

Who are the Prophets of Ephesians 2:20?

By Irwin J. Habeck

In presenting a discussion of the question: Who are the prophets of Ephesians 2:20? we are aware of the fact that this is not a question with direct doctrinal implications. Rather, it involves an examination of various exegetical procedures. The exegete must frequently marshal the arguments in favor of and against various interpretations and opt in favor of the interpretation which has the weightiest arguments in its favor and the least tenable arguments against it. Having been constrained to accept a given interpretation, he will draw practical applications and doctrinal insights from it. It is always a cause for gratitude that although there are exegetical problems, they do not involve those portions of the Word in which doctrines are set forth. If that were the case, a given doctrine could be accepted as being taught by God only if one of a number of possible interpretations were accepted. As it is, however, we can be sure of what we believe because the doctrine is set forth in passages which present no problems of interpretation. Still we must remain humble because there are other passages which do cause difficulty in evaluating the arguments in favor of one or another interpretation.

There are some few commentators who hold that the prophets in our passage are the apostles. They argue from the fact that there is a single article: *the* apostles and prophets. While the Apostle Paul gives himself other titles than apostle, minister (1 Cor 3:5), steward (1 Cor 4:1), ambassador (2 Cor 5:20), preacher and teacher (1 Tm 2:7), slave (Tt 1:1), nowhere, to my knowledge, does he call himself a prophet. Nor is this designation applied to any of the other apostles. Thus there is little to support the view that the prophets in our passage are the apostles.

A much more widely held view is that the prophets here are what are commonly called the New Testament prophets. They are mentioned, for example, in Acts 11:27–28; 21:9–10. What is more important, they are mentioned twice in Ephesians: 3:5 and 4:11. There is a sound hermeneutical principle that if the meaning of a term is doubtful in one place, but the term also appears in the same general context and its meaning is clear there, the meaning of the term in the context ought to determine its meaning also where at first there may have been doubts about its exact meaning. Since in these other two passages the prophets referred to are evidently New Testament prophets, it might seem that the New Testament prophets are meant also in our passage.

The only valid scruples against this interpretation in our passage are historical in nature. The Ephesian Christians are reminded that their change from a lost condition to present bliss was brought about by their being made to rest upon the apostles and prophets as a firm foundation. To the apostles and prophets is accorded this important relation to the faith of the Ephesians not in an independent capacity, but because in the foundation which they form the chief cornerstone is Christ Jesus. To assign such an important function to the New Testament prophets, however, does not accord with what has been revealed about the history and origin of the New Testament churches. That the faith of converts rested upon the apostles and their testimony to Christ is evident, but nowhere is a similar role in the conversion of Christians attributed to the New Testament prophets. All that we can say positively is that they had the gift of prophecy and used it to foretell future events.

May we then look for a different meaning for the term prophets in our passage? We might relax the grip of the hermeneutical principle referred to before by setting up another: If a term is generally used in a technical sense, it is to be understood in that sense wherever it occurs unless a different meaning is indicated in the context. In 3:5 the fact that Paul is referring to his contemporaries is evident from the word “now.” Likewise in 4:11 the prophets referred to must have been contemporaries of the apostles, for we are told that they were given to the church by the Lord Jesus after His ascension. So even if the term prophets is generally used in a technical sense to mean someone else than the New Testament prophets, the context in 3:5 and 4:11 shows that there it means New Testament prophets.

But is there a technical meaning for the term prophets in the New Testament? The Lord Jesus rebuked the disciples on the Emmaus road: “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Lk 24:25). Whom did He mean with the prophets? “Beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto

them in *all the scriptures* the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:27). When He referred to the prophets He meant the Old Testament Scriptures. In Romans 16:26 the Apostle likewise uses the term to designate the Old Testament: “Now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets.” Here, incidentally, we find something which parallels our passage: now—apostles; scriptures of the prophets—prophets. In 2 Peter 3:2 we find a juxtaposition of the two terms used in our text, only in reverse order: “That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Savior.” So there is evidence that in the New Testament the word prophet was used in a technical sense for the Old Testament prophets or the Old Testament Scriptures which they wrote.

Above we contended that there is no evidence in the New Testament that the New Testament prophets played such an important role in the life of the church that they would be ranked with the apostles as forming the foundation upon which the faith of New Testament believers rested. Is there historical evidence that the Old Testament prophets did play such a vital role? There can be no doubting that when the Apostle Paul preached in the Jewish synagogues on his missionary journeys, his method was to use the Old Testament to prove that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Acts 13:16–41 is one example. In the account of his conversation with the Jews in Rome in the last chapter of Acts we are told: “To whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the Law of Moses, and out of the prophets” (Ac 28:23). The faith of those who believed him was grounded upon the prophets.

Some erroneously suppose that the church at Ephesus was made up largely of gentiles. But in the account of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus in Acts 19 Jews are specifically mentioned: “All they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (19:10). And the point in the passage and section under discussion is that the gentiles by faith in Jesus were brought to share in the blessings which were enjoyed by believing Jews, both groups being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. But how did the Apostle proceed with the gentiles? There could be no reference to the prophets, the Old Testament, for except in the case of proselytes the prophets were unknown to the gentiles. Rather, the Apostle had to proceed from the natural knowledge of God and of the law to work a knowledge of sin. Then he would proclaim Christ crucified as the Savior from sin and damnation, trusting in the power of the Spirit working through the gospel to work faith in Jesus. His method of approach to the gentiles is clearly shown in the account of his preaching at Athens (Ac 17:22–34).

Once the gentiles had by faith become incorporated in the church, the Apostle would foster their growth in knowledge. One feature in this process was to acquaint them with the prophets, the Old Testament. It is evident from the Epistle to the Ephesians that by the time the Apostle wrote it some five years after his ministry in Ephesus had been concluded he presupposed a knowledge of the prophets on their part. There are shorter or longer references to or quotations from the Old Testament throughout the Epistle: 1:20,22; 2:17; 4:8,25,26; 5:2,31; 6:2,14,17. This method of progressing from apostolic preaching to imparting a knowledge of the prophets would account for the fact that in our passage the apostles are mentioned before the prophets. But the fact remains that the Old Testament prophets had an important part in grounding the faith of the gentiles.

The use of a single article before the two terms indicates that the apostles and the prophets were not considered by the Apostle to be independent one from the other, but rather united. The faith of Christians rests upon apostolic and prophetic testimony, testimony to Jesus as the One upon whom faith rests and the hope of salvation depends.

One may wonder whether ruling the New Testament prophets out of the picture in our passage because they did not play a fundamental role in the founding of the New Testament church can be upheld in the light of the order in which they appear in 4:11. If we look upon the succession of terms there as a ranking according to the order of importance, then indeed it would seem that they rank next to the apostles. But there can be another explanation for the order in which the terms apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers occur. The apostles and prophets received a special charismatic endowment, the apostles that of direct inspiration, the prophets that of prophecy. After Paul no other man was called to be an apostle. That particular gift ceased. The special gift of prophecy gradually disappeared from the scene together with other charismatic gifts like speaking with tongues, the interpretation of tongues, the working of miracles. Evidence for this statement is the fact that

there is no reference to such gifts in the later epistles. But there have continued to be to the present time evangelists, if we understand this term to refer to missionaries, pastors and teachers. Hence 4:11 does not compel us to believe that the prophets of 2:20 were New Testament prophets.

We have endeavored to answer the question posed in our theme on the basis of exegesis and history. That our interpretation coincides with the traditional exegesis is not the result of a tendentious approach. On the other hand, we are not among those who operate with the premise that if any opinion was held in the past, it must be wrong. Rather, we are thankful that we come out as we do and need not cringe when we come across the many references in the literature of the church to the fact that the church is grounded upon the apostolic and prophetic word.

What practical use can be made of the interpretation of our passage? If the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, we may expect to find the church where people hear the apostles and prophets, are directed by them to place their trust for salvation in Jesus, and do in that manner rest upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets in sincere faith. The apostles and prophets, the New and Old Testament Scriptures, are marks of the church.

Since the prophets are included in the foundation upon which the church rests, they are to be heard also in the New Testament church. Since the New Testament shows us the Savior who has appeared, there is always a temptation to be content to search the New Testament and to ignore the Old. This is not the Lord's intention for His New Testament people. The old couplet still holds true in what it says about the Old and New Testaments:

The New is in the Old concealed,
The Old is by the New revealed.

A dimension is lacking when New Testament Christians bypass the Old Testament. Therefore we want to encourage them to read the Old Testament also. As pastors we want to include Old Testament sections in our curriculum in Bible classes and Old Testament texts in our preaching. We want it to be true of our people, and of ourselves: "(Ye) are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets."