

A Prophet Like Moses

Acts 7:37-43

For the past four weeks, as we've studied Stephen's defense before those who sought to kill him for blasphemy, I've repeatedly asked the question, "What was so offensive about his words?" And, "Why did he choose to defend himself with an extended history history?" The answer, I've emphasized, is that it was not just a history lesson, but rather a redemptive/historical account of the work of God in salvation. And so Paul would later write to the Galatians,

Gal. 3:8 "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham."

Likewise it is proper to say the same with regard to Moses, that Scripture preached the gospel to Moses beforehand as well. The whole history of the old covenant people of God in the nation of Israel is the historical outworking and unfolding of God's work of redemption, his work of salvation. So all of this history, as we've seen the past four weeks, not only points us to Christ but declares to us the salvation that is found in him. And all of that becomes explicit in our text this morning, where we pick up with verse 37.

According to verse 35, God sent Mose to be a ruler and a deliverer. We also read in that verse "of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush." And we read of God's presence with Moses,

v.36 "He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years."

So you should recognize now, that it wasn't just Moses whom

God would send, it was Jesus, "the prophet like Moses" as we read in,

v.37 "This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear."

That is where we start this morning, with one of the clearest and most meaningful prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament, the prophet "like unto Moses." Let's go back to that actual Old Testament reference, on the occasion when Israel was about to enter the promised land. God was teaching them, instructing them on how they should live, how they should faithfully serve and worship the God who saved them and promised them this great land. And chief among those instructions was the need for God's people to trust in the revelation of God, not in the fallible and false fortune tellers and the like.

Deut. 18:9 "When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. 10 There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. 12 For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. 13 You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. 14 For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the LORD your God has not appointed such for you."

This is a big deal. Will you listen to God, to the word of God? Or will you listen and pay attention to the word of man? Will you recognize the word of God as such, or will you seek what Moses calls an abomination—all the other alternative ways of pursuing

and defining what is truth: witchcraft, soothsayers, sorcerers, mediums, spiritists, fortune tellers, or even seances with the dead. And why are those things such an abomination? Because God will send his own prophet, and his name would be Jesus. And, I should add immediately, he is called “the word.” So we read,

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.”

But then John makes it plain.

John 1:14 “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.”

So that’s who God would send, that’s who he promised to Moses. And that is what Stephen is declaring to the High Priest and to the Jewish council which will eventually put him to death. He is proclaiming Jesus to be the word of God in the flesh, the prophet like unto Moses. As we study this portion of Stephen’s words, let me begin with a bit more of a foundation regarding the nature of prophecy itself.

I. THE NATURE OF PROPHECY.

What is prophecy? To be honest, there are a range of meanings, depending on the context and how the word is used, such that prophecy can mean, more or less, forth-telling. Any good sermon can be defined in that way, proclaiming with a measure of authority the word of God. And sometimes you can have thoughts or ideas that you might informally say are prophetic, that is, having some helpful warning about what is to come. But in its most specific context, with its most accurate and

well-established definition, prophecy is much more than that. The fullest, formal, biblical definition of prophecy, actually this, that...

A. God puts his words into the prophet’s mouth.

And that is certainly Stephen’s meaning in verse 37, where he quotes from Deuteronomy 18.

v.37 “This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren.”

Let’s go back to that reference.

Deut. 18:15 “The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, 16 according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’ 17 “And the LORD said to me: What they have spoken is good. 18 I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.”

That is my reference for this formal definition of prophecy. God says, “I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.” We get even further emphasis in,

Num. 12:6 “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.” That’s a prophet. Literally, it is “mouth to mouth.” “I will put My words in His mouth.” So that

when the prophet speaks, God speaks. The very words of the prophet are, by definition, the very words of God. Thus, to say it more broadly,

B. The prophets spoke with the authority of God.

That is certainly Stephen's emphasis. Verse 37, "Him you shall hear," although those words are found in the earliest manuscripts and thus not included in the ESV. But the sense is clearly there, as it was in Deut. 18.

Deut. 18:19 "And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him."

The words are included when Matthew describes the transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus.

Mat. 17:5 "While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!"

So when the prophet speaks, you shall hear him. You shall pay attention to what he says, upon threat of God's judgment. Because they spoke with the authority of God. When the prophet speaks, God speaks! That is Stephen's emphasis. And I should I one more thought to that. Look how the words of the prophet are described in,

v.38 "...the one who received the living oracles to give to us."

Living oracles! The word of the prophets of God is living, for it is the word of God! So we read,

Heb. 4:12 "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

C. The word of God is living and powerful.

Jeremiah puts it this way,

Jer. 23:29 "Is not My word like a fire?" says the LORD, "And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? 30 "Therefore behold, I am against the prophets," says the LORD, "who steal My words every one from his neighbor. 31 Behold, I am against the prophets," says the LORD, "who use their tongues and say, 'He says.' 32 Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," says the LORD, "and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all," says the LORD."

God's word is living. That is to say, it is active. It has power. It exercises power.

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."

That's the nature of God's word, and thus, that's the nature of prophecy. And yet, unbelievers reject that word, and that is Stephen's point. Clearly he is not seeking to defend himself, but to challenge his opponents to believe God's word. So he rebukes them, identifying,

II. THE SINFUL REJECTION OF PROPHECY.

That is his emphasis here, this rejection of God's word. And Stephen makes it clear that,

A. It is disobedient rebellion to reject the prophetic revelation of God.

This is no small matter! This rebuke is pointed and personal. v.38 "This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness

with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, 39 whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt.”

God spoke through Moses. He utilized the angel, the angel of the Lord. God spoke clearly. But “our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt.” That’s sin. That’s rebellion! That’s unbelief. And I should note at this point, it still is! Rejecting the authority of God’s word, the Bible, is disobedient rebellion. Denying the reality of God’s word as such is the same thing as the people of Israel declaring that they want to go back to Egypt rather than enjoy the privileges of the deliverance which God had provided.

It is a big deal when people today profess to be Christians but then deny to full authority and infallible truthfulness of God’s word. And I am including all the writers of Scripture under this definition of prophecy, God speaking by putting his words into the mouths of his prophets. Thus for us, the Bible is God-breathed. It is inspired by God, as that is often translated.

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.”

Similarly,

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.”

“Carried along by the Holy Spirit.” God’s words in the mouth of God’s prophet. Given by inspiration of God. God-breathed.

And it is the very essence of disobedient rebellion to reject that prophetic revelation of God. And, it is idolatry. Stephen continues.

v.40 “...saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ 41 And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.”

B. It is idolatry to reject the prophetic revelation of God.

Stephen is reminding these Jewish leaders of an awful event in their history, one they would no doubt despise and reject—the golden calf. Stephen dares to bring that up, and says to the council and to the high priest, that is what you are doing again!

If you reject the word of God, as the people of Israel of old rejected the words of the prophet Moses, if you despise the word which God has spoken through his prophet, then you are rejecting the one true and living God. You become an idolator, a worship of idols. If you reject the Bible as the word of God, you are included in the same category of idolatry as those people fashioned the golden calf and offered their worship in idolatry to the work of their hands. And they were judged for that!

C. Rejection of the prophetic revelation of God will incur his judgment.

v.42 “Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets...”

You should note the awful nature of that judgment. God turned them over. God gave them up. God withdrew his restraint and his grace, and left them to indulge fully in their own sin. It’s the same judgment we find in,

Rom. 1:18 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven

against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. 24 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, 25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to vile passions...28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.”

God gave them over! God gave them up! In our text today, “God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets.” Then we read what that means, as Stephen quotes from Amos 5.

v.42 “Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 43 You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan, Images which you made to worship; And I will carry you away beyond Babylon.”

That prophecy in Micah speaks of the terrible judgment of God.

Micah 5:18 "Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! For what good is the day of the LORD to you? It will be darkness,

and not light. 19 It will be as though a man fled from a lion, And a bear met him! Or as though he went into the house, Leaned his hand on the wall, And a serpent bit him! 20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it?”

That is the judgment upon those who reject and rebel against God and his word. And Micah goes on to describe just how offensive that rebellion is to God, noting that with that rebellion, your acts of worship are empty and meaningless.

Micah 5:21 “I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies. 22 Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. 23 Take away from Me the noise of your songs, For I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. 24 But let justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Let me say this with particular emphasis and clarity. I believe that judgment of God will be upon those professed Christians and churches who reject the truth and authority of God’s word! Churches who deny the infallible truth of God’s word in the Bible, who deny that the Bible itself is the word of God, God-breathed, those churches ought to fear this judgment of God, “I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies...I will not accept them...Take away from Me the noise of your songs.”

Now you understand when Stephen’s words were so offensive, as we read in,

v.54 “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.”

One more thing to add to all of this. One more very important

thing about the word of God and the prophet like Moses. I have been implying it all morning, so let me say it bluntly. The prophet like unto Moses, whom God will raise up, is Jesus!

III. JESUS IS THE INCARNATION OF GOD’S PROPHETIC WORD.

The reference in verse 37 to “Him you shall hear” certainly refers to the transfiguration which I already mentioned. So this prophet like unto Moses is also the one identified at Jesus’ baptism with the words,

Mat. 3:17 “And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

And,

Mat. 17:5 “While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!”

And Peter ties all that together with his words,

2 Peter 1:17 “For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” 18 And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. 19 And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; 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.”

The prophetic word is confirmed, confirmed in the person of Jesus, in the incarnation of Jesus. As I read at the beginning of

the sermon,

John 1:14 “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.”

But Stephen’s emphasis in Acts 7 is that,

A. Jesus appeared frequently in the Old Testament.

He appeared before his incarnation. So we read of Jesus in, with reference to the angel, the angel of the Lord.

v.38 “This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us.”

And, with these words,

B. Jesus appeared in the likeness of Moses.

He would be a prophet like Moses, like unto Moses. In other words, God would put his own words into the mouth of Jesus. In fact, in an even greater sense, Jesus was the word of God. As great as Moses was, with the word of God spoken to him mouth to mouth, Jesus is that word, in the flesh, incarnate. And his incarnation is the fulfillment of this great Old Testament promise to Moses, and that is why Stephen speaks so clearly and so boldly. He is proclaiming Jesus, the eternal and incarnate word of God.

Thus Stephen’s conclusion to this whole defense we’ve been studying is a rebuke to those who would reject Jesus, just as they rejected all the other prophets. It is a call to repentance, and faith. And it cost him his life!

v.51 “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And

they killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One...”

Jesus the Righteous one has come, in the flesh. Thus, to quote one final time from John 1, we read,

John 1:12 “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.”