

## What is a prophet in the Bible?

In a general sense, a prophet is a person who speaks God's truth to others. The English word prophet comes from the Greek word prophetes, which can mean "one who speaks forth" or "advocate." Prophets are also called "seers," because of their spiritual insight or their ability to "see" the future.

In the Bible, prophets often had both a teaching and revelatory role, declaring God's truth on contemporary issues while also revealing details about the future. Isaiah's ministry, for example, touched on both the present and the future. He preached boldly against the corruption of his day (Isaiah 1:4) and delivered grand visions of the future of Israel (Isaiah 25:8).

Prophets had the task of faithfully speaking God's Word to the people. They were instrumental in guiding the nation of Israel and establishing the church. God's household is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

More than 133 named prophets are mentioned in the Bible, including 16 women. In addition, numerous others prophesied, such as the 70 elders of Israel (Numbers 11:25) and the 100 prophets rescued by Obadiah (1 Kings 18:4). The first named prophet in the Bible is Abraham. In Genesis 20:7 God spoke to Abimelech in dream, saying, "Now then, return [Abraham's] wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you will live." God had revealed Himself to Abraham on numerous occasions.

Jacob and Joseph, descendants of Abraham, both had dreams regarding the future that could be categorized as prophetic. Moses was called a "man of God" and was considered a

great prophet (Deuteronomy 34:10). Joshua and many of the judges served as prophets, with the last judge, Samuel, hearing the voice of God as a young boy (1 Samuel 3:4). He would later anoint David, who served as both king and prophet in Israel.

The time of Elijah and Elisha was marked by a high level of prophetic activity. In fact, a school for prophets thrived during their lifetimes (see 1 Kings 20:35). Both Elijah and Elisha performed many miracles as well.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist foretold the Messiah (Matthew 3:1). Jesus Himself came as prophet, priest, king, and Messiah, fulfilling many of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

The early church also included prophets. For example, Ananias was given a prophecy about the apostle Paul's future (Acts 9:10-18). Acts 21:9 mentions four daughters of Philip who could prophesy. Prophecy is listed as a spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. In the end times, two "witnesses" will prophesy from Jerusalem (Revelation 11).

Usually, the prophets God sends are despised and their message unheeded. Isaiah described his nation as a "rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the Lord's instruction. They say to the seers, 'See no more visions!' and to the prophets, 'Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions'" (Isaiah 30:9-10). Jesus lamented that Jerusalem had killed the prophets God sent to them (Luke 13:34).

Of course, not everyone who "speaks forth" a message is actually a prophet of God. The Bible warns against false prophets who claim to speak for God but who actually deceive

the people they purport to inform. King Ahab kept 400 such false prophets in his employ to tell him what he wanted to hear (2 Chronicles 18:4; cf. 2 Timothy 4:3). In the New Testament we have many warnings against false prophets. Jesus taught, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matthew 7:15). He later noted that, in the end times, “false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:24). Revelation speaks of a false prophet who will arise in the Tribulation and deceive people around the world (Revelation 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). To avoid being led astray, we must always “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1).

A true prophet of God will be committed to speaking God’s truth. He or she will never contradict God’s revealed Word. A true prophet will say, with the prophet Micaiah just before his fateful confrontation with Ahab, “As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell him only what my God says” (2 Chronicles 18:13).