



Priest, Prophet, Wisdom Teacher: Old Testament Models of the Minister*

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What is a minister, anyway? How are ministers different from other believers? A religious community needs leaders. It will find some way to generate them, choose them, appoint them, and assign specific functions for them to perform. In ancient Israel, we hear about three distinct types of religious leaders—priest, prophet, and wisdom teacher. By looking at each of these in some detail, perhaps we can learn something about the leadership needs of the contemporary church.

I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

1. The church claims biblical authority, but on questions like this—about the nature, structure, and function of ministry—we rely almost wholly on post-biblical developments. We may not be able to move directly from forms of leadership in the Old Testament or New Testament to the modern church, but that may make as much sense as to derive ministry models from some specific point in church history, say the third, fourth, fifth, or sixteenth century. Perhaps a threefold model of ministry which included priest, prophet, and wiseperson would work rather well. But what I am proposing here is considerably less modest. This study of Old Testament models of ministry may not give us specific structures for our time, but it may raise theological issues about how God speaks through human institutions, how the call comes and is verified by the community, and how the sacred traditions

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and practices of the past are renewed for each generation. What we can learn for our day may be more by way of analogy and identification with these biblical forms than by copying them.

2. In biblical times (and probably in other times as well), leadership moves from less differentiated roles in formative times to more specialization as the community develops. Moses is claimed by priests, prophets, scribes, and wisdom teachers. He was simply Moses. Samuel, an important transition figure during the move from a less structured society to the complexities of monarchy, was named as seer, judge, possibly priest (he studied with Eli), and prophet. Later, Moses shares some of his charisma with others (Exod 18:19-22; Num 11:11ff.), and Samuel's various offices are divided among kings and prophets. As New Testament ministry developed, it was decided that the apostles should devote themselves to preaching the Word of God and prayer

and let someone else serve tables and handle the administration (Acts 6:1-6).

In monarchic times, we know that the religious leadership could be differentiated into at least three main types—priest, prophet, wisdom teacher. Those conspiring against Jeremiah said, “Come let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the Law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet” (Jer 18:18). In Ezekiel 7:26: “Disaster comes upon disaster, rumor follows rumor; they seek a vision from the prophet, but the law perishes from the priest, and counsel from the elders.”

3. There is diversity within each of these three groupings and there is uncertainty among biblical scholars about a number of matters, such as how they are chosen (or called), trained, paid, and what specific functions they performed. There are huge gaps in our understanding of each. But we do know something. We can make some generalizations-and that is what we will be doing here.

II. THE PRIEST

Who is the priest? What does he do? How is he chosen? Some Protestants, at least those who grew up in a low church tradition, do not particularly like the word “priest” and hesitate to claim it for themselves. But the priest’s function may be most like what we think of as the role of the ordained minister. The blessing of Levi by Moses (Deut 33:10) gives an indication of what the priest was called to do: “They shall teach Jacob thy ordinances and Israel thy law; they shall put incense before thee, and whole burnt offering upon thy altar.” Teach the torah and tend to the altar-it sounds like Word and Sacrament ministry. Malachi 2:4-7 provides some words about God’s covenant with Levi: “True instruction was found in Levi’s mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and humans should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.”

The priest is the one who brings the means of grace to people. He is the custodian of the holy things, the sacred symbols. The priest ministers to people at important points in their lives (in the life stages of individuals, the yearly cycles of nature, and the structured remembrance of God’s activity in the past).

The priest is the teacher of the tradition. One theory about the structure of the book of Deuteronomy is that it reflects the homiletical style of Levite priests who

were responsible to pass on the story of God’s dealings with the people from one generation to the next. (See, for example, Neh 8:1-9 where the priests teach the law of Moses to the people who are gathered at the water gate.)

The priest is the one who lives with people over the long haul, who makes a commitment to be with them and help them through the stages of life. The priest does the “in-house” work of the minister: taking care of the flock, preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, nourishing, comforting.

The priest is chosen by the religious community. Priests are set aside as special persons. Not everyone can serve in this office. To begin with, he must be male and he must belong to a specific family. We would not want to follow that tradition with regard to those matters. The important point to consider here is the more general one: the community decides whom it wants.

It is not a charismatic choice (“God called me to do this”). It is not only or primarily a personal vocational decision. The priesthood is a self-perpetuating class of people. There is a well-defined system of accreditation. The church in our day will continue to insist on deciding whom it wants to carry on its priestly functions, though it will surely use different criteria than those of ancient Israel.

III. THE PROPHET

Some prophets were also priests—e.g., Jeremiah, Ezekiel, maybe Isaiah. So, these functions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. (This can be an important point to consider as we wonder whether modern-day priests can carry on prophetic tasks.) It is important to note, however, that Jeremiah and Ezekiel are priests who can no longer operate as priests—Jeremiah because centuries earlier his family sided with the wrong son of David and was banished to Anathoth, and Ezekiel because he had been deported to Babylon and no longer had access to the temple. (Again, this may give us some insight about why a priest sometimes acts more like a prophet.)

The emphasis with the prophet is on a direct Word from God, an immediate relevance, bypassing normal institutional channels—though the prophet, too, may become institutionalized (e.g., cult prophets like Micaiah ben Imlah [1 Kings 22]; false prophets like Hananiah [Jer 28]). These false prophets were also prophets of Yahweh, not Baal, but they had become tamed, “in-house” yes-sayers to the king, no longer able to discern God’s Word from the more pleasing message that people wanted to hear. The great prophets who survived into the canon were not cult prophets. They were more likely outside the institution, contending against others who call themselves prophets but are judged as “company men,” who “speak peace when there is no peace.”

The prophet, unlike the priest, was less likely to appeal to past tradition but did something similar by jumping over the immediate past to some “ideal” former time. The prophet was more likely to appeal to special revelation, a divine appointment. Amos, for example, claims to be neither prophet nor a son of a prophet. Nevertheless, God called him and told him to prophesy (Amos 7:14-15). Because of his special appointment, the prophet was free to challenge and severely criticize existing religious and political institutions.

The prophets could have positive continuing relationships with the people (similar to the priests). Since their direct access to God set them apart from others, they could carry messages from the people to God as well as from God to the people.

Thus, intercession on behalf of the people was a common task of the prophet, at least until the threat of catastrophe became so ominous that there was no use protesting anymore. Groups of prophets gathered around Samuel and Elisha. Isaiah and Jeremiah apparently had some disciples.

Post-exilic prophets did speak words of comfort. Ezekiel ministered to exiles in Babylon. But, in spite of these examples, the primary task of the prophet was not to tend to the pastoral care of the flock. More often than not, the prophets were disruptive rather than consoling to the community. The truth must be spoken, whether or not the people liked what they heard. The perpetuation of the status quo, the protection of the institution from outside threats, was not the conscious goal of the canonical prophets.

It is important to remember that the prophetic word is not always critical. Contrary to frequent contemporary usage, “prophetic ministry” is not synonymous with “critical ministry.” Look at the wonderful words of hope and comfort in Isaiah 40-55 or the Book of Consolation in Jeremiah 30-31. The prophetic word may be a word of hope that finds expression outside stodgy, gloomy traditional and institutional avenues.

How are prophets chosen or prepared? Some may “go to prophets’ school” or join a guild. But, primarily, at least for the great canonical prophets, it is God who makes the choice, not the religious institution.

It is worth noting that, unlike priests, there are women prophets in the Old Testament—e.g., Miriam (Exod 15:20), Deborah (Judg 4:4), Isaiah’s wife (Isa 8:3), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14).

Certain questions come to mind as we try to relate this data to the present context. Can a prophet be contained in the institution? Is a prophet lay or ordained? Can the same person be prophet *and* priest? Are these offices mutually exclusive? Does one give up too much of one’s supportive relationship to people by taking the role of prophet? We latter-day priests have the advantage that part of the tradition which we are to pass on to the next generation already contains the prophetic word.

IV. THE WISDOM TEACHER

The role of the teacher of wisdom tends to be less emphasized in our thinking than the ministry functions of the priest and prophet. Perhaps this has something to do with the anti-intellectualism in both church and society. We see it reflected in statements about potential pastors by accrediting committees or congregational search committees (“Wouldn’t you rather have a warm, friendly pastor than a cold, detached intellectual type who can’t get along very well with people?”). We emphasize the part of the Bible that contains salvation history and prophetic word and pay less attention to those parts of the Bible that emphasize human reflection on life and God. We don’t quite know what to do with the wisdom of the world—accept it, dismiss it, rationalize it to make it fit our preconceived theologies, look on it as friend or enemy? How do we use psychology, sociology, philosophy, archaeology, linguistic skills, management expertise, the conclusions of science in biology or geology? There is a real mingling of the sacred and the secular in the ministry of the wisdom teacher.

The church needs ministers who are wise, observant, honest about the world. It is to the church’s benefit to have leaders who can read and write, think clearly,

and make connections between the religious tradition and the world, between science and revelation, between personal experience and the teaching of the community.

The wisdom teacher is ecumenical. We can learn even from those who have different religious beliefs or no religion at all. Proverbs that observe how life works, struggles of Job or the Preacher to see justice and meaning amidst the world’s suffering, and songs of joy about human love can be appreciated by all who share the common human experience. Solomon was truly an international figure.

The wise person honors and studies creation. There is order which can be perceived. We are not helpless before blind fate. We can have some control over what happens in the world.

Experience is valued. Even the great teachings of the past can be challenged if they do not adequately explain present human experience (e.g., in the book of Job). A sense of integrity demands that the teacher be true to his or her own thoughts, feelings, and intuition. Art, poetry, song, and dance are also gifts from God. A good story can be valuable for its own sake.

The teacher of wisdom, not willing to leave people floundering in their struggle with the complexities of living a life faithful to God, offers ethical guidance.

Though there is some overlap, priest, prophet, and wisdom teacher each offer unique and vital aspects of ministerial leadership to the religious community. The ministry of the contemporary church needs what is offered by each of these offices. Something would be lacking if one of them were allowed to disappear; yet each of them leads to problems if it is allowed to dominate.

V. VALUES AND LIMITATIONS OF EACH MODEL

A. Priest

Value: There is an emphasis on the spiritual dimension in the office and function of the priest. The priest deals with sacred symbols. This is a holy vocation, not just another job.

Priests are the teachers of the tradition of the religious community; they are responsible to pass on what we know and believe about God to the next generation. Claims for new revelation need to be checked by established canonical texts and creedal statements.

The priestly function includes serious concern for the “care of souls”—nurturing and comforting. The priest has a continuing relationship and commitment to a group of people.

Priests are chosen by the community. There are checks on who holds the office, who gets the title, who is ordained.

Limitations: Priests may so identify themselves with their office that they lack criticism of the office or the institution. Their main concern may be to perpetuate the office and their personal status. The clergy become a special, separate class of believers.

Preoccupation with “in-house” concerns of fellow-believers may lead to the exclusion of outsiders. Fascination with ritual, symbols, and doctrinal minutia result in idolatry, where the symbols become ends in themselves.

Priests who are concerned with protecting and passing on the old traditions may greet all new challenges with resistance and unwillingness to change.

B. Prophet

Value: The work of the prophet emphasizes the immediate relevance of God’s word, including both its demands for obedience and its words of grace, assurance, and forgiveness.

God’s Word may come outside of established religious institutions and from others than properly certified clergy. Though God has given us structured means of grace, God is certainly not limited to those avenues. God’s spirit cannot be restrained by human institutions.

Prophetic ministry provides for criticism of even that which we hold most sacred. Nothing in this world is immune from human perversion and corruption, not even religious institutions and revered doctrine. God may have more to say about questions we think we have already resolved.

Limitations: How do we tell the true from the false prophet? Not everyone who claims to

speaking a new and relevant word from God is actually sent by God. From biblical times to the present, this problem persists. The priestly function of using the ancient tradition to measure the validity of a new prophet is crucial. But how do we know if God is really speaking a new word for our day?

Sometimes prophets can be lone rangers, speaking without the check of past tradition or community. Related to this, the prophet may be unduly critical. Criticism may mask a deep-seated hostility, a lack of concern for the people who are being accused of everything from false doctrine to deviant ethical behavior. Prophets have sometimes loved people on distant continents but hated those close at hand. Prophets are usually much better at complaining about the flaws in the institution than they are at helping the community organize its everyday life together. A church run by nothing but prophets would be sheer chaos.

With prophets, there is a danger that personal experience may be elevated as more important than the great teachings of the past. How can one person have the audacity to challenge all that the past generations have passed on to us? How can one be certain that his or her word is actually from God and is not merely the projection of some personal offence, emotional trauma, or narrow definition of the truth?

C. Wisdom Teacher

Value: The wisdom tradition values the created order. Cause and effect can be observed and deductions made that are beneficial to humanity. The first article of the creed is included in our theological speculation.

The worth of human beings is highlighted, an important balance against “worm” theologies or societal attitudes which regard “humanism” as a dirty word. God made human beings as the most elevated of the creatures—to be stewards, to have dominion over the creation, to be just “a little lower than God.” Human intellect is a unique aspect of what it is to be human. In short, the work of the wise teacher counteracts world-denying, anti-intellectual, and anti-humanistic tendencies in our church and culture.

Many of the contemporary buzz words used by the church and theological educators are properly part of the work of the teacher of wisdom-pluralism, collegiality, ecumenicity, lay ministry. God gives wisdom even to those from outside the faith or off the clergy roster. We can learn from each other. We should

be wise to the ways of the world and make proper use of secular knowledge, not hiding our heads in the sand as if we were still living in a pre-scientific age.

The teacher of wisdom tries to make sense out of things. We do not have to give in too soon to the limitations of human intellect and submit ourselves wholly to the mysteries of God. Truth statements can be made. Theological distinctions are of great value. The work of the theologian is honored.

Limitations: Emphasis on human worth can lead to human pride. We humans are never content with human limitations. We want to know what only God knows. If we could only penetrate the unknown we would not need to be so dependent on God; we could take control into our own hands.

Perhaps there is danger in over-intellectualizing matters of faith—a danger which can

lead to arid, abstract statements that do not touch the reality of people's lives without a translation back into the language of experience, emotion, and intuition.

Some ministers have come to depend upon self for authority rather than upon the tradition they represent (like the priest) or the immediacy of their relationship with God (like the prophet). They base the authority of their office on their personal charm, ability to relate to people, gifts of speaking, managerial skills, knowledge of conflict resolution. Secular skills and insights, which the wise person can learn to enhance ministry, somehow have become the heart of the ministry itself. Though such ministry may go well for a time, it is a heavy burden to think that the office of ministry is completely dependent on our own skills and wisdom. Without God's help, none of us can make it.

VI. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

1. The church needs all of the functions provided by these three offices. We need the priest to teach the sacred traditions, to keep us in touch with the holy through Word and Sacraments, to be responsible that right teaching occurs and all is done in good order. We need the prophet to remind us that God is still alive and working in the world and all our human efforts to contain God within our institutions, doctrines, and practices are subject to criticism and further revelation from God. We need the wisdom teacher to open us to the wonders of God's creation; to encourage us to use our gifts of observation and intellect; to help us make connections between faith and life, between what is sacred and what is secular.

2. The priestly function clearly makes the best case for ordination. These are the persons chosen by the community to preserve the faith and teach it to others. It is much less clear whether prophets and wisdom teachers should be ordained. Cult prophets or wisdom teachers in the king's court may become stifled by the expectations of the community or king so that their function as true prophets or impartial counselors may be compromised. Attempts to bring the prophet into the system may actually nullify the effectiveness of the prophet. Who is to be ordained in our day, in our religious institutions? Clearly, we still need people like priests to carry on those functions. But how do we honor and welcome persons for the other tasks which need attention?

3. The matter of call is very complex. How is one chosen for a religious office? Is it the inner call between God and a specific person that matters (as with the prophet)? Is it the institution that calls, that verifies, that lets us know whether the

inner call was legitimate and gives permission to take up our ministry within the community (as with the priest)? Is the call based on human considerations (as with the wisdom teacher)—a careful balancing of skills, interests, and abilities over against the demands of a specific job? Or can the call somehow involve all three of these possibilities?

4. Can the modern parish pastor carry on all three of these functions in his or her office? Or do we need specialists? Pastors have a hard time trying to figure out what they are supposed to be doing in these days when more and more is expected of the pastoral office. Is the priestly function still the primary? There is much pressure, even from the bureaucrats in the main offices of the institution, for pastors to act as prophets, even as there is much resistance to that role within congregations. And the pastor is expected to learn a wide spectrum of skills—from

computer operation to the grammar of ancient languages to the treatment of chemical abusers to business administration—in order to survive and move up in the modern parish. Is it better to limit the expectations for the parish pastor, to concentrate on the priestly tasks and not try to do everything? Certainly the valuing of lay ministries is important here. Maybe they can best provide the community with the ministries of prophet and wise person.

In Old Testament times, we had priest, prophet, and teacher of wisdom. Which of these is the modern minister? Or what combination of the three? A consideration of this question will help the church in its contemporary contemplation of its ministry.