



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Wild Goose
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 40-44)
- 📖 Would That All Were Prophets
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 9-15)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Jesus as a Prophet

Jesus' teachings and actions, which can appear eccentric and mysterious, are often oracles and symbolic actions like those of Israel's prophets. How do Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection promise the return of prophetic guidance to God's people?

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Malachi 2:17-3:2 and 4:5-6; Mark 6:14-16

Reflection

Many Jewish leaders in Jesus' day believed that the prophets, called "Spirit-bearing people" in Hosea 9:7, were spiritual dinosaurs, creatures of the past. The Babylonian Talmud shares this view: "When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the latter prophets, were dead, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel" (Soḥa 48b).

The first Christians rejected this all-the-prophets-are-dead-as-the-dinosaurs view. They, like many first-century Jews, recalled God's promise to send Elijah before the restoration of Israel (Malachi 4:5) and longed for a Spirit-bearing person to return to their land. This explains the mysterious early 'buzz' about Jesus (Mark 6:14-15).

He was more than "just" a prophet, of course. Jesus pressed his closest disciples to discover the deeper truth that he was the Messiah (Mark 8:27-30). Later theologians would speak of the three-fold offices of Christ: he was not only a prophet, but also our priest and king.

"Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament," N. T. Wright concludes. "Like Elijah or Jeremiah, Jesus was proclaiming a message from the covenant god, and living it out with symbolic actions. He was confronting the people with the folly of their ways, summoning them to a different way, and expecting to take the consequences of doing so." †

- ▶ Jesus opened his public ministry with a prophet's call experience, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1), and proclaimed, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." His ministry would mirror the work of Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:25-27). Indeed, when Jesus raised a dead man, holy fear seized the crowd and they cried, "A great prophet has risen among us!" (Luke 7:16).
- ▶ Symbolically acting out Malachi 3:1-2, Jesus drove merchants from the outer court of the temple. Quoting from the prophets (Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11), he reproached them for disrupting the temple's witness to the Gentiles (Mark 11:17).
- ▶ Both Jesus' challenge to religious leaders to make their lives match their devotion to the Lord and his hyperbolic language, when he called them "whitewashed tombs" and "a brood of snakes," echo Israel's prophetic tradition (Matthew 23:27-36).
- ▶ Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God reflects a prophetic vision of the restoration of creation. "Isaiah envisions a future time of peace and righteousness, when all creatures will be reconciled, at peace



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with one another and with God (11:1-10). Jesus likewise described the kingdom as a great reversal of rivalries — of great and small, rich and poor, and servants and masters,” Tracy Stout notes. “His was a prophetic vision of God’s future meant to speak to the present day.”

- ▶ On the day of Pentecost, Peter realized that Jesus’ death and resurrection was the ultimate prophetic action, revealing God’s intention to restore Israel and open the floodgate of prophecy predicted by Joel (Acts 2:16-17). This powerful unleashing of the Spirit occurred, Peter concluded, because “God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (2:24).

Study Questions

1. Briefly review the stories about the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 17-18. How was Jesus’ ministry similar to Elijah’s?
2. What is the relation between Jesus and the prophet Elijah in the story of the Transfiguration in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 17:1-13; cf. Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36)? Who is identified as fulfilling the prediction in Malachi 4:5 of the return of the prophet Elijah?
3. Why did Jesus’ contemporaries consider him to be a prophet? What are the dangers of interpreting him as “just” a prophet?
4. How does the hymn “O Young and Fearless Prophet” capture some of Jesus’ prophetic teachings and challenges?

Departing Hymn: “O Young and Fearless Prophet” (verses 1, 4, 5, and 6)

O young and fearless Prophet of ancient Galilee,
your life is still a summons to serve humanity;
to make our thoughts and actions less prone to please the
crowd,
to stand with humble courage for truth with hearts uncowed.

Stir up in us a protest against our greed for wealth,
while others starve and hunger and plead for work and
health;
where homes with little children cry out for lack of bread,
who live their years sore burdened beneath a gloomy dread.

Create in us the splendor that dawns when hearts are kind,
that knows not race nor station as boundaries of the mind;
that learns to value beauty, in heart, or brain, or soul,
and longs to bind God’s children into one perfect whole.

O young and fearless Prophet, we need your presence here,
amid our pride and glory to see your face appear;
once more to hear your challenge above our noisy day,
again to lead us forward along God’s holy way.

S. Ralph Harlow (1931), alt.

Suggested Tune: ST. THEODULPH

† N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress Press, 1996): 167-168.

Jesus as a Prophet

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 3 or 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To appreciate the continuities between Jesus' ministry and Israel's prophet tradition.
2. To interpret specific words and deeds of Jesus as prophetic oracles and symbolic actions.
3. To explore how, in the gospels, Jesus' ministry heralds the return of prophecy to God's people and the restoration of Israel.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. Locate the tune ST. THEODULPH in your church's hymnal.

Begin with a Story

On the Sunday after Jesus' crucifixion, two disciples were deep in conversation when they met a stranger. "What are you talking about?" the man asked them. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know ... about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him?" Cleopas replied. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Notice that the disciples already understood that Jesus was a prophet sent to redeem Israel. Soon they would understand more, when the curious stranger broke the bread for their supper: he was Jesus, now resurrected from the dead!

This story in Luke 24:13-35 reminds us that with their first glimpse, incomplete though it was, the disciples saw Jesus as a prophet in Israel's tradition. The gospel invites us to join the disciples in looking at Jesus this way, so that we may also, like them, see him as our risen Lord.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will experience the excitement, fulfillment, and fear of those people in the crowd who welcomed Jesus, exclaiming: "A great prophet has risen among us!"

Scripture Reading

Ask one member to read Malachi 2:17-3:2 and 4:5-6, and another member to read Mark 6:14-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

"Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament," the theologian and New Testament scholar N. T. Wright observes. For Christians, this should be sufficient reason to study Israel's prophetic tradition. As we appreciate the continuities between Jesus and Israel's prophets, we will better understand Jesus' actions and teachings.

This lesson surveys five points of continuity: Jesus' opening description of his ministry as fulfilling the

prophet's calling and echoing Elijah's and Elisha's work; his symbolic action of cleansing the temple; his use of hyperbolic language to call religious leaders to repentance; the shape of his teaching about the kingdom of God; and the prophetic action of his death and resurrection.

The New Testament welcomes the return of prophecy to God's people in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This theme will be explored in the next lesson. Here you might note how the gospels interpret Jesus' life as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. Later, when Christians formed their canon, they positioned the book of Malachi at the end of the Old Testament so that the prophet's prediction would serve as a transition to Matthew's gospel.

Study Questions

1. You might assign a member or small group to survey these four stories in 1 Kings 17-18: Elijah called on God's power to continually replenish the bread of a foreigner, the widow in Sidon (17:8-16), and to restore her son to life (17:17-24). He confronted King Ahab and prophets of Baal (18:17-40); then he announced the end of Israel's three and a half year famine (18:41-45). Members may see similarities between the first two events and Jesus' miracles. Elijah called on Israel to abandon idols and worship the Lord. Jesus also called the people to repentance, corrected their religious leaders, symbolically cleansed the temple, and announced the Kingdom of God.
2. Jesus' ministry is continuous with that of Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophetic precursor of the Messiah. His shining countenance (Matthew 17:2) and the voice of God (17:5) designate Jesus alone as divine. "Elijah has already come," Jesus said, in John the Baptist (17:12-13).
3. His disciples on the road to Emmaus described him as "Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Luke 24:19). This suggests that both his miracles and powerful teachings showed that the Spirit of God was evident in his ministry. Members may mention specific instances that reveal to them the presence of the Spirit in Jesus' deeds and words. [You might refer to these passages: One crowd spread the word that Jesus was a "great prophet" after he raised the son of a widow (Luke 7:16-17). The Samaritan woman at Jacob's well called Jesus a prophet after he revealed her sordid personal life (John 4:19). The crowd that was fed when Jesus multiplied the bread and fish concluded he was "the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). The man born blind, after he was healed, said "He is a prophet" (John 9:17).] While the category of "prophet" helps us to appreciate Jesus' ministry and the reaction of the people to him, it does not capture all that Jesus means to the world. He is more than one among many "Spirit-bearing people."
4. This prayer to Jesus, "the young and fearless Prophet," confesses that we are tempted to depart from "God's holy way" in order to "please the crowd." We need "hearts uncowed" because the crowd's pressure is great, and focused attention on Jesus because it is difficult to hear his "challenge above our noisy day." Notice how we can fall into hypocrisy, just like those "whitewashed tombs" among the religious leaders in Jesus' day: we may become greedy for wealth and ignore the jobless and sick, or become provincial in our friendships and attitudes, forgetting the wideness and inclusiveness of God's kingdom.

Departing Hymn

Verses 1, 4, 5, and 6 of "O Young and Fearless Prophet" are printed in the study guide. The suggested tune, ST. THEODULPH, should be familiar, for it is usually paired with the text "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.