

The Prophet as Guardian of the Theocracy

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New Creation Publications Inc.
www.newcreation.org.au

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Published by

New Creation Publications Inc.
PO Box 403, Blackwood, 5051
Adelaide, South Australia

1983

First published September 1983

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ISBN 0 86408 001 8

Cover design by Glenys Murdoch

Typeset by Kay Robinson

Printed by John Skewes

Printed at New Creation Publications Inc.

Coromandel East, South Australia

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INTRODUCTION

Words like ‘family’, ‘neighbourhood’, ‘community’ have changed their meaning over the last twenty or so years. Family can refer to persons who live together in one dwelling. It can mean husband, wife and children, or it can mean one of the many variants that are found in society today. The ‘normal’ family as Christians understand it, with father, mother and children, is now the exception.

Neighbourhood or local community is often a transient picture, with people staying only a short time before moving on. Large numbers of people have not lived in one area, let alone one house, for more than a year at a time, and the sense of neighbourliness hardly exists. To a large extent the suspicion and fear which prevails in society is due to T.V. presentations where family break-ups and problems, plus domestic chaos, is a major diet.

In my formative years I never heard the term ‘identity crisis’. I lived in the same home for over 20 years and had the security of one family, one neighbourhood, one primary and one high school, one job, and only three churches. Today people are trying to find themselves, discover their identity. There are exceptions, and more exceptions in Adelaide than in Sydney or Melbourne, but the pattern still exists in Adelaide.

Therefore the theme of the prophet as guardian of the theocracy.

What is Prophecy?

A prophet is one who speaks from God. One who speaks by the Spirit of God. In the Old Testament a prophet is ‘a man of the Spirit’. In the New Testament ‘prophets are men who speak from God, moved by the Holy Spirit’. The understanding of Hebrew prophecy is that Jehovah by His Spirit spoke to the mind of the prophet without the intervention of any other means. This brings the difference from heathen prophesying

or divination. Heathen prophets used divination to find the mind of God or the gods through external means, such as casting lots, throwing animal innards into the air, using arrows or rods, etc. So we emphasise that Hebrew prophecy has the distinction of being the effect of the Spirit (Joel 3:1, cf. Acts 2:17).

What is Theocracy?

Simply, the government or rule of God. Israel first rejected this when they desired a king, so as to be like the other nations.

‘The prophets were the living depositaries of the idea of the theocracy, or the kingdom of God.’¹ They were the ancient preachers of the church. They differed from the Levites in that the Levites explained the law and the prophets enforced the law. The prophets delved into the foundations of the law and came forth with the law’s fundamental principle, i.e. the retributive righteousness of God. God is holy and just, and the God of covenant. In ministry they sought to alter the idolatrous and immoral practices of their nation Israel and point the hearts and practices of people to the allegiance with Yahweh (Jehovah).

No man was a prophet by birth, but only by divine call. ‘Holy men of God spoke as they were moved.’ For the holy work of God’s kingdom cannot be maintained by unholy men. So in ministry we see the different functions between priests and prophets. Priests symbolise salvation by actions; the prophets by words. The priests enter by sacrifice and the blood of atonement into the fellowship of love with God; the prophets by the indwelling Spirit. But both go as mediators and take the people with them. This in turn points to our Lord Jesus, who is the one mediator of the New Covenant, and who through the Cross has entered within the veil and taken all His people with Him.

Therefore the holiness of prophetic ministry is vital. ‘The prophets were holy men, waiting for the salvation of God, deeply penetrated by the sense of sin, having no hope but in God’s mercy, living by faith, and working in the strength of the Lord.’²

We must recognise that men like Balaam or Saul or Caiaphas are not

prophetic types—they are monstrosities of prophecy. They are proof of what the Spirit of God can do—as when the dumb ass spoke—but they are no indication of what the Spirit of God normally does.

The holy requirements of the prophets is revealed in their consecration, which symbolised moral purification. See Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1:5, Ezekiel 1:3.

So, in consideration of this subject, there are two main methods which present themselves.

- (i) The details of the ministry of the individual prophets and how the theocratic state was protected.
- (ii) To select a number of general points concerning the prophetic ministry and show how they served to maintain the theocratic rule.

An extension of this, if time permits, could be to focus on the work of one prophet, and demonstrate how he revealed his ministry as a guardian of the theocracy.

¹ *Old Testament Prophecy*, A. B. Davidson, p. 8.

² Davidson, *op. cit.*

1. THE ORIGIN OF THEOCRACY

We can trace back to the time of Abraham for the beginnings of theocracy. The main account, however, is revealed in Exodus 19 where the people dedicated themselves to Yahweh. The covenant was initiated at Mount Sinai, and the terms of theocracy were established.

‘Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine’ (Exodus 19:5-6). Moses brought Yahweh’s words to the people and they replied in verse 8. Yahweh had declared His will to His people and the pact was made. The theocracy was born, the people declared themselves to follow Yahweh, therefore both parties were in agreement.

‘We must remember that the covenant was far more than what we should call a ‘contract’ which either party could ‘contract out of’. It bound the Jewish nation to God in an intimate way. The best analogy—which Hosea used so forcefully—is that of marriage. There was always the possibility, of course, that when Israel broke the covenant Yahweh would feel justly free to break it on His side too. But when the prophets came to reveal God as a loving person—the ‘husband’ or ‘father’ of Israel—the relationship took on a far deeper meaning.¹

We can also think of the covenant as introducing theocratic rule. ‘... by concluding the covenant God too subjected Himself to its terms, thus becoming a son of heavenly constitutional monarch, exercising His reign over the people under the provisions of a self-imposed law.’²

We find that the prophets refer time and again to the terms of this covenant. ‘You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Cursed be the man who does not heed the words of this covenant which I commanded your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God’ (Jeremiah 11:3-4).

Therefore it must be said that such undeserved grace from Yahweh calls forth the gratitude of grace in those who receive from Him, and the people as an extension of this were commanded to obedience. The development of such a covenant of grace meant that the profession of religious worship was indissolubly linked with the practice of morality, and the blessings of the Lord God were conditional upon such obedience and service.

¹ The Rise of the Prophets, p. 29

² Social and Religious History of the Jews. Baron, p. 48

2. THE RISE OF PROPHECY

The prophets were the guiding lights of Yahweh's will and command. We can trace this fact back to the time of Abraham. 'Now then restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours' (Genesis 20:7). But the significance and power of the prophets' ministry did not come into vital prominence until the time of Moses.

Deuteronomy 18:19-22 gives the main origin of prophecy. The people are clearly instructed by Yahweh that they are not to follow the abominable practices of the other nations, especially in the matter of heeding the words of soothsayers and wizards, etc. Moses receives this direction from God and declares its truth to the people. 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed—' (Deuteronomy 18: 15). Here Yahweh tells His people of His provision for them in the raising up of one who will be His spokesman. Yahweh emphasises the responsibility of the people to heed His words, and then gives them the warning of the consequences of disobedience in verse 19.

Now some more words of explanation. In understanding what is meant by the rise of prophecy, we underline the fact that prophecy in our study means the work of the Hebrew prophets, whose writings are recorded in the Old Testament. Their message was addressed to their own era, and to people who wrestled with the conditions of their own day. Their language was for their own day, so there are figures of speech and allusions that are obscure to us. The obscurity is not due to some prophetic mystery, but mainly because our knowledge of their time and understanding of their situation is limited.

The prophets were spokesmen for the God of Israel to the nation to which they belonged. But they would have been surprised to realise that their words would be preserved in writing for centuries, and be pro

claimed in places of worship in our day, but with the local setting unaltered. They would have been surprised and even perplexed to discover that some people would fail to distinguish the living Word from its incidental setting. They would be dismayed at the idea of their prophetic utterances being used as some divine fortune-telling computer for unravelling the future. The relevance of the prophets' message for us is not in the realm of divination or soothsaying, for that was strongly denounced by the prophets. 'For thou hast rejected thy people, the house of Jacob, because they are full of diviners from the east and of soothsayers like the Philistines, and they strike hands with foreigners' (Isaiah 2:6).

Our problem is that when the word 'prophecy' is used we make it roughly synonymous with predictions of the future, particularly in respect to world events, and the Lord's return, and sensational books which have been published down through the years to 'captivate the minds of various generations. Now one of the dictionary meanings of the word 'prophet' is prediction, and we know that there are Christians who believe that the Bible does foretell the course of events in present and future ages, and there is quite a strong aspect to this; but there are preachers who run riot and grab onto everything that occurs in the media, and therefore find many gullible followers among the uncritical, those whose curiosity is greater than their brain power, and those who are fascinated by the mysterious, and feel that they can unlock the doors of theological perplexities. Such people tend to forget the words of Jesus in Acts 7. I believe we are always living in the end times, but to be caught up by the news of wars and rumours of wars, the increase of knowledge, apostasy and worldliness, which are pointed at as signs of the end, could be used of just about every period of human history. It's interesting that Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin and Irenaeus in the second century A.D. believed they were living in the last times. During the third century Hippolytus declared that 500 years after the birth of Christ the end would come. The same type of thing happened in the fourth century, the twelfth century, and so on. Many of the false cults have their following because of predicting dates when prophetic events are supposed to come to fruition.

The Biblical passages on which such so-called prophets and writers

have based their predictions are generally from Daniel and the Revelation, plus a few other suitable selections that enhance their belief. It is interesting that there is scarcely any reference—except for some brief Messianic passages—to the collect, ‘on of prophetic Books which forms our Old Testament, and yet it is this division which contains the works of the major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as those of the twelve minor prophets. We need to understand that the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible is not included in the section known as The Prophets: it is rather in the section known as The Writings.

In fact, Daniel and Revelation are not prophetic writings in the original sense at all. They are known as Apocalyptic or Revelation literature.

3. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THEOCRACY AND PROPHECY.

The first real prophet in Israel, as we have said, was Moses. He exercised a unique role. ‘With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’ (Numbers 12:8). As the undisputed leader of the people and the nation Moses, in that role, certainly guarded the theocracy.

As we further progress we enter the period of the Judges and see the nation settling into the land of Canaan. The record, however, shows a regular movement of apostasy, subjugation, penitence, and deliverance. In reality this is a summary of the historical movements written under the idea that Yahweh presided in the history of Israel. ‘This period is the creative epoch of historical Israel—the workshop in which the nation as we know it was fashioned’.¹

When we turn to the Book of Judges it is difficult to discern the work of the prophets or even their actual existence, but it is plain to see that the theocracy was maintained by the work of the Judges, and there are many references to ‘doing evil in the sight of Yahweh’. These references illustrate the point that the theocracy was still in existence and that the sovereignty of Yahweh was very evident. The story of Judges was of course written in latter days, and interpreted.

There were great risks involved in maintaining any consciousness of unity in Israel during the time of the Judges, because there were elements working for disintegration. But there came an increasing cry from the people for their own king to rule over them. This tendency was also known in the time of Gideon, who refused to accept a kingship, and referred to the true theocratic ideal, ‘the Lord shall reign over you’, and then the crisis really developed during the days of Samuel, when the people cried out, ‘Give us a king to govern us!’

¹ Davidson, op. cit p.31.

We can interpret this clamouring for a king in various ways. The Judges had only ever achieved a temporary fusion. The Israelites wanted their own monarchy like all other nations, and on the human level there was great appeal in the establishment of a kingship. Samuel, who was 'half prophet, half judge, with a little of the priest still clinging to him'¹*, is faced with a decision. The fact of Samuel's sons, in not following their father's example of judging, must have caused the old leader a great deal of embarrassment and heartache. The theocracy was involved, and Yahweh mentions the theocratic question, 'They have rejected me from being their king.' But even in the light of a prophetic ministry exercised by Samuel and his teaching of the ways of the king, the people still gave vent to the old cry, 'No, we will have a king over us.'

Yahweh granted His people their request in the selection and anointing of Saul to be the king. This establishment of the monarchy was the natural outcome, in a sense, of the nation's development, and yet even through this event is illustrated the fact that though leadership was to be centred in one person, it was still to be a theocratic rule, with Yahweh as the one guiding and directing, as through the prophet.

At first there was close alliance between Saul and Samuel. Saul did not at first allow himself to forget that his position as monarch came by the hand of Yahweh, but eventually Saul became disobedient to Yahweh's commands, and this is illustrated very clearly in I Samuel 15:9ff. Samuel's reply to Saul's behaviour is in those momentous words of verses 22 and 23: 'Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king.' Here is a striking illustration of a prophet under divine authority rebuking a king and guarding the theocracy. Saul failed because he rejected the covenant.

David, who succeeded Saul as king, did maintain the theocratic

rule. In fact David's character and religious zeal brought the kingship into close relationship with Yahweh, who was the God of the people. And it was David's character and career that gave a more completed picture to the idea of kingship. But even with David there came the need for the prophet to exercise his ministry of guarding the theocracy. It was Nathan who rebuked David for sin against one of his officers, which was also sin against the obligation of 'mercy' within the covenant community. A further illustration is when God offers David a choice of punishments because of his census of the population for military or taxation purposes. This was the concern of deity alone, and David had no right to exercise his independence in such a fashion.

¹ Bull, p. 18

4. THE PROPHETIC SUCCESSION

The facts relating to the prophetic succession provide us with the background against which the theme of the prophets as guardians of the theocracy may be developed. God was 'known by His mighty acts in national history and in the prophets' own experience. One who, in the actual situation of every movement, had made and continued to make His own characteristic demands upon His people.'¹*

To follow the lead given by R. B. Y. Scott in this quote, we can classify the prophetic succession that is revealed by the epochs of the movement under five headings.

- i. The traditional literature as it relates to the founder, Moses.
- ii. The narratives contained in Judges, Samuel and Kings, in which the prophets play a major role.
- iii. The material gathered around the names of the pre-literary prophets, Elijah and Elisha.
- iv.. The prophets of the 8th, 7th and early 6th centuries B.C.
- v. The post-classical written prophecy, eg. Ezekiel, Haggai, Malachi, Joel and Zechariah.

We can see right through the history of Israel that Yahweh's raising up of these prophets at specific times is indicative of His purpose in utilising the prophets as guardians of the theocracy.

5. THE PROPHETS AS GUARDIANS OF THE THEOCRACY

'Israel had three theocratically leading classes. The princes (kings) were the political leaders of the nation. The priests and prophets concerned themselves with the inward and the eternal. In this connection the priests were the permanent, and by birth, the appointed guardians of the written, deposited, divine revelation, while the prophets were, as the occasion required, the bearers of the progressive divine revelation, appointed not by birth but by personal vocation (I Samuel 10:12).'¹

The prophets were the bearers of the thought and idea of the theocracy. They stood in three clearly defined positions in their relationship to the people. As simple individuals, as an ecclesiastical organism, and as a state. The words of R. B. Y. Scott have an important bearing here. 'Because they were morally certain of the will of Yahweh, they stood out boldly against the power of kings, the anathemas of priests, and the fury of mobs.'²

Again, 'His message came out spontaneously as from a crucible where his life was fused with the life of his people by the white heat of the holy will of God.'³

(i) Ministry to Kings

We have already seen glimpses of the ministry of Samuel, Nathan and Gad in the ministry of the prophets rebuking and advising the kings.

One of the most dramatic pictures is in the account of Elijah's fearless condemnation of Ahab for his worship of Baal and all that he has done to 'provoke the Lord, the God of Israel to anger'. Elijah confronts Ahab with the warning of the forthcoming drought. Then he later returns and commands Ahab to assemble all the priests of Baal upon

¹ Scott, op. cit., p. 59.

¹ Dawn of World Redemption, Erich Sauer.

² Scott, op. tit. p. 52

³ Ibid. p. 116.

Mount Carmel. The resultant victory for Yahweh reminds the people of His Theocratic rule. ‘The Lord—He is God.’

Another instance of the illustration of the prophet’s role is contained in the account of the resistance to Ahab’s despotic seizure of Naboth’s vineyard (I Kings 21)

A further example is Isaiah in his denunciation of Ahaz for his appeal to the Assyrians for help against Israel and Syria. Isaiah emphasises that they should rather trust Yahweh, their King. But the king and the people both rejected the prophet’s word, to their ultimate downfall.

In another instance, Isaiah advised Hezekiah, who set upon a reformation of Judah and heeded Isaiah’s advice not to seek aid from Egypt (temporarily). Jerusalem was virtually saved by Isaiah for a further century—because the people heeded the advice of their real King’s warnings.

We could add the accounts from the post Exilic prophets—Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Then there are the instances of Ahijah’s prophecy to Jeroboam (I Kings 11:29-40); Jehu’s judgement of Baasha (I Kings 16:1-4); Elisha’s sending to Jehu (son of Jehoshaphat) by a young prophet his message of commission (II Kings 9: 1-3); Micaiah’s fearless word to Jehoshaphat (I Kings 22:5-28); Amos in his denunciation of Jeroboam (Amos 7:9); Jeremiah’s ministry to Jehoiakim whom he condemned (Jeremiah 22: 18-19), and the ministry of Hosea.

These, and many other instances, can be cited in the prophets’ ministry. However, it is sufficient to say that though man ruled as earthly king, Yahweh constantly referred all the people, especially the monarchs, to the fact of His Theocracy through the prophets.

(ii) Ministry to Priests and False Prophets

‘The prophet was the medium of communicating God’s will to the people in addition to what of His will was already fixed, congealed so to speak in institutions. There was still a living fountain out of which there welled forth God’s commands. This living fountain was the prophet.’¹

Here is portrayed the purifying influence exerted by the prophets on the religious life of the nation. Although much of the preaching was directed to the people as a whole, the priests and false prophets came in for a share of righteous condemnation.

Hosea condemns the prophets of his day (4:4-11). Punishment is foretold for them (verse 9).

Jeremiah rebukes the priests and the prophets (23:11). He is very forceful in this same passage concerning the prophets in particular. Their immoral practices cause Yahweh to pronounce, through Jeremiah, in 23: 15, ‘Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets: "Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, and give them poisoned water to drink; for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone forth into all the land." ‘

Micah, in 3:11 if., also condemns the false religious leaders.

Isaiah 9:15 and Amos 2:12 are further examples of this prophetic ministry.

In I Kings 22:5-28 is Micaiah’s opposition to the false prophets, and in I Kings 18, the fact of Elijah’s eventual victory over the prophets of Baal is significant to the same end.

These condemnations were essential to the guarding of the thought of Theocracy.

(iii) Ministry to the People

In their ministry to the people, the prophets were, first of all, religious teachers. They continually referred to the covenant with Yahweh, condemned hypocritical religiosity, and forbade the worship of false gods.

The prophet Elijah is one whom God raised up in the time of crisis. His forthright question to the people was, ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him’ (I Kings 18:21).

The well-known scene of Mount Carmel led the people to cry, ‘The Lord, He is God.’ The Theocracy had been represented in a convincing manner.

II Kings 17 details the waywardness of the people again and again,

¹ Davidson, op. cit. p. 107.

and notice verse 13. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the earlier prophets, Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah, all take up the same theme.

The prophets also attacked the social and moral evils: oppression by the rich, false dealings in the commercial world—all were condemned. See Amos 6:6 and 8:4-6, etc. False justice, drunkenness—all were shown to be contrary to the laws of the Theocratic rule.

‘Political forms, economic activities, legal and judicial practice, social institutions, public morals, culture and religion—all were deformed by a basic error as to the meaning, values, and directions of life. The prophets’ message concerning society was not evolutionist or reformist, but revolutionary and they were social revolutionaries because they were religious conservatives seeking to revive the essential ethics and social creativity of historic Yahwehism.’¹

6. AN ESTIMATE OF THEIR SUCCESS AS GUARDIANS

Were the prophets successful in their task of guarding the Theocracy? Yes, they were successful, but not completely. We see Israel and Judah in captivity and we tend to regard it as the nation’s doom—the end of the people of the Covenant—but we must see that **‘the doom of the nation is not the doom of the Covenant.’¹**

Isaiah’s teaching about a remnant (1:27, 6: 13, 7:3) reminds us that even in exile, the prophets still maintained the truth of Yahweh’s Theocracy.

Therefore, we can still say that the Theocracy is still with us, but in the terms of the new covenant, the Kingdom is within the hearts of believers.

7. THEOCRACY AND COVENANT

From Malachi to Matthew, there is a space of some four centuries where there was no prophet. John the Baptist comes on the scene and Matthew declares in 3:2 and 3, the message of the Kingdom of heaven. The result of this by the people is seen in verses 5 and 6. Severe warnings regarding the religious hypocrisy of the leaders is demonstrated in verses 7-10.

Jesus also, at the commencement of His public ministry, takes up the same theme (Matthew 4:17). Mark adds his contribution in 1:15 and then Luke brings out his emphasis in chapter four, verses 16-21. Luke further describes in verses 31-37, the authority of Jesus in verse 32; the ministry of the Gospel in verse 35; and the recognition by the people in verse 36.

¹ Scott, op. cit., p. 172.

¹ Scott, op. cit. p. 122.