. And so we come to,

I. THE DEFINITION OF A PROPHET.

There is no clearer definition than,
v.18

The words are plain and straightforward. It is the very definition of true prophecy. "I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him."

So, when the prophet speaks, God speaks. Because the word

of the prophet is the word which God himself put in the prophet's mouth. That becomes our definition of inspiration, doesn't it?

2 Tim. 3:16 "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Or even more clearly,

2 Peter 1:20 "...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

That's prophecy, in the capital "P" fullest sense of the word. Sometimes the word prophet means simply forth-telling, or declaring the truth. Sometimes it is appropriate to talk even of modern day preaching in those terms, proclaiming the truth, with a prophetic voice. But prophecy in its fullest sense, a prophet in the fullness of what that word means, is a word from God put into the mouth of a human being so that we can hear it. God's words are put into the mouth of God's prophets.

Now, back to our text. The point here is that God will raise up a prophet like unto Moses, to use the language of the original King James Bible.

v.18a "I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren."

Two questions immediately arise. What does it mean, "like Moses?" And then, who is it? First, like Moses. Moses was the preeminent prophet in that day. He stood out above all the other prophets in terms of how God used him, and what God had him to say.

Numbers 12:5 "Then the Lord came down in the pillar of cloud

and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward. 6 Then He said, "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. 7 Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. 8 I speak with him face to face, Even plainly, and not in dark sayings; And he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid To speak against My servant Moses?"

"I speak with him face to face, Even plainly, and not in dark sayings." That's a description of the superiority of Moses as a prophet. With Moses, nothing hidden, nothing disguised. Just plain, straightforward, direct, immediate declarations from the Lord. So the Lord says, there will be another prophet like that. Another prophet who will be preeminent. Another prophet who will stand above all the others. And for us, the identity of that prophet is obvious.

B. Jesus is the ultimate prophet.

And, of course, Jesus isn't simply "like unto Moses." He is that, and then much more. He is superior to Moses, but not only is the word Jesus speaks the word of God, not only does God put his word in Jesus' mouth, speaking through him mouth to mouth, but more so, Jesus is the word of God. He embodies the word of God. He is the word of God, made flesh, made to be human. So he does not simply speak the word of God, he is the word of God.

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men...14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

This same Jesus is made known in the book of Revelation as well,

Rev. 19:11 “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. 12 His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. 13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.”

So God, through the prophet Moses, is telling his people that Jesus the Messiah will come. And I don't have to assume that interpretation, as obvious as it does seem. I can prove it definitively. With the added emphasis that this prophet like unto Moses would also be the suffering servant whose sacrifice of his own life would be the means by which God's people would be redeemed. Listen to Peter's sermon after Jesus healed a lame man, in,

Acts 3:13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. 14 But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. 16 And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.”

Acts 3:17 “Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. 18 But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. 19 Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of

refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, 21 whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. 22 For Moses truly said to the fathers, The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. 23 And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’ 24 Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days. 25 You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ 26 To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.”

So this prophet would be the savior of the world! And you must believe this prophet, his word, if you are to gain eternal life. You must believe the word of this servant, this suffering servant, who is the son of God in the flesh. As I just read,

Acts 3:19 “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, 21 whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”

That is the invitation of the gospel. And Jesus is the ultimate prophet whom God would send to speak truth to his people. In that context, we can also come to understand why we believe that this particular gift of prophecy, in terms of God putting his very words into the mouth of a man, has ended. To put it bluntly, we don't need that sort of prophecy any longer. Because we have

Jesus, the final word.

That is the idea of the contrast that is expressed in, Heb. 1:1 “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.”

Then, in those days, in the Old Testament, before the first coming of Jesus, God spoke through his prophets. “At various times and in various ways.” “At sundry times and in divers manners,” in the language of the original King James. Here and there. In this way and that way. God spoke through his prophets. But now, in the New Covenant, “in these last day,” God has spoken to his people by His Son. Jesus is the ultimate prophet. And Jesus is the final prophet.

1 Cor. 13:8 “Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.”

Jesus is the one who is perfect. Complete. Having said all of that, let’s continue, then in our text, with what I call,

II. THE TEST OF A PROPHET.

If God’s people must listen to his prophets, as I’ll emphasize shortly, then the people have the right to ask a very significant question. How do we know which prophets to listen to? How can we tell a false prophet from a true one? Moses gives us a very easy to understand answer.

A. The test of perfect accuracy.

Perfect, complete accuracy. Not like our weathermen today,

or meteorologists. With apologies for making fun of something that I realize is quite a detailed subject, it’s not enough to say that there is a 50% chance of rain. That, of course, means, there is a 50% chance of no rain. That’s a pretty easy forecast to defend, because you can never be wrong, can you? Even 80% gives you an excuse if you are wrong. That’s not the standard of true prophecy.

I also think always of Chinese fortune cookies as well, with so-called fortunes such as these: “A fresh start will put you on your way.” “Be on the alert to recognize your prime at whatever time of your life it may occur.” “Your road to glory will be rocky, but fulfilling.” You, of course, can google those expressions just as easily as I can. The point, of course, is that they are meaningless. They bear no prophetic value. They contain no knowledge. At best, they are just harmless, though usually trite, expressions of good will.

But a prophet, claiming to speak the words of the Lord, has a much higher standard to meet.

v.21 “And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?’— 22 when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”

There is a simple point to all of us.

John 17:17 “Your word is truth.”

Jesus personalizes that as well, doesn’t he?

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

So one who claims to be a prophet, one who claims to possess God's word, must be tested by the standard of truth.

v.22 "...if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him."

The test of prophecy is the ability to foretell the future with perfect accuracy. And that was important in the Old Testament, because if a prophet spoke, the people of God were obligated to listen! And they would have a very understandable question to answer for themselves, how can we know? How do we know a true prophet from a false one? And the simple, straightforward answer, given for the people's encouragement and benefit, is that Moses the prophet defines,

B. The consequences of falsely claiming to be a prophet.

A false prophet was to be put to death, as that is the only way to protect the people of God from his danger. A man claiming to speak the words of God, but shown to be false, would have no excuse, no recourse.

v.20

Again, I would emphasize, that is for the protection of God's people. Because they bore the responsibility to listen, to hear, to pay attention to those prophets who truly spoke the word of the Lord. And we see that clearly in our text.

III. THE RESPONSE TO A PROPHET.

It is, of course, still as true today as it was then.

A. God's people must listen to his word.

v.15b "Him you shall hear."

And the negative expression of that same idea, spoken as a

warning,

v.19

We can go back to,

Acts 3:23 "And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people."

If you don't listen to the truth of God's word, you will die. You will be condemned for your sins. You will be cut off from God himself. But, on the other hand, in Jesus' own words,

John 8:31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

You who believe the truth, you now hear the truth and listen to it because of God's word, you have this encouragement along with the people of Thessalonica,

1 Thes. 2:13 "For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe."

With that, Moses goes even a bit deeper in terms of the attitude of the heart. It is not just outward obedience, certainly not any sort of outward expression intended only for show. But much more as a matter of the heart,

B. God's people must give honor to God's word.

Not just listen. But give honor.

v.15-16

Reverence would be the best word to describe that reaction. Deepest of reverence.

Ex. 20:18 “Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. 19 Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.” 20 And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin.” 21 So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.”

Now, you might think, what does that mean for us today? What is the application for us, when we read about the people standing afar off, fearful even for their very lives? I would answer that this way, by emphasizing that the spirit of the heart still applies, the reverence and honor that we should give to God’s word. But now, with Jesus having come in the flesh, we don’t have to stand afar off.

Heb. 12:18 “For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. 20 (For they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.” 21 And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.”) 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.”

Yet, as that passage continues, we still come with the sense of

great honor for God’s word through his final prophet.

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

So come to Jesus. Come to the city of the living God. Were doing that even this morning as we come to worship in this place. And hear his voice as he speaks in his word, the word which God himself puts into the mouth of his prophet. Listen to all the prophets whom God has sent, Old and New Testaments. And listen to the ultimate prophet, the one whose name is truth, “the way, the truth and the life.”

Most of all, believe in him that might have eternal life.

Acts 3:19 “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, 21 whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”