THE TESTING OF NEW TESTAMENT PROPHECY

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Synopsis

The problem of the testing of New Testament prophecy is largely determined by the outcome of a debate between, on the one hand, those dispensationalist and neo-Reformed writers who perceive prophecy as a uniformly authoritative form of revelation in both testaments, and on the other hand, the majority in recent scholarship who perceive a variety of forms of New Testament prophecy which were not equally authoritative. For the former, prophecy is intrinsically related to the foundation of the biblical canon, and so has now ceased; for the latter, the testing process itself revealed some prophecy to be of 'canonical' significance and some to be of local and temporal significance, and thus an ongoing phenomenon in the life of the church.

While the background of New Testament prophecy is the Old Testament and not the Hellenistic world, prophecy in the Old Testament is shown to be a complex phenomenon with a variety of forms and its testing more difficult than a superficial reading of Deuteronomy suggests. While some prophecy was, in principle, canonical and in the process of testing was so recognized, much was not, and at least an echo of this runs throughout the inter-testamental period. This secondary, but important, stream dominates the New Testament, and there is clear historical evidence that such prophecy continued to be valued in the life of the church well into the third century.

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The question of validity, and so the problem of testing, was relevant to all prophecy, and in the New Testament this is the responsibility of the gathered Christian community, whose corporate judgment involved a diversity of gifts and ministries and a range of criteria which could never be uniformly applied because the prophetic expression was so variable. But among these criteria, the most important was conformity with the received traditions correctly applied to the particular circumstances. Such judgment was more commonly qualitative but other important tests such as of the character of the prophet and the ‘discerning of spirits’ could and did result in absolute rejection of the prophet.

**Introduction**

Despite a flurry of recent publications about New Testament prophecy, the last word has yet to be said. The present practical problem of how to test prophetic utterances is tied up with fundamental questions about the nature of prophecy and must engage the view that prophecy disappeared after the apostolic era with the close of the New Testament canon. If this is sustained, subsequent claims of prophecy must be rejected as false ipso facto and the problem of testing becomes academic. Historical evidence from the post-Apostolic period must therefore be considered in addition to the primary New Testament data. Moreover, the cessationist view rests on a monochrome depiction of Old Testament prophecy as the exact words of God and foundational to the biblical canon, as a model for New Testament prophecy. This depiction of Old Testament prophecy must also be examined.

Many who accept contemporary prophecy as valid share this depiction of Jewish prophecy and so seek to distance New Testament prophecy from the Old Testament type. Others arrive at a dangerously exaggerated authority for the modern phenomenon based on this Old Testament paradigm. We will demonstrate that while New Testament prophecy is continuous with that of the Old Testament, the latter has great diversity, and only through the process of testing was some prophecy, notably that of the classical era, recognized as canonical. This is also true of New Testament prophecy, cessationist claims for which are neither exegetically nor historically defensible. Prophecy was always to be tested, and we will explore various criteria used in this process.