

Agabus Predicts a Famine (Acts 11:27-30)^a

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Passage (Acts 11:27-30)

[27] And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. [28] Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. [29] Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. [30] This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.¹

Ministry of Agabus

1. Agabus predicted a coming famine

A. “throughout all the world (οικουμένην [*oikoumenēn*])”

I. All the *known* world²

II. Similar usage elsewhere, by the same writer: Luke

a. “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that *all the world* should be registered” (Luke 2:1)

i. All the Roman world, the known world

b. “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too” (Acts 17:6).

B. “This was actually a series of severe famines that struck various sections of the Roman Empire during the reign of Emperor Claudius (a.d. 41-54.)”³

C. Historical witness outside the Bible⁴

I. Queen Helena of Adiabene, an ancient kingdom in Assyria with its capital in modern-day Iraq.

II. Converted to Judaism in 30 A.D.

III. Generosity during this famine was recorded by her contemporary, the Jewish historian Josephus.

. . . she had a mind to go to the city of Jerusalem, in order to

worship at that temple of God which was so very famous among all men, and to offer her thank offerings there. So she desired her son to give her leave to go thither: (50) upon which he gave his consent to what she desired very willingly, and made great preparations for her dismissal, and gave her a great deal of money, and she went down to the city of Jerusalem, her son conducting her on her journey a great way. (51) Now her coming was of very great advantage to the people of Jerusalem; for whereas a famine did oppress them at that time, and many people died for want of what was necessary to procure food withal, queen Helena sent some of her servants to Alexandria with money to buy a great quantity of corn, and others of them to Cyprus, to bring a cargo of dried figs; (52) and as soon as they were come back, and brought those provisions, which was done very quickly, she distributed food to those that were in want of it, and left a most excellent memorial behind her of this benefaction, which she bestowed on our whole nation; (53) and when her son Izates was informed of this famine, he sent great sums of money to the principal men in Jerusalem.⁵

D. Predicted in A.D. 40, initial fulfillment about 1 year later in A.D. 41

2. Agabus predicted trouble for Paul when he reached Jerusalem at the end of his 3rd missionary journey.

A. At the home of Philip the evangelist, in Caesarea (Acts [21:10-11](#))

[10] . . . a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. **[11]** When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'⁶

B. Predicted in A.D. 55, fulfilled within just a very short time thereafter (Acts [21:27-33](#)).

Observations Concerning Prophecy in the New Testament

1. A few remarks concerning the phrase: "New Testament Prophets"?

- A. Notice that Scripture doesn't refer to Agabus as a "New Testament prophet". Rather, he is simply said to be "a prophet."
- B. The emphasis on "New Testament" in the phrase "New Testament prophet" can sometimes be by design: to facilitate the idea that prophets in the New Testament are qualitatively different than their Old Testament counterparts.
- C. What I hope to show, in our limited time, is that "New Testament Prophets" are

simply “prophets” which happen to occupy the times and pages of the New Testament.

- D. Although they minister to the Church, rather than to the nation of Israel, Scripture reveals their abilities *and accuracy* match that of their counterparts in the Old Testament.
- E. This should come as no surprise since the same Spirit is the source of their pronouncements.

2. Prophets are said to be among the foundational ministries of the Church

- A. 1Cor. [12:28](#), “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, *second prophets*, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.”
- B. Eph. [2:19-20](#), “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles *and prophets*, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, . . .”
- C. Eph. [4:10-12](#), “(He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) And He Himself [Jesus] gave some to be apostles, *some prophets*, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ . . .”
- D. The prophets mentioned in these passage are NT prophets, not OT prophets. How do we know?
 - I. In each of the previous passages, prophets are listed *after* apostles—which would be odd if Paul was referring to prophets from the OT which ministered before any apostles existed.
 - II. It was to *these prophets* that the mystery of Christ was newly revealed.
 - a. Eph. [3:3-5](#), “by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets.”

E. Their relative importance: second only to the apostles

I. “first apostles, second prophets” (1Cor. [12:28](#))

II. “foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20)

III. “[Jesus] gave some to be apostles, some prophets” (Eph. 4:1-12)

3. **Given their importance, second only to the apostles, we need to very carefully evaluate several claims we often hear concerning “prophets” and prophecy in our day.**

- A. Claim #1: NT prophecy differs from OT prophecy in that it contains a mixture of both truth and error.
- B. Claim #2: NT prophecy differs from OT prophecy, focusing on encouragement and edification rather than prediction.
- C. Claim #3: NT prophets, similar to Agabus in this passage, are among us today.

4. **Claim #1: NT prophecy differs from OT prophecy in that it can contain a mixture of truth and error.**

A. Really?!

Wayne Grudem has written a popular theology supportive of the modern prophecy movement.

Most charismatic teachers today would agree that contemporary prophecy is not equal to Scripture in authority. Though some will speak of prophecy as being the “word of God” for today, there is almost uniform testimony from all sections of the charismatic movement that prophecy is imperfect and impure, and will contain elements that are not to be obeyed or trusted. For example, Bruce Yocum, the author of a widely used charismatic book on prophecy, writes, “Prophecy can be impure—our own thoughts or ideas can get mixed into the message we receive—whether we receive the words directly or only receive a sense of the message.”⁷

B. The coming famine was shown “by the Spirit”

C. Paul’s predicted bondage was also given by inspiration: “thus says the Holy Spirit”

- I. This is equivalent to the phrase, “thus says the Lord,” found throughout the Old Testament.
- II. Wayne Grudem describes what he thinks this phrase should be understood to mean in connection with modern so-called prophetic utterances:

The phrase can apparently mean, “This is generally (or

approximately) what the Holy Spirit is saying to us.” If someone really does think God is bringing something to mind which should be reported in the congregation, there is nothing wrong with saying, “*I think* the Lord is putting on my mind that . . .” or “*It seems to me* that the Lord is showing us . . .” or some similar expression. Of course that does not sound as “forceful” as “Thus says the Lord,” but if the message is really from God, the Holy Spirit will cause it to speak with great power to the hearts of those who need to hear.⁸

III. You must be joking! Are there any such timid prophetic pronouncements to be found anywhere in all of Scripture?!!

D. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth

I. What did *Jesus* say concerning the Spirit?

- a. “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:16).
- b. “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me” (John 15:26).
- c. “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come” (John 16:13).
- d. Do you hear a theme here? 1) The Spirit is the “Spirit of truth”; 2) He proceeds from the Father (an inerrant source); 3) even He doesn’t speak of His own resources; 3) He will tell the disciples “things to come.”. What can they be but prophetic content?

II. The claim that modern prophecy can contain error is equivalent to saying that the Holy Spirit is unable to control those whom He inspires so as to avoid the message being tainted by human error.

III. But isn’t this essentially the same argument liberals make when they attack the inspiration of the Scriptures themselves?

“Human writers could not produce an error-free Bible, even by God’s inspiration, because they are fallen humans.”

E. Judging prophecy - what does it mean?

- I. "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge" (1Cor. [14:29](#)).
- II. Is this to sort out what is true from the rest, which might be false?
- III. If prophets themselves are errant, how can they reliably separate truth from error within the statements of others who claim to be prophets?
- IV. If the prophets are allowed to spout error, and then sign it with "thus says the Lord," how can those who are not even prophets possibly be qualified to sort out the true vs. mistaken predictions?
- V. This judgment was not to separate wheat (inspired utterances) from chaff (error). Rather, it was to discern whether the entire message was inspired by the Spirit of Truth or some other spirit. In other words, to determine whether the entire prophecy was legitimate or not.
 - a. The word translated "judge" (diakrinetôsan) is the same root word which describes the gift of "discerning" or "distinguishing" spirits, mentioned in 1 Corinthians [12:10](#).
 - b. Refers back to Paul's mention of the ability to discern/distinguish *between* spirits, mentioned in 1 Corinthians [12:10](#).
- VI. John wrote of this same need for discernment:
 - a. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1Jn. [4:1](#)).
 - b. Not about discerning truth from error, all mixed into a message supposedly from the Spirit of Truth.
 - c. "Test the spirits, whether they are of [from] God"
 - d. Why? "Because many false prophets have gone out into the world"
 - e. Error is a clear indication that the message did not originate with the Spirit of Truth!
- F. What is *really* behind this claim that we should expect error mixed within the pronouncements of today's prophets?
 - I. An inability to demonstrate true, accurate, prediction - as found in both OT and NT
 - II. Why: because today's so-called "prophets" are not inspired

- a. They exhibit the same characteristics as the false prophets of Jeremiah's day.
- b. "Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the Lord" (Jer. 23:16).
- c. "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied" (Jer. 23:21).
- d. "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart," (Jer. 23:25-26)

III. To get us to accept their bogus pronouncements, we need to be convinced that their statements might not be correct.

5. Claim #2: NT prophecy is *different* - its about encouragement and edification, not prediction.

A. Based on 1Cor. 14:3, concerning instructions to the church at Corinth for using the gift of prophecy

- I. "But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men" (1Cor. 14:3).
- II. But the purpose of prophets and prophecy has *a/ways* included edification, exhortation, and comfort.
 - a. Although their messages often included predictions and judgments, Old Testament prophets almost always included encouraging promises of restoration.

B. Remember the name given in Barnabas, translated "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36)?

- I. Bar (son of) - Nabi (of a prophet)
- II. Nabi is from a Hebrew word meaning "to utter" or "announce"
- III. Frequently behind the OT phrase translated, "thus says the Lord."

IV. Son of Encouragement = **υἱὸς παρακλησεως** [*huios paraklēseōs*] (similar to name of Holy Spirit).

- a. Hence, the mention of the Holy Spirit as the *source* of these inspired pronouncements.

C. What should we make of such a claim? What did we just see with Agabus?

- I. How encouraging were his two prophecies: concerning an upcoming famine and bondage for Paul?

II. Both prophecies were *predictions*

- a. A great famine is coming soon: objective, testable within a short period.
- b. Paul would be restrained by Jews in Jerusalem and delivered to the Gentiles.

D. What is the real motivation behind this teaching?

- I. The inability, by those who claim that prophets are among us today, to produce an individual who is able to make accurate, testable, predictions.

6. Claim #3: NT prophets are among us today.

- A. Can God inspire prophets whenever and wherever He wants to? YES (that's not the question)

- I. The Book of Revelation reveals that the world has yet to see two "witnesses" for God who are also powerful prophets (Rev. **11:3**)

- II. Prophets and prophecy are given according to God's purposes and seasons.

- B. Apostles and prophets formed the foundation of the Church: a foundation which is no longer being laid.

- C. This should not surprise us: Paul told the church at Corinth that the revelatory gifts would cease:

- I. "Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away."

(1Cor. 13:8-10)

- II. Beyond the scope of what we have time for today, but the thrust of the passage concerns transitioning from immaturity to maturity.
- a. “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1Cor. 13:11)
 - b. In this analogy, Paul compares the revelatory gifts of the early church with speaking as a child—something that would eventually be put away, much like childish things as a person grows up.
 - c. It is my view that the purpose of the revelatory gifts within the early church came to an end with the completion of the foundation of the Church, including the completion of God’s sure revelation: the canon of Scripture which we know today as the New Testament.
 - d. Thus, I am neither surprised nor concerned regarding the facts we see on the ground: neither today’s claimed prophets nor their pronouncements are inspired.
- D. Admittedly, there are numerous understandings of 1 Corinthians 13, but we must still ask:
- I. Where’s the beef?!
 - II. “The proof,” as they say, “is in the pudding.”
 - III. Those who believe the revelatory gifts continue into our age must explain the inability of so-called modern prophets to make accurate prophetic pronouncements.
 - IV. If they can’t (and they can’t) then why is that? Could it be one’s understanding of what Paul taught concerning when the revelatory gifts would cease is incorrect?

Sat Mar 19 21:33:32 2016



Endnotes:

1. NKJV, Acts 11:27-30
 2. "The expression "all over the world" (Acts 11:28) was probably used in a national sense, and by it Judea was doubtless meant." Ref-0185, Acts 11:28
 3. Ref-0640, Acts 11:28
 4. "the words must be understood to apply to that famine which, in the fourth year of Claudius, spread throughout Palestine. The poor Jews in general were then relieved by the queen of Adiabne, who sent to Egypt to purchase corn for them (Josephus Ant. 20.2.5; 5.2)." Ref-0185, Acts 11:28
 5. Ref-0411, *Antiquities* 20.2.5; 5.2
 6. NKJV, Acts 21:10-11
 7. Ref-0394, 1056
 8. Ref-0394, 1056
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Sources:

- NKJV** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0185** Merrill F. Unger, R. K. Harrison and Howard Frederic Vos, *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988).
- Ref-0394** Grudem, W. A., *Systematic Theology : An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).
- Ref-0411** Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. *The works of Josephus : Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1987).
- Ref-0640** Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985).
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Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/36_Acts_11_27-30/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.