

The Prophet

Back in the August of 1999, I received a very interesting e-mail message that had been broadcast and re-broadcast over the Internet to long lists of recipients. I frequently receive forwarded messages, but the content of this one really made me sit up and take notice. Its anonymous originator stated that the head minister of one of the churches of God was claiming to be "the Prophet" mentioned in chapter 18 of the book of Deuteronomy.

The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him. (Deuteronomy 18:15-19)

The e-mail message also reported that this minister, armed with the authority of "the Prophet," had advised all the members of his congregations to make arrangements to attend the 1999 Feast of Tabernacles at a site in Jordan as, from there, they would be taken to "the place of safety" in Petra. An excerpt from a child custody court case purported to have resulted from this plan was appended, apparently to give credence to the main body of the message.

After re-reading this letter, giving it much thought, and praying about it, I sent a copy to a friend of mine who is a member of the church that was named in the message, and I asked him if he felt there was any truth in it. He and his wife were both shocked by the content and considered it an offensive attack on their church. After they had done some investigating, we talked about it over the phone. Most – if not all – of the story turned out to be false. My friends could not spare the time to research into the veracity of the court case part of the story, but they assured me that the Jordan and "Prophet claim" sections were definitely untrue. Their church leader had no intention whatsoever of going to Jordan for the Feast. In fact, he had firm plans to share the eight days of the Feast between three North American sites.

Both the subject of this e-mail message and the section of scripture that it quotes raise many questions, the examination of which may prove helpful to God's people. I don't pretend to have all the answers on these scriptures, but let us ask some of the questions anyway!

How did the story originate? Did some malicious person – perhaps a disgruntled former member of their church – knowingly compose this set of lies as a hoax to fool God's people? Or did it develop as so many rumours do – by someone passing along the seed of a story – with additional fragments of opinion, truth and error added in by various recipients along the way?

Even though this message turned out to be false, we still can learn some lessons from it. The first lesson, of course, is that we should all be very careful not to take unsubstantiated rumours seriously – whether we receive them by e-mail, telephone, good old "snail-mail," or by any other medium. But, more importantly, one day in the future the leader of one of the churches of God really could stand up and proclaim himself to be "the Prophet" of Deuteronomy 18, or the end-time fulfillment of Elijah or some other Bible personality, or one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11. What if such a man was to make an announcement that the time has come for God's people to flee to the place of safety? We can be sure that there were at least some church members who did take last August's e-mail message seriously. There may have been some that may have even been frightened into taken some real action on it.

Who is "the Prophet" of Deuteronomy 18:15-19? Does God's Word prophesy that he – or another fulfillment of him – will appear in the end-time? Let us take a look at these eight verses to see if any man's claim of being "the Prophet" could be true. Beginning with verse 15:

The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken;

Who was speaking here? There is no doubt as to the correct answer. It was the LORD our God who was speaking – the Eternal God. Secondly, who was He speaking to? For the answer to this question, we must turn all the way back to the beginning of this dialogue in Deuteronomy 5:1-6:

And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them. The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day. The LORD talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire, (I *i.e.* Moses) stood between the LORD and you at that time, to shew you the word of the LORD: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount;) saying, I am the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Moses then continues – up to and beyond the chapter 18 verses that this article is examining – to relate all that God had told Him to repeat to the children of Israel. So again, who was God speaking to in verses 15 to 22 of chapter 18? He was speaking to Moses specifically and, through Moses, He was speaking to the children of Israel.

Yet more questions arise from verse 15. What did the Eternal God promise to Moses and the Israelites? He promised that He would raise up a prophet.

The Prophet's profile

Let us now seek some details about this prophet. First, where would he come from? Note the words, "a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren." He would come from among their own people. The prophet would be born an Israelite.

Next, what very special attribute would this prophet have? The words, "like unto me" indicate that he would be like the Eternal God Himself!

At the end of verse 15, the Israelites were commanded to hearken to the words of this prophet. To hearken is to listen and to act upon what one hears. Moving on now to verse 16:

According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not.

This verse is linked to the last phrase of the previous verse: "unto him (i.e. the Prophet whom God would raise up) ye shall hearken; according to all that thou desiredst..." The Israelites were to hearken to the Prophet because, in their fear, they had begged not to have any further direct contact with God Himself. On to verse 17:

And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken.

God told Moses that they were correct in what they had feared. What did He mean? Probably, He meant that they would die if they had any further direct contact with Him. Verse 18:

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

Here God repeats some of the words that He had spoken in verse 15. But notice the difference! In verse 15: "The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto *me*..." In verse 18: I (the LORD: see verse 17) will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto *thee*..."

The main difference is that in verse 15, God said that the prophet would be like Himself; but in verse 18, He said that the prophet would be like "thee."

Who does the pronoun "thee" refer to? To the Israelites generally? Or to Moses specifically? Was this prophet to be merely human – like the Israelites? Or would he be human with special attributes? This prophet, although human, was to be somewhat like God, who promised that He would put His words in this prophet's mind and mouth. The prophet would then repeat to his brethren every word God commanded him to.

Could this scripture have applied to Moses? Yes, it could have and, to some degree, it did. But it could have applied to Moses only to the extent that any human being – even one filled with and guided by God's Holy Spirit – can be like God. In this way the scripture could also have applied to and prophesied of God's later prophets such as Samuel, Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel, John the Baptist and John the apostle. One of the main functions of this Prophet, we are told, was to act as a mediator between God and His people. Comparing verse 16 and 18 of this chapter to Deuteronomy 5:5, we can see that it was, in fact, Moses himself who was the first human mediator between God and His people – and thus, the first fulfillment of this Prophet:

I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to shew you the word of the LORD: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount; (Deuteronomy 5:5)

Could the Prophet also have applied, through prophetic duality, to Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Yes, it most definitely could. In fact some Bible scholars maintain that Jesus, during His human sojourn, was the *primary* fulfillment of these verses. On the first day of the New Testament Church of God, Peter quoted part of Deuteronomy 18 – applying it to Jesus – for the edification of those present at the temple for the Feast of Pentecost:

And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people. (Acts 3:20-23)

On the last night of His human life, Jesus told His disciples that He was the Mediator – the One to whom His Father had given His words to pass on to those who would hearken – to those who would listen and obey:

Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works.... He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me. (John 14:10, 24)

Returning to chapter 18 of Deuteronomy to verse 19:

And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.

God warned that any who would not listen to and obey God via this prophet would have to answer to Him. This warning should put God's people on a double alert: first, to heed and obey God's words through Jesus Christ, Moses and the other true prophets of God and, second, that if a final fulfillment of God's true Prophet does appear in the end time, we will recognize him and we will heed God's words through him.

Advice for prophets and their audiences

In the remaining verses of the chapter, beginning with verse 20, we see a change in the subject matter.

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. (Verse 20)

In verses 20 to 22, God seems to imply an acknowledgement that He had purposely left unnamed the true Prophet of whom He had been speaking in verses 15 to 17. He seems, perhaps, to have wanted His people to put effort into recognizing the one (or ones) who truly represent Him – using His criteria, of course. This is as true today as it was then.

The "generic" prophet mentioned here in verse 20 does not seem to be referring specifically to the true chosen prophet of God mentioned in the previous verses. The Bible translators seem to have picked up on this point and have highlighted it by using a capital "P" in the word "Prophet" in verses 15 and 18, but a small "p" in verses 20 and 22. Verses 20 to 22 seem to be referring to any prophet – true prophets, professing prophets and even false prophets. Prophets speaking God's words and those pretending to represent Him but who, with clever but deceitful words, actually speak against Him. Verse 20 warns that if a man calling himself a prophet claims to speak in God's name, but speaks words that God has not given him to speak, or speaks in the name of false gods, he puts himself under the death penalty. More on this later.

And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? (Verse 21)

God foresaw the inevitability of the appearance of false prophets, and that His people could become easily confused at the frightening words of any charismatic, clever-talking, scripture-twisting, self-professing prophet. God also knew that that His children would ask how they would be able to know whether or not a professing prophet's words were truly sent by Him. God gives His children the solution in advance:

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. (Verse 22)

A simple test. If a man claims to be a prophet speaking in God's name, His people are to prove the veracity of the man's predictions. If his prophecies do not come true, then it is obvious that God is not speaking to him or through him. Such a man is a false prophet. We should not fear his words nor feel compelled to obey them.

Even if the man's prophecies do come to pass, we must beware. God warns us:

Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world (I John 4:1).

We need to be watching for the fruits of God's Spirit in those who would claim to be His representatives.

The end-time prophet?

In the specific potential scenario of a minister claiming to be the Prophet of Deuteronomy 18 and using the authority of that position to frighten church members into joining him on his sojourn to Petra, his credibility will either stand or fall on the outcome of the very scriptures he has used to make his claim. Such a man would say that he is God's end-time prophet. To repeat for emphasis, God says that the prophecies of His true prophets will come directly from Him and that it is certain that they will come to pass. God also says that if the prophecies of anyone claiming to be a prophet do not come to pass, such a man is revealed as a fraud and a false prophet and thus brings upon himself the death penalty.

If a man holds the opinion that he is God's end-time prophet, he needs to soberly consider the implications of his claims, his words, his plans and his decisions... both for himself and for all the members of God's true church, including those who are not with his particular group. We read in the scriptures that God spoke to and instructed His true prophets, both directly (i.e. face-to-face) and through dreams and visions. Does your modern day claimant for the position of God's prophet state that God has spoken to him and given him these instructions regarding the place of safety? Listen carefully to his answer.

If a church leader were to take thousands of God's people on a one-way trip to Jordan, the news people would soon get to know about it. With the memories of similar, recent, failed pilgrimages, and of mass suicides and massacres such as those in Jonestown, Guyana and Waco, Texas, the details would soon be uncovered and would be splashed throughout the world's media. Here is a BBC News release from 1999:

'Cult' members deported from Israel:

In its latest crackdown on millennialist Christians, Israel has deported 17 Americans, two Britons and an Australian it suspects are members of dangerous cults. The Israeli authorities said the deportees represented a danger to public welfare, but gave no further reason for the deportations. The BBC Middle East correspondent, Paul Adams, says the police evidently fear the Christians' radical beliefs will result in violence as the new millennium approaches. Twenty-one suspects were arrested on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem at midnight on Sunday and then driven to a prison in the town of Ramle in central Israel. A police spokesman expressed concern that the group was paving the way for other Christian groups to settle in Israel. Their arrests marked the third time since January that Israel has detained Christian groups.

Israel radio reported that the police suspected the group was planning mass suicide or other dangerous acts. But group members have said that they oppose violence. But our correspondent says that while their fervent belief in the apocalyptic visions described in the Book of Revelations renders the suspects rather eccentric, they do not appear to constitute a threat to Israel's security. A leader of the group, Brother David, told the BBC they were arrested "because we speak the truth and Israel is about to hear the truth in a greater way than ever before". He said he was a former trailer park owner from Syracuse, New York, and believed that Jesus would return soon. Some commentators believe that the Israeli authorities are ill prepared for an influx of religious zealots to a city where any perceived threat to sites holy to Jews, Muslims and Christians can spark violence.

If the claim is right and true, of course, no amount of negative press would matter one whit. But if it is false, the impact would not be limited to the financial ruin of the members of the leader's own church group. A trip like this would bring ridicule and persecution upon every member of every branch of the true church of God throughout the world.

The problem for church members is this: It is the hope and belief of most – if not all – of God's people that, when His time is right, prior to the return of Jesus Christ, God will, by miraculous means, take all but a remnant of His church to a place of safety and will protect them there for three and a half years (Revelation 12:14-17). If a man claiming to possess the authority of the Prophet of Deuteronomy were to come on the scene, if he were to proclaim to the greater church of God that the time to flee is now, if his claim were true and we have rejected it, then we would face the danger of being shut out of that place of safety.

But consider these questions: Is this the way our loving God works with and communicates with His people? Does He force our obedience by scaring us or threatening us into compliance through an unprepared for, one-time, do-or-die decision? Considering the example of Moses and the miraculous exodus from Egypt, would God have us follow any man without first proving to us that He is truly working through him? What about all the members of God's true church who may not recognize such a claimant as God's one chosen leader? Will God shut them out? What about those members of God's true church who have perhaps never even heard of this man? Will God shut them out? Will God reject any of the people of His true church who have not been given an ample opportunity to prove the veracity of such a man's claim to be God's end-time representative? God comforts us with these words:

Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7)

He is not out to trick us or to trip us up. Our beloved Friend and Elder Brother Jesus Christ tells us:

Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. (John 15:15)

We can have confidence in God's promises that He will not do any significant thing concerning His people without informing us first in a clear, orderly and understandable manner. If and when He chooses to send a special end-time leader to His people – whether he be a prophet, an end-time leader in the spirit and power of Moses, Elijah or Elisha, or whether he be one of the two witnesses – God will make sure we are able to recognize the man as God's true servant.

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