

TOWARD A CHECKLIST TO EVALUATE THE VERACITY OF MODERN PROPHECIES

Why is rightly discerning prophecy important?

We live in a time when the gift of prophecy is being rediscovered and schools of prophecy and prophetic ministries are thriving. Anyone searching the web will find an abundance of hits under those key words. How are we to know what is reliable and what is questionable, especially in terms of the prophetic role of nations and of peace and judgment to come? Does not the Bible warn us that false prophets will be one of the marks of the end of time?¹

Two clarifications are needed: there is a difference between the gift of prophecy and the ministry of the prophet.² It may also be helpful to draw attention to the difference between prophecy in the OT/Tanach and prophecy in the NT/B'rit Hadashah, prophecy in the written history of Israel and contemporary, post-canonical, mainly spoken prophecy. The difference is not watertight, except for the fact that the ministry or office of a prophet is an irrevocable calling that does not depend on a person's desire but on the choice of God, while the gift of prophecy is a charisma that depends on the desire of the believer and the moving of the Holy Spirit.

Moses wished that all the people were prophets (Num 11:29) but no true OT prophet became prophet because he wanted to be one.³ The task of the OT prophet as a hearer, a herald and a mediator, according to Jocz (1961) can be summarized under the five headings: **pronouncement of judgment**,⁴ **call to repentance**, **interference in and interpretation of current events**, **offer of grace and forgiveness** and **God's ultimate triumph in history**.⁵

The apostle Paul in the context of the NT church encourages the believers to desire the charisma 'especially to prophesy.' It must be noted that he defines the meaning of this term in the context of the local church as '**edification**,

¹ Matt 24:11 and Tim 4:1-2 are warnings to the effect that after Christ, anything added or modifying His gospel is false prophecy (there will be many false prophets, ex. Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russell, etc.)

² See Ben Israel's publication: *The Spirit of Prophecy: An Examination of the Prophetic Call*.

www.benisrael.org. This article defines the office of prophecy as one of 'oracular' prophecy whose 'quintessential function' is outlined in Jer 1:9-10 and particularly analyses the 'Anatomy' of the False Prophet (Jer 23). « The calling is given and is not something that we ourselves summon or take for ourselves. » (Ben Israel, op.cit. p. 13)

Bill Hamon, *Prophets, Pitfalls and Principles – God's Prophetic People today* (Preface by Oral Roberts, Vol III, Destiny Image, Shippensburg. 1991); www.ci-ministries.org. This insightful book distinguishes three categories: the prophetic ministry includes the ministry or office of the prophet, prophetic ministers (ministers without the office of a prophet), and all prophetic people. See fn. 10.

³ 2Pet 1:21 (prophecy not by an act of human will). - Jacob Jocz, *The Spiritual History of Israel*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1961: "This is the remarkable awareness of the prophet: he knows himself taken hold of by God and used as an instrument or mouthpiece. He is a man possessed in the literal sense of the word: God has taken possession of his life. What he says is God's word, though it is the prophet who speaks." (106)

⁴ "they never regard punishment as an end in itself... Only when kept together: judgment *and* grace, do we receive a balanced view of the prophetic message." (J. Jocz, op. cit. 116) "The foundation of the church... is the revelation of God as He in fact is... The key knowledge is the knowledge of God as He is, both in judgment and in mercy..." (Ben Israel, op. cit., p. 31)

⁵ J. Jocz, op. cit. (110)

exhortation and consolation' (1Cor 14:3).⁶ This is prophecy in the sense of a pastoral **ministry of encouragement** within the local congregation, for the Holy Spirit is the 'parakletos,' the Comforter (KJV John 14:16; NASB 'Helper').

While the OT prophet is the herald, the mouthpiece of God, the One who reveals God's standards, actions and thoughts, the prophet in the NT Ekklesia (church/congregation) in his or her prophetic word expresses subjective mental, spiritual impressions or physical sensations intended for others. It is the *local* church concerned that will need to discern the genuineness and validity of that kind of prophecy.⁷

The proposed **PEX** list [**PROPHECY EVALUATOR INDEX**]⁸ may be primarily applicable where contemporary prophecy goes *beyond* the context of the local Body of Christ/Messiah, overlapping with Scriptural prophecy in assuming validity even for political leaders, cities and nations. Scripture exhorts us to test the spirits (1 John 4:1-3; 1Thess 5:20-21). Tests are needed in contemporary prophecy to discern the true from the false and to protect us from deception and seduction. In Biblical times, the true prophet must be heeded (Deut 18:19). False prophecy (**Jer 23:25ff; Jer 29:8;**) carried the death penalty (Deut 13:1-10; Deut 18:20; Isa 44:24-26; Lam 2:14; Ezek 13: 1-9; Zec 13:3-5).⁹ Even more so, as we near the end times, we must not trust all religious claims (Matt 7:15-23; 24:4,22-25; 2 Pet 2:1-3). A prophet carries a heavy responsibility (Rev 22:18-19).

The Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy (Rev 19:9-11).

Prophecy is a gift (charisma) from the Holy Spirit that performs a variety of functions. Biblical prophecy is not always **predictive** (as in Acts 11:28). It does not always concern the future, but often it deals with the issues of the present as the Holy Spirit convicts of sin. Conviction happens when He brings into the open what otherwise would remain hidden. Some famous NT examples of such **revelatory** prophecy in the New Testament are John 4:18-19; Acts 5:3-4,9 ; Acts 9:4 ; Matt 20:19, 26:2). An awakened conscience may then respond to a call for repentance. Specific guidance in the prophecy may follow repentance, making the prophecy **prescriptive** (Acts 9:6). In view of all this, it would be absurd to assume that every kind of prophecy is a discipline that can be learned. The wind

⁶ 2Tim 3:16 summarizes God's word as useful for 'teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.' It is therefore not possible to use 1Cor 14:3 to exclude all other aspects of God's word from contemporary prophecy. This is why our evaluator list includes 'other biblical prophecies.'

⁷ Steve Thompson: "Whenever we 'hear from God,' it is usually subjective in nature to some degree. Seldom is it completely objective." (143) He gives a number of caveats in his chapter of Wisdom and Warnings to balance his instructions regarding the three components of a 'prophetic word' (revelation, interpretation and application) in *You May All Prophecy, Practical Guidelines for Prophetic Ministry*, Morningstar Publications, Wilkesboro, NC, 2000. See our review of this book. - The warning of Ben Israel is well taken: „We are calling men prophets who have not the office, but who are operating in the gift of prophecy, and in many instances, not even the gift of prophecy, but rather even a deceitful clairvoyance.” (op.cit., p.8)

⁸ The principles behind PEX as a prophecy evaluator tool can be summed up as Faithfulness to the Spirit of the Scripture, to historically recognized doctrine, sociological appropriateness and personal standard of prophetic integrity. See the categories on the PEX list.

⁹ Steve Thompson, pointing out that 'prophecy' in the contemporary sense is a learning process that allows misjudgments, restricts the meaning of 'false prophecy' without claiming to be able to define when a prophecy is misguided due to misjudgment and when it must be called 'false' prophecy.

(hebr. ruach = spirit/wind) blows where it wills. What may be learned is **preventive** prophecy in the sense of discerning the times we live in (John 6:14-15), the persons that influence us (Matt 16:15-17), warning about the trends where things are heading (Matt 16:6, 11-12; Mk 8:15; Lk 12:1; Acts 21:11-14). Yet the Spirit is also the comforter (gr. parakletos = the One who is called beside). So we then find that **exhortative** prophecy functions as exhortation for the purpose of encouragement (Lk 24:6-8, 1Cor 14:3) which obviously is where the emphasis of contemporary prophecy lies.

Discerning the spirits is not only legitimate. It is a necessity.

We need the largest possible measure of objectivity as we sort through myriads of pronouncements from diverse corners, all claiming Divine inspiration. So now we venture to present **a checklist (PEX)** to keep in mind as we examine contemporary prophecy or prophecy outside the biblical canon of Scripture in order to discern its spirit. Since prophecy is the Holy Spirit's prerogative, **it is the Spirit that must have the last word.** As the community of believers is expected to function as a body, such testing involves more than just any one person alone. Discernment is a gift, it can be learned (1 Cor 12:10; Phil 1:10; Romans 12:4-8).

Disclaimer

We do not claim that any such list will ever be authoritative or be able to protect us from mistakes. Nothing can replace the ministry of the Holy Spirit Himself. However, since many are claiming to know the Spirit's mind and all do not always agree, something is better than nothing. Anyone wishing to refine this list will be welcome. Please respond if you wish to refine this tool or draw attention to others who have written about these issues.¹⁰

Some problem areas / Issues to watch

- 1) The **office** of a prophet is obviously not something to be learned. It is a result of a divine, irrevocable calling, a matter of life and death. A person learning to exercise his or her spiritual gift (**charisma**) of prophecy (in the sense of 1 Cor 14:3) cannot be evaluated on the same rigorous scale as an OT prophet. - What about date setting? Whoever sets dates is a 'false prophet.' When does someone in the category of contemporary (charismatic) prophecy become a 'false prophet?' Christian writers have predicted the date of the Messiah's return and were proven false. Have they become 'false' prophets? (They made a false prediction – some of them admitted it, some did not) Have they lost their credibility or was their mistake just a "learning experience?")
- 2) No prophet in the OT/Tanach has ever been the product of a school of prophecy. If contemporary schools of prophecy claim to provide training for a prophetic ministry, are

¹⁰ Hamon, op. cit., p.66, presents a noteworthy alliterative checklist called "10M's for Maturing and Maintaining Manhood and Ministry, Determining Prophetic Ministers True/Fals Status." Each "M" is supported with 3-4 Scripture references, e.g. Message: Eph 4:15 (truth in love), 1Tim 4:2 (balance); Mk 16:20 (divine confirmation). 10M covers the whole context of prophecy, rather than the content of the message. He argues that Balaam's example shows that it is not enough to examine the message as a prophet can be 'false' even if his message is correct. In addition, his book lists seven abuses or extremes that must be avoided: 'an overemphasis on personal prophecy', ministering outside the authority of church leadership (no accountability); and wrong motivations behind the prophetic ministry: using prophecy to justify rebellion and other sin; manipulating others, personal gain; trying to fulfill personal prophecy out of proper timing; presumptuous, critical, and judgmental prophesying.

they not misleading Christians by making them believe that the office of a prophet can be learned within three months or whatever length that school may be? Ought these schools not rather be called 'Discipleship School' or School for Discipleship training, as the first duty even of a charismatic "prophet" is to learn how to hear what God has to say? (Isa 50:4)

- 3) Some Bible teachers claim that prophecy in the NT is marked by God's love, grace and forgiveness. For them, since Christ has borne the judgment in His death on the cross, judgment is no longer commensurate with the message of God's love. ('Armageddon' to them has become a symbol of ridicule and obscurantism). How is it possible to maintain this kind of distinction in the face of Biblical passages - even in the NT - that prove that HE is the same, yesterday and forever? Is the story of Ananias and Saphira a hangover from the OT? Is the frequent reference of the apostles to OT passages not proof that God has never changed? He is holy forever. Judgment and mercy are the two sides of His character. How many harsh statements about hell have come out of Jesus' mouth? Does Paul not write about the severity and goodness of God? What about Peter who refers to the prophets of the OT? Is this not false teaching if one overemphasizes the message of love at the expense of the message of judgment or vice versa? Is the message of judgment not always a message to return to God? Mercy triumphs over judgment but does this mean that the message of judgment is now outdated? Is Habakkuk's cry no longer needed: "In wrath remember mercy!"?

1. Proposed criteria for evaluating the prophecies¹¹:

Biblical Content

- Lack of biblical foundation (use of unbiblical sources to trump the Scriptures?)
- Distortion of scripture (misinterprets Word thru bad hermeneutics, i.e. ignores grammatical, literary, and historical context of Scripture?)
- Arrogant spirit with regard to translations (there is NO perfect translation)?
- Contradicts other biblical prophecies / verses on same topic? (OT and NT)

Doctrinal Content

- Erroneous doctrinal assumptions?
- Adds to, subtracts from, or claims to "correct" the "distorted gospel"?
- Questionable view of eschatology?
- Fails to understand end-time role of Israel as nation (in God's plan of Salvation)?

Spiritual Content

- Fails basic Holy Spirit endorsement of Jesus Christ (spirit of prophecy = Spirit of Messiah)?
- Fruit of prophecy is bad (you will know them by their fruit)?
- Lack of balance between promises and warnings (all black or all rosy)?
- Prophesying vain (carnal, worldly, idolatrous) imaginations (Ezek 13:2,17; 2 Cor 10:5)?

Sociocultural-Historical Context

- Level of verifiability (too ambiguous or general to be tested)?
- Impossibility to verify because fulfillment is too far away?
- Person-centered, fad-driven, "experience-seeking now" spirituality?
- Pagan or occult syncretism?

¹¹ To understand this list it is necessary to read its introduction.

