
Moberly’s aim in this book is boldly refreshing: to analyse the criteria for the discernment of prophetic authenticity in the Old Testament and for prophetic and apostolic authenticity in the New Testament and out of these to explore similar questions in a modern context. As he points out, this is not an area that has often been explored in the past and as such he is engaging in a new and valuable area of study. Moberly considers this book to be a sequel to a previous volume in the same series (The Bible, Theology and Faith) in which he argued for the need to place academic biblical study firmly within the theology and spirituality of the Christian church. This volume, like the previous one, is aimed both at specialists and non-specialists and is largely successful; although there are sections that non-specialists might find a little over technical, the overall argument and exegesis are clearly written and easy to comprehend.

In the first chapter Moberly sets up his argument by looking at the nature of prophecy as speech on God’s behalf, Moses as paradigmatic prophet (based on Deuteronomy 5.22-33) and the way in which modern biblical scholarship has treated the question of the validity of prophecy (here he uses the work of James Crenshaw, Maxime Rodinson, and William McKane as illustrative of more general trends in scholarship). Moberly argues convincingly that this is an area that has been overlooked for too long in modern scholarship and deserves further exploration. In his subsequent chapters, Moberly expands on the theme looking in turn at Jeremiah (which is arguably the only biblical book to address questions of the discernment of prophecy directly and coherently), Micaiah ben Imlah, Elisha and Balaam, before turning to the New Testament. Here he focuses on Jesus’ teaching about false prophets in Matthew 7.15-23, as well as the command in 1 John 4 to test the spirits, before turning his attention to Paul’s defence of his apostolicity in 2 Corinthians (as well as glancing briefly at 1 Thessalonians 5.19-22, 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Philippians 2.5-11). He argues strongly that the Old Testament concern for the moral character of the prophet and the moral and theological content of the message is taken as read in the New Testament, though transformed ‘into a pattern that is both Christ-centred and cruciform’ (p. 151).

In his final chapter, Moberly takes a step back and reflects more widely on what these lessons might tell us about prophecy and discernment today. In the course of this chapter he address what he considers to be three mistaken concerns about prophecy: that an account of divine impact upon a prophet...
might dehumanize the prophet; that psychology might in some way explain prophecy and that the suggestion that miracles might validate prophecy. His response to these – in his view – fallacies is straightforward. Arguing from the biblical text, he maintains that rather than dehumanizing, prophecy fully humanizes a prophet because: ‘prophetic speech is most truly human when it is also more responsive to God’; that the Bible displays little if any interest in the psychological state of the prophet and places much more emphasis on the moral and theological content of the prophetic message and that there is no evidence of an appeal, within the texts explored, to the miraculous as validation of prophecy. In fact contrary to these concerns the biblical texts contain straightforward criteria for testing prophecy: ‘the moral character, disposition and behaviour of the speaker’ and ‘the moral and theological content of the message’. These follow out of the belief that that the visible (i.e. the prophet) can give access to the invisible (i.e. God).

This is a remarkable book in many respects. It is worth reading for Moberly’s careful and thoughtful exegesis of key passages alone. His argument that the expansion of Exodus 20:18-21 in Deuteronomy 5.22-33 should be regarded as paradigmatic for the relationship between God and prophet is persuasive. As, too, is his carefully constructed argument from Old Testament passages about the nature of true prophecy. In some ways Moberly’s use of Old Testament material is stronger than his use of the New Testament. Although he makes some helpful observations, particularly about Jesus’ saying about false prophets in the Synoptic Gospels, 1 John’s command to test the spirits and Paul’s defence of his apostleship in 2 Corinthians, Moberly’s treatment of the New Testament material feels less coherent than his treatment of the Old Testament. In particular I would have valued a longer— and more persuasive — argument about why Paul’s defence of his ministry as apostle is to be understood, mutatis mutandis, in terms of Old Testament prophecy. The mapping of Old Testament categories onto the New Testament is more complex than this and, in my view, requires more demonstration than offered here that what is being referred to is qualitatively the same.

Moberly’s study raises key questions about the nature of discernment. I felt challenged over and over again to ask two specific questions. Firstly, can discernment of prophecy in the Bible be boiled down to both the moral character of the person involved and the moral and theological content of the message? And secondly, if it can be so condensed is the answer proffered by the biblical writers a sufficient answer for us in the church today? Whatever answer we choose to give to these questions there can be no doubt that Moberly has with consummate skill and careful argument opened up a valuable area of study