

# FROM THE PULPIT

---

## *Jesus and the Prophets*

LOWELL L. BENNION

IN HIS WRITINGS on the sociology of religion, Max Weber contrasts two types of religious leaders: *emissary* and *exemplary* prophets. The founders of the great religions of mankind fall into one of these two categories.

Prophets of the Near East—Moses, Zoroaster, Peter, Paul and Muhammad—were all emissaries. They believed they were sent of God; they spoke for him in his name. People followed these prophets when they believed they were speaking for God. Professor Louis Zucker, teacher of Old Testament literature and himself a Jew, has called the prophets of Israel “God-intoxicated” men.

It took earnest persuasion by the Lord to get Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah to accept the call to be his mouthpiece—an audacious calling indeed. (Read Exodus 3 and 4, Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1.) Once in the harness, the prophets still struggled with both God and man as each sought to be the Lord’s emissary to a stiffnecked people.

What kind of men were these emissary prophets? They could be described as sons of thunder for they came raging like a storm, striking like lightning, threatening doom and destruction with occasional rays of light and hope.

Woe to them that are at ease in Zion . . . (Amos 6:1)

Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey? . . . (Amos 3:4)

Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it? (Amos 3:6)

They spoke with abandon, fearlessly and with full confidence that the Lord would fulfill their word. One of the most colorful and dramatic of Israel’s prophets was Elijah. You will recall his contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Jezebel, a foreign queen, had brought to Israel a host of the priests of Baal who ate at her table at the expense of Israelites whose faith in Jehovah they sought to undermine.

---

LOWELL L. BENNION is executive director of the Salt Lake Community Services Council. His most recent book is *The Things That Matter Most*.

This situation angered Elijah so much that he called all the people of Israel and the prophets of Baal together for a contest to see which was the living God—Baal or Jehovah.

First he instructed the devotees of Baal to build an altar, to place wood on it and to offer a bullock as a sacrifice. Then Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to call down fire from heaven as proof of Baal's existence. They cried from morning until noon, but there was no voice, no answer. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying,

Cry aloud: For he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awakened. (I Kings 18:27)

When evening came, Elijah dressed his altar with wood and placed the bullock on it. Then he had the sacrifice drenched with four barrels of water, again and again. This was not enough, so he had a trench built around the altar. This, too, was filled with water. Imagine his confidence, his faith and his triumphant, almost arrogant mood before men. Then note his humility and submission when he turned in prayer to Jehovah.

Lord God of Abraham, Issac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. (I Kings 18:36-37)

Elijah illustrates the strong and changing moods of the Hebrew prophets. They could be angry with their people—threatening, sarcastic, caustic—and then become messengers of hope, harbingers of peace. Isaiah, after rejecting the religious devotion of his people, calling them people of Sodom and Gomorrah, spoke these comforting words:

Learn to do well: seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:17-18)

In fact, Chapter one of Isaiah runs the whole gamut of prophetic moods and portrays beautifully the spirit of the emissary prophets of Israel.

Their message was not abstract theology, not systematic philosophy, not a catechism of beliefs, not a code of behavior, but spontaneous outbursts—exhortations of faith, righteous indignation, hope—whatever the situation called for. Their preaching has such great underlying themes as the ethical character and will of God and man's service to such a being—but the presentation is always dynamic, emotional, urgent and inseparable from the historical setting which provoked it.

Emissary prophets were human. They never said "follow me," or "do as I do." It was always "hearken unto the Word of God," "do as he says." Never did they say "I have found the way." Moses, traditionally the greatest of the

prophets who talked with God, took the honor unto himself when the Lord provided water for Israel, so he was not permitted to enter the promised land (See Numbers 20).

When Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple, his response was:

Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. (Isaiah 6:5)

Paul acknowledged his human weakness and then did a little honest boasting in the same breath:

For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. (I Corinthians 15:9–10)

Let it be noted, then, that the very word prophet means "one who speaks for God." The Hebrew prophets—Moses, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and Paul—were giants in the prophetic role. They knew their role as emissaries of the Most High.

Religious leaders of India and China, however, are called *exemplars* by Max Weber. What kind of men were they: Lao-tze and Confucius in China, Buddha, Mahavira and unknown Hindu teachers in India?

The exemplary religious leaders of the Far East differ markedly from the emissary prophets of the Near East. They never speak for God—"thus saith the Lord." Confucius, when asked about the supernatural, replied, "If you cannot serve men how can you serve spirits?" When asked about death, he answered, "So long as you do not know life, how can you know about death?" Confucius was a humanist. For him man was the measure of man. He was either agnostic or atheistic, and, therefore, he did not think himself an emissary of deity.

The same can be said for Buddha. "Who has ever seen Brahma face to face?" asked Buddha. "Would the further bank of the river Akirvati by reason of this man's invoking and praying, hope and praising, come over to this side?"

Buddha, a wealthy young prince, recognized the great amount of suffering in human existence. After much reflection, he discovered the cause of suffering and worked out a system of thought and action which would enable an individual to overcome suffering. This way of salvation was created by Buddha without reference to deity. The Buddha himself followed his own path and truly exemplified the principles he taught. He, like Jesus, gathered around him loyal, devoted disciples who only later began the process of deifying him.

Confucius, too, exemplified the fine moral virtues he taught—integrity, propriety, the golden mean, respect for elders. People followed him because

they saw in him his teachings personified. He never called on a god to support them.

In Hinduism and Taoism the concept of God is of one who is quite impersonal. He is the great soul or essence from which all things came and to which all things will return. Never do either Lao-tze or the Hindu philosophers consciously speak *for* a god.

The Far Eastern religious founders were learned. Confucius was an editor of Chinese classics. Hindu philosophers were gurus or teachers and exemplifiers. Lao-tze was reportedly a librarian. They were all men of reflection, of calm meditation. Their works are characterized by philosophical detachment; they are timeless, nonhistorical. Buddha, in particular, was a calm, thoughtful, systematic thinker. Even the mysticism of Hinduism and Taoism appears more rational than emotional. In both instances, it lacks the emotional fervor of the Christian mystics of the late middle ages: Francis of Assisi, Eckhard, St. John of the Cross.

Where does Jesus fit among the religious leaders of the Far East and the Near East? Was he an emissary or an exemplar? Did he speak for God or for himself? The answer is both. Jesus was a supreme emissary in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. He was also an exemplar, accepted and followed because of who and what he was.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because they all have the same basic arrangement. They begin with Jesus' birth or with his ministry and unfold his life until his triumphant resurrection. By contrast, the Gospel of John begins by declaring Christ to be God, and it proceeds to demonstrate his divinity in nearly every occurrence. We might expect Christ to be portrayed as an emissary in the synoptic gospels and as an exemplar in the Gospel of John, but he is presented as both emissary and exemplar in all four gospels.

Let us first illustrate his emissary spirit:

And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God. (Mark 10:17-18)

This same conversation is recorded in Matthew 19:16-17 and in Luke 18:18-19. An emissary always defers to God, as Jesus did in this instance.

The Lord's Prayer shows full respect and honor to the Father:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven . . . for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus cried, "Saying Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." (Luke 5:30-31) The same attitude towards the Father is expressed in John:

Now about the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and taught. And the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?

Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him. (John 7:14–18)

On the other hand, Christ's exemplary character is clearly portrayed in all four gospels. Mark reports Christ saying, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee." (Mark 2:5) The power to forgive sins was a prerogative of Deity in Israel and, in the ears of scribes, was blasphemous when spoken by man, but Jesus said it on more than one occasion. In a similar vein, Jesus declares himself to be Lord of the Sabbath, to be above the rules governing Sabbath observance in Israel. "For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day." (Matthew 12:8)

Jesus declared his own exemplary nature in these unequivocal words:

All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and by burden is light. (Matthew 11:27–30)

Jesus' exemplary nature, as we might expect, is portrayed most often and most powerfully in the Gospel of John. At Jacob's well, he tells the woman of Samaria that

Whosoever drinketh of this water [meaning of Jacob's well] shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. (John 4:13–14)

In the strongest possible language, Jesus declares himself to be the exemplar, the revelation of God.

Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him. Philip saith unto him, Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?  
(John 14:6–9)

Two views of Jesus emerge from the gospels: In one he is an emissary prophet, intimate spokesman for God, confident of his having been sent, speaking with authority for the Father, deferring to him with humility and

reverence. In the other, he teaches the truth in his own right. He bids men to come unto him for comfort, to find the truth, to gain everlasting life. He presents himself as the revelation of God. He and the Father are one. No other prophet or religious leader has assumed this dual role of emissary for God and exemplar of the religious life.

Add to these two roles Christ's divine mission as the Son of God, Redeemer of mankind, Savior from death and sin, and it is no wonder that he has had such great historical appeal and has acquired such a large following.

One can follow him because one believes that he spoke for God. One can follow him because of the quality of his life and teachings, for what he said and did. One can follow him because he was and is the Redeemer. One can follow him for all three reasons. He is unique in this threefold appeal.

