

4 Characteristics of a False Prophetic Spirit

In Acts 16:16, Paul and his team encountered a young woman who prophesied to them through what Luke calls a “spirit of divination.” However, the Greek word from which “divination” is translated is *python*.

“Python” was a word associated with prophecy among the ancient Greeks and Romans. Because it was so well-known in the ancient Greco-Roman world, the original readers of Acts would have made an immediate association when they read the words “spirit of python.” Here is how they would have understood it.

Prophecy Among Ancient Greeks and Romans

Prophecy was common among the ancient Greeks and Romans. One historian said that the consultation of prophetic oracles was probably the most universal cult practice in the Greco-Roman world.

“Oracle” was a word used by the ancients for a message from the gods, *i.e.*, a prophecy. Many regions had their own divinely inspired prophets or prophetesses who gave their oracles (prophecies) to a constant stream of seekers.

Prophecy was also common in the ancient pagan and mystery religions. This is borne out by the Roman historian, Livy (59 B.C. – 17 A.D.), who describes followers of the pagan deity, Bacchus, who “as if insane, with fanatical tossing of their bodies, would utter prophecies,” and also describes devotees of the goddess Cybele as “prophesying in their frenzied chants.”

That prophecy and the supernatural were so common in the ancient world is why there are so many admonitions in the New Testament to not be deceived; and is why Paul, every time he

mentions prophecy, includes an admonition to judge, test and prove the genuineness of prophecy.

The Oracle at Delphi

The most famous ancient oracle (prophetic center) was at the city of Delphi in Greece and was known as the "Oracle at Delphi." According to legend, the Greek god, Apollo, had slain a large female serpent—a python—at that site and the spirit of the python had remained. According to the legend, it now possessed the prophets and prophetesses who functioned there, "taking possession of their organs of speech moving and compelling them to give prophetic utterances."

This was commonly known as the "pythian spirit" or the "spirit of python." At the height of its popularity, the prophetic oracle at Delphi maintained three priestesses/prophetesses who offered advice and counsel through the pythian spirit to a continual stream of visitors including generals and government officials. This is the association the first readers of Acts would have made to Luke's mention of a "spirit of python."

One characteristic of the Oracle at Delphi—and all pagan prophecy—is that it was self-induced. Preceding their prophetic functions, the priestesses would go through ritual baths, sprinklings and animal sacrifices leading to a hyped and frenzied prophetic state.

One ancient drawing pictured the prophetess in a disheveled, frenzied state as she gave forth her oracle. Other pagan religions used music, dance, contortions and sex orgies to work themselves into a prophetic frenzy. Do we charismatics have our own rituals by which we work ourselves into a "prophetic" state?

How We Open Ourselves to a Spirit of Python

In contrast, New Testament prophecy is not self-induced; it does not come forth at the initiative of the person

prophesying. Paul is very clear in 1 Cor. 12:11 that the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, are given *as He [the Holy Spirit] wills*.

Although we can learn about how prophecy and how Spiritual gifts function, it is dangerous to think that we can learn “how to” prophesy of our own initiative.

This is, perhaps, why Paul allowed this situation to go on for “many days” before dealing with it and casting out the spirit. He did not have a “how to” list for dealing with such situations but was dependent on the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I am convinced that when we begin to push ourselves into prophesying out of our own hearts, apart from the Holy Spirit, we open ourselves to false spirits such as the spirit of python that possessed this young woman in Philippi.

Characteristics of a False Prophetic Spirit

Luke uses “spirit of python” in regards to this slave girl probably because the spirit operating in her was like the one at Delphi. There is, of course, the possibility that she had actually been to Delphi and that is where she picked up this false spirit.

It is important to note that what she said was true. Satan and demons have some knowledge and will reveal their “secrets” in order to impress and draw people into their destructive web. Only our God, however, is omniscient, *i.e.*, all knowing.

Here are some of the traits of a false prophetic spirit that are obvious in this narrative.

1. It loves to flatter.

The prophecy of this young woman was not given to encourage or affirm, but to flatter. We all need to give and receive affirmation and encouragement, but flattery is insincere and

self-serving.

So many today, including leaders, are so starved for affirmation and approval that they are vulnerable to the flattery of a deceiving, python spirit. We must be so settled in God's acceptance and approval that we are no longer susceptible to the flattery of a false prophetic spirit. Beware of those who use prophecy to flatter and, thereby, gain advantage.

2. It loves to be seen and heard.

This is indicated by the fact that she kept putting herself at the center of attention with her continual prophesying day after day. Scripture is very clear that the Holy Spirit is in the Earth to draw attention to Jesus. Jesus Himself said of the Holy Spirit in John 16:14, *"He will glorify Me, for He will receive from Me and will declare it to you."*

Revelation 19:10b says, *"Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."* Beware of those who use prophecy to thrust themselves into the limelight.

3. It wants to be important.

This is indicated by the fact that she directed her prophecies to the leaders of this new movement. Beware of those who use prophecy to gain status with pastors and leaders.

4. There is often a monetary motive involved.

This young slave girl was raking in a lot of money for her masters. I am afraid this same motive is at work in the church today in both overt and subtle ways.

For overt examples, you can go to the internet and find those who will send a personal prophecy in return for a donation. These are not psychics but those who claim to be Christian prophets. Such prophecies are not worth the paper they are printed on.

I recall observing a subtle expression of a monetary motive in a man who probably had a genuine gift of prophecy. After preaching he expressed his desire to pray for everyone who would bring a certain offering for his ministry to the front.

As he prayed and then prophesied over each one, I saw women looking in their purses to see if they had enough money to go forward and get a “word.” I believe this man was opening himself to a false spirit—a spirit of python—by his devious actions.

Taking A Stand for Truth

Many ministries today would probably have put this young woman on their prophetic team, for what she prophesied was positive and flattering. Discernment is lacking because, in this post-modern world, the lines between true and false are being blurred and even erased.

Some in the charismatic movement are tapping into New Age writings with the excuse that “all truth is God’s truth.” If this had been Paul’s approach he would never have confronted the python spirit and cast it out, for what was being said was true.

Taking a stand for truth is not always the most popular thing to do. Paul and Silas were arrested, beaten and thrown in jail because they distinguished between the true and the false and cast out the false prophetic spirit.

Because they refused to compromise, God sent an earthquake, physically and spiritually, and turned the situation completely around. God is looking for people who will stand for truth in this hour. As Jesus said in John 8:31-32, *“If you remain in My word, then you are truly My disciples. You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”*

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*This article was derived from **Eddie Hyatt's** latest book, Paul, Women and Church, available now from Amazon in the Kindle format and soon to be available in paperback. To learn more about his vision for another Great Awakening in America and around the world, visit his website at .*