

VI. True and false prophets

A. Statement of the problem

The prophets possessed an immediate and certain knowledge that their message was from God. This was not the case, however, with the people to whom they spoke. How could they know if what the prophets said was truly of divine origin.

We might ask: Is not the self witness of the prophets enough? They repeatedly say that their message is from God. This claim is certainly important and not to be ignored or discounted, but the problem is that there were also those who claimed to have a message from God and who said, "the LORD hath said," but the Lord has not sent them (Ez 13:6). They proclaim that which is out of their own heart rather than that which is revealed by God (Ez 13:2,3). These false prophets, however, were no less definite in their claims to be a mouthpiece for God than were the true prophets.

How then could the Israelite distinguish "true prophecy" and "true prophets" from those which were false?

This question is all the more important because it was not merely a theoretical distinction for the Israelite, but it concerned how they lived. The prophets called the people of Israel to action, that is they called them to do certain things, and Deut. 18:19 says "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."

What was the Israelite to do when two contradictory messages are delivered urging to opposite actions and both were represented as being the Word of the Lord (compare Jeremiah 27 and 28). Here a prophet named Hananiah urged the people to cast off Babylon's yoke and promised the LORD's help, and at the same time the prophet Jeremiah urged the people to submit to Babylon. Both prophets used the name of the LORD to give sanction to their words.

This question is raised already in the Mosaic era at the time of the description of the rise of the prophetic movement in Israel when in Deut. 18:21 Moses says, "You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?' " Here the question is answered with one of the means by which true and false prophecy was to be distinguished. Let us look at a few additional validation criteria that have been pointed to by various students of the Old Testament.

B. Validation criteria

I believe we can point to at least five factors that played an important role in enabling the Israelite to distinguish between true and false prophecy. These validation criteria did not work in isolation but, rather, functioned in combination in order to provide the ancient Israelite with a basis for the necessary discernment.

1. The moral character of the prophet as observed in his daily conduct.

This has often been pointed to as a factor in distinguishing true and false prophets. H. Freeman says (IOTP, 104, **CC p. 8**) "false prophets were characterized by their low morality, religious opportunism etc. While he who professed a divine commission from the holy God of Israel must reflect conduct and character consistent with that claim (see Matt. 7:15-20)." Cf., also Jer 23:11, 13, 14-16.

While this factor is certainly important, it seems to me that Freeman overstates its role. Because many false prophets are depicted in the Old Testament as displaying immoral behavior and religious opportunism this is not sufficient reason to say that they all openly reflect these types of conduct. We read nothing of this sort with respect to the conduct of Hananiah in Jeremiah 28, but we do read that he led the Israelites to trust in a lie. It is quite possible that his false prophecy came paired with unrepachable moral conduct as far as outward appearances were concerned. And on the other side we must also not exaggerate the flawlessness of the moral character of "true prophets." The true prophets were not sinless men. While it is true that the prophets are generally presented in Scripture as pious and godly people, note, for example, the case of Balaam, who apparently was a heathen soothsayer, but who spoke, even though against his will, the Word of the LORD as a true prophet. Or remember the case of the old prophet who deceived the man of God out of Judah by lying to him, but who also received and delivered a true message from God (1 Kings 13:21ff). The moral character of the prophet is thus something to be taken into consideration, but in itself it is not sufficient to provide a basis for discernment between the true and the false prophet. Cf., 2 Cor 11:14,15.

2. Signs and wonders.

Signs and wonders are often pointed to as an important validation criteria for distinguishing between the true and the false prophet, and it is certainly true that there are many instances in Scripture where signs and wonders are given to authenticate the Word of a prophet and to provide an aid to belief. In Luke 10:13 Jesus said to the inhabitants of Chorazin "if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes." John 20:30,31 says: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these

are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." John 14:11 says: "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves" (NIV). In Exodus 4 when Moses is told to tell the Israelites in Egypt that God had appeared to him and instructed him to lead them out of Egyptian bondage Moses objected (4:1) by saying: "What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The LORD did not appear to you'?" The LORD's response was to tell him to cast his rod on the ground. When he did this it became a serpent. When he picked it up it again became a rod. Exod 4:5 says this was done "so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, . . . has appeared to you." Then Moses was told to put his hand inside his cloak and it became leprous, when he put it in again it was healed. Verse 8 says, "If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first miraculous sign, they may believe the second. But if they do not believe these two signs or listen to you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground." At this and other crucial points in the history of revelation and redemption signs and wonders are multiplied to give authentication to the Word of the prophet. Signs and wonders are thus also of great importance, but at the same time it needs to be recognized that in itself a sign or wonder is not a sufficient test to separate true and false prophets. The reason for this is that Scripture also recognizes that false prophets are capable of performing signs. Matt. 24:24 says: "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect - if that were possible." In speaking of the anti-christ Paul says in 2 Thess 2:9 that his coming is "in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders . . ." In Deut 13:1-3 we read:

"If a prophet or one who foretells by dreams appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul."

This passage specifically recognizes that false prophets can also perform signs and wonders and the Israelite is warned not to be blinded by such things.

It seems then that the Bible suggests that signs and wonders play a role in distinguishing between true and false prophets, but in isolation signs and wonders are not decisive and their role in providing a validation criteria for true prophecy must function in connection with other considerations as well.

3. The fulfillment of prophecy.

Fulfillment of prophecy as a validation criteria for true prophecy is pointed to in Deut. 18:21,22, but only in a negative sense. That is, when a prediction does not come to pass, then it is not from God. Reference to the fulfillment of prediction as a positive evidence for validating divine revelation is found in texts such as Isa 41:23 where heathen deities are challenged to:

"tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear."

Or Isa 48:5:

"Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.'"

Jesus said in John 13:19:

"I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He."

These and other texts suggest that God alone possesses the necessary knowledge of the future so that He can "declare the things to come" with accuracy and consistency.

However, even though the fulfillment of prophecy is presented as an important means of validating divine revelation it also has its drawbacks or limitations, and is not presented in scripture as decisive in itself, or in isolation. In Deut. 13:1-3, where certainly predictions are to be included, it is clear that simply because a prediction is fulfilled, that is not in itself sufficient proof that the message is from God. Occasionally prophets or soothsayers who do not speak from God, may give a true prediction. Perhaps this is to be attributed to the limited knowledge of the contingent future possessed by Satan (Acts 16:16, "spirit of divination" KJV, "spirit by which she predicted the future" NIV), or perhaps to mere coincidence, but in itself the fulfillment of an isolated prediction is not proof that the prophet who gave it is a spokesman for God.

Besides it should be observed that this criteria is of use only with respect to predictive prophecy and then only in the future when it may be shown to have or not have been fulfilled. This particular limitation is especially pronounced when the prophecy relates to the distant future when neither the prophet nor his hearers will experience whether or not it comes to pass as foretold. Thus the non-fulfillment of a prophecy is a clear proof that it

was not from God and the prophet who gave it was a false prophet. But this does not provide a sufficient basis to draw the opposite conclusion that the fulfillment of prophecy is always conclusive or absolute proof that it was a message from the LORD, and given by a true prophet. It may point in that direction, but, again, in isolation it is not conclusive.

4. The conformity of the message to previous revelation.

Because a true prophet was a spokesman for God his message must be in agreement with the revelation that Israel already possessed in both the law and the preceding prophets. Any deviation from this is an indication of false prophecy. This, I believe, is the most important "touchstone" that was always available to the ancient Israelite. It is here that we find the most important validation criteria for true prophecy. Here no waiting for fulfillment is necessary. This standard could be applied at the moment any prophecy was given. Every Israelite could know the law and older prophets sufficiently well to make a judgment on the conformity of the message being presented to him with previously given revelation. This criteria is set down in Scripture in Deut 13:1-3. *Here we are taught that the signs, wonders and prophecies must be judged by the teaching or doctrine, not the doctrine by the signs, wonders and prophecies.*

The same thing is taught in Jeremiah 28:8. Jeremiah says: "From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms." Here Jeremiah appeals to earlier prophets in order to indicate that his prophecy agrees with their words, while Hananiah's prophecy has an entirely different character that stamps it as false. The prophets had consistently proclaimed judgment on a sinful generation and any true prophet could not do otherwise. Thus when Hananiah speaks peace to a sinful people in deviation from previous prophets who were recognized as having been sent from God - then he cannot have been sent by God.

Isaiah 8:19,20 is also instructive in this regard:

"When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn."

Prophecy is proclamation of God's word. Where can that word be better tested to see if it is really God's word, then to compare it with the word of God already spoken? There is no better or more adequate criteria of validation than this.

Objections:

1. Perhaps someone might object that revelation is by its nature the unveiling of new things, which then cannot be tested by revelation that has already been given. Because it is new, there is no equivalent to be found in an already given revelation, and thus the danger might arise that something will be stamped as false that is actually true. This objection is not as serious as it may sound. One must remember that divine revelation in the O.T. is never totally separate from what has preceded it. There is constant development, but this development builds on an already laid foundation. Progression in revelation is organic in character, it grows from the same roots and trunk as it branches out in greater detail and diversity. Or to use a different image perhaps the revelation of God to Israel can be seen as a chain in which each link fits into the one which has preceded it.

2. Another objection that might be raised with respect to this criteria of validation is that it is insufficient for testing some specifics of predictive prophecies as, for example, the one given by Isaiah that Sennacherib would not take Jerusalem, or that Babylon's power would last for just 70 years as given by Jeremiah. Certainly it is to be admitted that such specific details in prophecy, considered by themselves, cannot be established as true or false prior to their fulfillment or non-fulfillment simply by comparison with previous revelation. But we must remember that such precise details are usually not isolated. They come in a broader context and find their validation in that context. In addition sometimes a longer term prediction is validated by a shorter term prediction that could be observed as coming to pass and thereby providing a basis for expectation that the longer term prophecy is equally valid (example: 1 Kings 13 - the prediction that Josiah would defile Jeroboam's altar some 300 years in the future is validated by a short term prediction that was fulfilled on that very day (see vs. 2,3,5). The altar was torn down and the ashes were spilled out according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the LORD. Also the leprous hand of Jeroboam was both caused and healed on that day.

To return to the prophecies of Hananiah and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 27,28), how could the Israelite know that the prophecy of Hananiah that predicted the breaking of Babylon's yoke was false and that the prophecy of Jeremiah that predicted the continuation of Babylon's yoke was true? He could know because Hananiah prophesied peace without repentance and humbling before the LORD while Jeremiah predicted the judgment of God on an unrepentant people. Then, too, while the prophet needed certainty with respect to every detail of the revelation he gave and could

know that it was the LORD's word and not his own, the listeners needed only to be convinced that the prophecy was in agreement in its basic features with what God had already spoken. In this way details that otherwise might be unverifiable in themselves were validated as also being the word of the LORD. In addition in this instance we have the fulfillment of the short term prediction of Hananiah's death (within two months) that validates the longer term message (Jer 28:15-17).

One further illustration of the way in which this functioned in Israel can be found in Jeremiah 26. This chapter describes the sermon that Jeremiah gave in the court of the temple during the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim (some years earlier than the incident in chapter 28). Notice vss. 4-6:

"Say to them, 'This is what the LORD says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth.' "

Under the leading of the priests and false prophets the people turned against Jeremiah and said that his message could not be true. To speak in the way that he did was sacrilegious, if not blasphemous. Such a person deserved to be put to death (vss 8-11).

Jeremiah then defended his word (vss 12-15) with a fierce self assurance born of the knowledge that his message truly was from God and causing him to be unconcerned about what this might mean for his life. His defense made such an impression that the princes did not dare to put him to death (vs. 16).

Then some of the elders of the land rose to Jeremiah's defense (vss. 17-19). These were men who remembered the prophecy of Micah (Micah 3:12). Here we see how the prophecy of Jeremiah was compared with that of a former prophet (Micah lived a little more than 100 years earlier ca. 735, Jeremiah, ca. 609), and then accepted as a true message from God because it was validated by means of comparison with a previous revelation.

5. Enlightenment by God's Spirit.

While conformity of the message to previous revelation, the consideration of the role of signs and wonders and fulfilled prediction are all important

as **objective criteria** of validation, yet these things do not provide an automatic or mechanical stamp of absolute certainty in distinguishing true and false prophecy. To the objective divine revelation and its accompanying authenticating factors there must also be added the **internal enlightenment of God's Spirit**. There must be the "eye" to see the "truth." As Moses says in Deut 29:2-4:

Your eyes have seen all that the LORD did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.

It is as if the Israelites had seen, but had not seen. And in the same way with the touchstone of previous revelation, as well as with signs and wonders, and fulfilled prediction, it was necessary to have the "organ of reception" required to make correct use of the revelation that had been given. For this enlightenment by God's Spirit is indispensable. Where this was found, true and false prophecy could be distinguished with confidence and certainty. Where this was lacking such certitude and insight were also lacking. The Scripture makes it clear that in the objective divine revelation there is sufficient light to remove every excuse for being misled by the false prophets, but because of man's sinful nature and willful desire to suppress the truth he deliberately turns aside from that which is clearly presented to him. For this reason not only were the false prophets judged, but the people were also condemned for following them and turning their backs on the warnings of the true prophets. They were responsible for responding to the light that had been given.