

What Many Don't Understand About 'the Spirit of Prophecy'

From the opening of time, God's Spirit was shaping the destiny of creation. This is not only witnessed in the account of Moses when he declares, *"the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the water"* (Gen. 1:2b), it is also witnessed in the psalms of David. Under inspiration from the Lord, he writes, *"When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the surface of the ground"* (Ps. 104:30).

Yet, the sons and daughters would not continue to fellowship with their gracious heavenly Father. They turned away from His goodness and grace, losing access to His glory. God began to decry: *"My Spirit will not always strive with man, for he is flesh"* (Gen. 6:3). Flesh and blood had fallen tragically short of the glory.

Nevertheless, from the moment sin entered the hearts of men, there was a longing for a return of the Shekinah. We witness an intense longing in the oracles of the prophets.

For example, Moses declared, *"Oh, that all the people of the Lord were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!"* (Num. 11:29). In a similar way, Ezekiel became a mouthpiece, saying, *"For I will have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel, says the Lord God"* (Ezek. 39:29). Isaiah follows the same pattern, pronouncing: *"I will pour out My Spirit on your descendants, and My blessing on your offspring"* (Is. 44:3).

Joel joins this great company of seers, affirming, *"And it will be that, afterwards, I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; then your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your*

old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. Even on menservants and maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit” (Joel 2:28-29).

There is little doubt that ancient Israel expected the Spirit to be manifest within the people of God as they entered into the coming age of salvation. They believed that a day would come when all who loved God would be positioned to speak the mysteries of His Word.

Rabbis and the Spirit of Prophecy

Since the Holy Spirit was so closely related to prophetic speech in the Old Testament, some of the rabbis in the intertestamental period began to make reference to the “*Spirit of Prophecy*.” Theologian Archie Hui elaborates on this, noting that in Rabbinic literature:

“‘prophecy’ is one of the ten names given to ‘the Holy Spirit.’ ... other rabbinic lists of ten names sometimes replaced ‘the Holy Spirit’ with ‘prophecy.’ ... Thus, for instance, Midrash Haggadol on Genesis equates ‘prophecy’ with seeing, watching, proverb, interpretation, the Holy Spirit, prophecy, vision, oracle, sermon, riddle.”[1]

In many of the rabbinic sermons, or “targums,” we encounter references to the “*Spirit of Prophecy*.” Reflecting on this, Hui writes:

“In Targum Onkelos, Joseph is said to have the Spirit of prophecy in him after he interpreted Pharaoh’s dream (Targum Onkelos. Genesis 41:38). Similarly, Joshua is said to have the Spirit of prophecy in him (Targum Onkelos, Numbers 27:18). The Spirit of prophecy is said to rest upon the seventy elders of Israel, and they prophesied as a result (Targum Onkelos, Numbers 11:25-29). The same thing happened to Balaam, the false prophet (Targum Onkelos, Number 24:2).”[2]

Hui continues, noting that we also:

“find the Spirit of prophecy associated with Israel’s judges, kings, prophets, and priests including Othniel (Targum Nebium, Judges 3:10), Saul (Targum Nebium, 1 Samuel 10:6, 10; 19:23), David (Targum Nebium, 2 Samuel 23:2; 1 Chronicles 28:12), Solomon (Targum Ketuvim, Ct. 1:1; 7:2; Ecclesiastes 1:4; 3:11-14; 4:15; 9:7; 10:7).”[3]

Through its prominence in the various targums, it’s obvious that the *“Spirit of Prophecy”* captured the imaginations of rabbinic Judaism prior to the first century.

Although the rabbis believed that with *“the deaths of the last prophets at the end of the Persian era, the Spirit of Prophecy withdrew from Israel,”*[4] they were convinced that it would someday return. Rabbi Tanuma firmly declared, *“In this world, only a few individuals have prophesied, but in the World to come all Israel will be made prophets.”*[5]

The New Testament and the Spirit of Prophecy

As the New Testament explodes on the scene, it is bursting with the life of the Spirit. The Gospels, in particular, are proclaiming *“that the longed-for universal age of the Spirit had at last arrived and the age of the prophets and prophecy, if it had indeed died out, was now being reborn.”*[6]

Prophetic activity is now being accentuated in the infancy narratives (Luke 1:39-50; 1:67-79; 2:27-32; 2:36-38), as well as the life and ministry of Jesus (Luke 4:17-22). An outworking of the Spirit is also what later characterized the apostolic commissioning and activation (John 20:21-22).

In the book of Acts, the Spirit is poured out at Pentecost and multitudes find their mouths filled with prophetic speech (Acts 2:1-4). Peter reveals that this remarkable encounter fulfills what Joel had once envisioned generations earlier

(Acts 2:14-21).

As we finally come to the end of the New Testament, John the Revelator brings a fitting conclusion. He declares that *"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy"* (Rev. 19:10b).

The testimony—in other words, who Jesus is and what He has accomplished—has finally unleashed the long-awaited age of the Spirit. Because of His death, resurrection and activation of the church, you and I are presently living in the era that the ancients longed for.

[1] Archie Hui, "The Spirit Of Prophecy and Pauline Pneumatology," Tyndale Bulletin 50:1 (1990), 96-97.

[2] Archie Hui, "The Spirit Of Prophecy and Pauline Pneumatology," Tyndale Bulletin 50:1 (1990), 94-95.

[3] Archie Hui, "The Spirit Of Prophecy and Pauline Pneumatology," Tyndale Bulletin 50:1 (1990), 94-95.

[4] L. Stephen Cook, On the Question of the Cessation of Prophecy in Ancient Judaism (Tubingen, Germany: Gulde-Druck, 2011), 172. Cook references Frederick E. Greenspahn, "Why Prophecy Ceased," Journal of Biblical Literature 108:1 (1989): 43.

[5] Rabbi Tanuma quoted in Max Turner, "Tongues and Experience For All In the Pauline Churches," Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies 1 (1998): 246.

[6] G.F. Hawthorne, "Prophecy," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 637. {eo}

J.D. King, director of the World Revival Network and co-pastor at World Revival Church, is writing *Regeneration: Healing in the History of Christianity*. King is a sought-after speaker, writer and author.