"When Did Prophecy Cease?"

John W. Swails III

In an article in the Hebrew journal, *Tarbitz*, noted scholar Ephraim Uhrbach asks: "When did prophecy end?" The question arose for him in response to the rabbinical ruling that prophecy had ended with Ezra and Nehemiah; that is to say, at the end of the Biblical period. Uhrbach proceeds to show conclusively that this decision was obviously enacted ex post facto by rabbis of later times and did not represent the contemporary practice or general expectations of people. He pointed out that Josephus and the New Testament both gave clear evidence of prophetic figures arriving on the scene, being recognized as prophets by various layers of society, and being acknowledged as messengers of God's word. His conclusion was that for the period leading up to the destruction of the Second Temple, prophecy remained a viable and recognized institution in Jewish life. That leaves the question: Why did rabbinical leaders seek to impose a terminus ad quem, a conclusion, to the institution of prophecy.

The answer seems to be found in a decision to establish some sort of external control on an institution and individuals who had operated from earliest Biblical times with only the most rudimentary of such controls. A discussion of these controls must include a description of the office of the prophet and the general principles of prophecy.

Our word "prophet" is derived from the Greek word πρφημί, "to fore" or "forth tell." It is a translation of the Hebrew word נביא (navī). What makes this problematic is that the original meaning of this Hebrew word had become obscure by the time of the translation of the Septuagint. It was not until recent times that the etymology of the word

¹ Tarbitz 21 (1947), (Hebrew).

has been clarified. It turns out that the word is derived from *nabū*, a Semitic root seen most clearly in Akkadian with meaning "to call" and, in Hebrew, it is a passive form. The construction is related to words such as *mashīah*, "one who is anointed;" *natīn*, "one who is given (to the temple);" 'asīr, one who is imprisoned.²

Therefore it is clear, the prophet is simply "one who is called," receiving his authority and legitimacy directly from the Almighty. Not necessarily bound to any individual, group, or institution, the prophet's message was God's word, given by God, backed by God and to be carried out by God. The responsibility of the prophet was remarkably simple: Speak God's word as instructed. The prophet's authority as the messenger of God resulted from his being called by God to such service and by his, the prophet's, faithfulness in carrying out instructions. That is why the circumstances surrounding their call occupied so prominent a place in the accounts of several of the prophets: Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Amos. The phenomena accompanying the receipt and delivery of the Divine word will have to be examined below.

Major problems in this system appeared when conflicting words were given by prophets claiming divine inspiration. The Bible records some controls were applied. One, the prophetic word for future events, if from God, must always come true.³ This criterion must especially be applied to messages of "peace." Two, a measure of the message may be found in the character of the messenger. ⁵ This, however, does not seem to be a binding sanction. One definite control is the stipulation that any prophecy, no matter how convincingly attested by signs, which called for the worship of other gods was false and

² Dt 17²⁻⁷; Dt 13²⁻¹²; Dt 18⁹⁻²².

³ A. Heschel, *The Prophets* (NY: Harper & Row, 1962): 405. (185, paperback).

⁴ Jer 28. ⁵ Jer 23^{11, 14}.

the exponent of that word had to be severely punished. Having said all that, it must be recognized that the prophetic office operated as a spiritual institution generally free of restraints. A prophet might inveigh equally against king or priest and do so with the authority of the "the word of the Lord."

In the context of a homogenous nation with structured worship and lines of authority, a prophet may have been troublesome, even annoying, but that problem cold be dealt with more directly. ⁶ In this regard note the persecution of various prophets mentioned in the Bible. After the destruction of the Temple and the upheaval this brought about in Jewish life, the leaders were more limited in dealing with such independent messengers and it can be seen how they might choose to try to establish some restraints over the prophetic institution. This decision must also be viewed in the light of the development of the rabbinate and the gathering of influence. At any rate, the resulting limit was established: prophecy was ended.

The prophetic institution, if we may use that term, was essentially a direct line from the Almighty to His messenger, not running through existing, visible human institutions. The validation of prophecies was a problem in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures as well. At Mari, in the Old Babylonian period, it is by now well understood that an allegedly divine message was to be reported and accompanied by a lock of the hair and the fringe of the garment of the prophet. This was to identify the person and to offer some guarantee for his authenticity and that of his message. The possession of these personal articles gave symbolic but also a quite real legal control over the prophet. An interesting exception to this practice occurred in Mari when a message was sent to the

_

⁶ For example, Jeremiah in prison: Jer 37¹¹⁻²¹; 38¹⁻²⁸; 38¹⁵⁻¹⁸

⁷ W. L. Moran, "New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy," *Biblica* 50 (1970): 19.

king with the explanation added that "because he is a trustworthy (reading tàk-lu) man I have not taken his hair nor the hem of his garment."8

For his authority, the prophet depended upon an experience in which he is divinely endorsed and given a specific communication. ⁹ To remain a true prophet, as opposed to a false one, the prophet had to maintain a continual dependable hearing and proclamation of the word. For the prophet himself, he had to be sure that initially he was hearing correctly with the certainty that the Almighty had spoken. From the Bible, it is clear that the reception of the divine communication was so intense that the prophet would remain convinced of the veracity of the message in the face of tremendous opposition and contradiction. That conviction was based in an experience so profound that he would not doubt its legitimacy, and it seems that similar experiences later served to confirm his perception.

These occurrences, as indicated in Scripture, were transcendent, lifting the individual out of the ordinary human frame of reference by feelings, visions, and other phenomena and are often referred to by analysts as ecstatic. Not having to do with complete loss of control by the prophet, but as one commentator remarked: ecstasy is the focusing or concentration of the faculties upon God. ¹⁰ There are a number of instances where the reception of God's word, even perhaps the giving out of that communication, is accompanied by a supernormal level of expression and action, which may be termed ecstasy.

The initial indications of ecstatic activity in the Bible are in Nu 11, I Sam 10, and 19. In each of these passages the verb "to prophesy" is employed. Its meaning here is

⁸ A. Malamat, "Prophetic Revelations in the New Documents from Mari," VTS XV (1965): 225. ⁹ Jer 1; Is 6; Ezek 1-3; Amos 7.

¹⁰ J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 19612): 4 ff.

denominative: "to do whatever it is that a prophet does." Some translations include "to rant" or "to rave" for these instances. ¹¹ This activity may have included unintelligible speech and some have suggested this activity was what is known today as "speaking in tongues." There is an effort to see in the text something other than speaking in tongues by those who deny to efficacy of present-day glossolalia. ¹² Scripture makes clear that in these instances those being described were behaving in an extraordinary manner which differed from that to be seen regularly and are ecstatic in nature.

A general and early approach to prophecy has been to ascribe ecstasy only to "primitive" prophecy, the early stage of the institution; preferring to see a development away from this pursuit. In this typology, three main stages in the development of prophecy are delineated: First, the primitive, ecstatic prophets; second, the prophets of deeds rather than words (Elijah and Elisha); and third and finally, the classical literary prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.). All of these people are called prophets by Scripture and it is clear that these three groups are more related than hitherto acknowledged. The distinctions drawn between the types are based simply on appearances from the narrative, but the Bible calls all of them prophets. The descriptions of each of these groups emphasize different activity: ecstasy, miracles, and lyrical verbal composition. These three are all continuing aspects of the prophetic ministry. There are other aspects as well: The poetical composition of Isaiah and Habakkuk, the letter-writing of Jeremiah, not to mention the highly unusual personal customs of Ezekiel. These are but three examples.

¹¹ W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969): 209 ff. John Bright, *Jeremiah*, Anchor Bible, Vol. 20, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965): xvii ff.; xxii, n. 4. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962): 324 ff.

¹² For instance, see Leon Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1976): 101 ff.

Beyond this acknowledgment, further assumptions emerge concerning the prophetic word. If the classical prophets are purveyors of words, it then becomes important how these words have been preserved. In the book of Jeremiah, Baruch, his amanuensis, was deputized to record Jeremiah's words as he spoke them (36). It is likely all of his words were proclaimed and preserved in the same way. The collection and preservation of the prophetic utterances is a whole study in itself.. It is also evident that the collections of the words and works of a prophet as early as Samuel may have been on the same order. The oracles of Ezekiel, so difficult of understanding even today, impressed followers with their divine origin and worth so that they were recorded and preserved. One of the more generally held theories on this has to do with the guilds of the prophets; what is known in the Bible as the "sons of the prophets." We have whispers of the existence and functions of this group in several passages, notably Elisha and before him, Samuel. Understanding the term, "sons of the prophets," as a guild, an association or society for upcoming prophets, explains the part of the call of Amos where he states that he is not a prophet or the son of a prophet. He was explaining that he was not trained as a prophet nor was he professionally a prophet. By the way, this seems to be true for the psalmists as well. The "sons of Korach" in the Psalms may definitely be seen in this light especially as ostraca at the site of ancient Arad were found for them in the sanctuary there.

Back to the conviction of the prophet and his associates of the veracity of an utterance, one of the persuasive elements may have had to do with some ecstatic expression on the part of the prophet. If this is true, it is one more characteristic that demonstrates the unity of the prophetic office; Jeremiah and Samuel are part of the same

movement. Their words were received, accorded the same level of reverence, and preserved similarly. It may be that the manifestation of the prophetic word had similar characteristics: an out-of-the-ordinary experience that is not always recorded. For those familiar with the prophetic office, it was part of the milieu, the frame of reference of the day and would need no explanation, hence the passing of the meaning of the term out of usage.

One may point out the ecstatic nature of the receipt of God's word, but has to always bear in mind that the message itself is of far greater importance. This is the basis of the story of Numbers 11 and a key to understanding the whole institution of prophecy This is expressed especially in the sentiment articulated by Moses in Nu 11 concerning the anointing of the seventy who were to act as his deputies, all of whom began to prophesy The words of these 70 were not recorded making it more likely that what was happening was experiential and observable, no one had any doubts they were "prophesying," especially Joshua who wanted to immediately place restriction on the two who were prophesying in the camp outside the consecrated confines. When he heard this, Moses replied that not only should these two not be confined, he expressed his wish that "...would God that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them." (Nu 11²⁹⁾. Joel follows up on that with his vision in Joel 2²⁸: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh..." The Apostle Peter made the connection with what was occurring on the Day of Pentecost and the prophetic tradition with his reference to Joel's prophecy: "This is that..." The connection is clear: The Spirit-empowered life is the true continuation of the Scriptural prophetic tradition. Paul agrees in Gal 3¹³: "that we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

In this view, all who received the "gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2³⁸) would become prophets, enabled to communicate the word of God. This clearly seems to be the understanding of the apostolic church, since their accounts place little emphasis on the personal experience but strongly accentuated the communication received. The prayer in Acts 4²⁴⁻³⁰ focuses on the desire articulated in verse 29: "And grant unto Thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak Thy word." In verse 31, it is recorded that wish was fulfilled. They were all filled with the Spirit and as a result "they spake the word of God with boldness."

As the age of the Apostles passed, a diminution of the gifts of the Spirit became apparent and with the rise of church structure with ecclesiastical authority, questions on the gifts, especially tongues, had to be addressed. Crises, such as the Montanist movement, evoked a reaction and over time hardened into doctrine: the gifts of the Spirit were for the establishment of the church and were good only for apostolic times. This coincided with the resolution of the canon of the New Testament; the basic criterion had to be the writing was from apostolic times. This is reflected in Augustine's dilemma in *The City of God*, writing as a believer and seeker but also as a church official. Whatever the immediate causes, the doctrine represented an attempt to establish some external and organizational control of the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is my belief that the principle underlying the Church's decision on the gifts of the Spirit was the same as the guiding principle motivating the rabbis who decreed the end of prophecy. That principle is an ongoing discomfort with any human institution or

_

¹³The unnamed prophet in I Kings 13²: "...cried against the altar *in the word of the Lord*." (בדבר־יהוד). This phrase, "in the word of the Lord," is used 13 times in the Old Testament; seven of them are in this chapter (Verses 1, 2, 5, 9, 17, 18, and 32). "In the word of the Lord" may offer some light on the NT phrase "in the Spirit." Jesus is recorded in John 11³³ to have "groaned in the Spirit."

structured organization and the humanly unfettered and divinely inspired prophetic office. This difficulty is exacerbated by Western man's profound uneasiness with anything beyond his control.

Prophecy as well as the Spirit-filled life are manifestations of a direct relationship with the Almighty, not governed by visible organization. From the outside their operation can appear free-wheeling and unaccountable. As the institutions of rabbinical Judaism and the Church became more crystallized and their power became more centralized, their discomfort with the freedom of the prophet became acute. It may be in the nature of human institutions, as organization and power grow that at some point they must deal with those who represent the role of the prophet. This tension may have resulted in the issuing of a blanket denial of legitimacy to the prophetic or charismatic office.

Further study of the reasons given by the rabbis and the Church for their negative reaction would be enlightening. It may be, as Uhrbach pointed out, that excesses and errors among those professing prophetic gifts were used as the immediate foundations for outside objections. This tension may be seen in the O.T. in confrontations between true and false prophets.

The Bible very rarely names anyone as a "false prophet." Even Jeremiah, face to face with Hananiah in ch. 28, does not call Hananiah a false prophet. He denounces the fallacious instruction of Hananiah, who was basing his prophecy on the already established prophet Isaiah, quoting from what we have as Isaiah 23. Jeremiah has the final word in the dispute. Even though, Hananiah broke the yoke that Jeremiah was wearing as an object lesson, Jeremiah, after remarking that he had broken a yoke or wood but made a yoke of iron, "went his way." He returned to announce that Hananiah would

live out the year. This confrontation took place in the fifth month and the terse statement at the end of the chapter gives the result: "So Hananiah, the prophet, died the same year in the seventh month."

A note in passing: torah does not originally mean "law." It means "teaching" and is related to the word for teacher. The word "doctrine" also means teaching. Now, before anyone starts formulating charges of antinomianism, there are laws in the Scripture and established boundaries for human behavior. The point to take away is that doctrine or law are positive pointers to the promises and provision of the Lord. They are to elucidate areas where power and blessings are available to the believer. Believers make a mistake when they begin to view doctrine as the establishment of a limit on the power and mercy of the Lord. If some sort of boundary is to be set up beyond which God has obligated Himself not to work, there should be **explicit** statements in the Scripture in support. In the absence of such limitations in Scripture, great care should be exercised about promulgating them. A word from the study of the prophets, do not place limits on God. For instance, in Corinthians, Paul listed nine gifts of the Spirit. Does that mean that there are nine and no more?

It would be erroneous to establish personal experience or understanding of the Kingdom as the outer limits or final boundary of God's power. Doing so might place someone in the position of attempting some control on the operation of the Spirit; compounding the error of those who would have pronounced the end of prophecy. Such an endeavor even in a small way is an act of rebellion. It may be that using the gift of tongues as "initial evidence" is a measure of the same imperative, controlling the

prophetic gift. So doing might lead to unloving denunciations of others whose experience differs from ours or does not meet certain criteria not expressly stated by Scripture.

The prophet is our example. From him we see that God's dealings with man are based on communication not coercion; communication of His word and the accompanying power and grace to put into effect His will in our lives and others is the basis of the prophetic tradition. The prophet will be gauged, in the end, by obedience.