

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

7.1 Was Jesus a prophet? Different routes, one destination

At the outset, we took note of current research which detects similarities in the Jesus tradition between Jesus and the classical prophets. We set ourselves the task, however, of examining this research to determine whether it has taken into account all that needs to be considered in this respect.

The three models of research which we chose to examine, all reach the same conclusion, namely that Jesus was a prophet. They have all three travelled along different routes, consulting different maps, yet all three have reached a destination from which a clear view of Jesus as a prophet has emerged.

7.2 N T Wright

Wright was our first navigator on the road to attempt a sighting of the Jesus of history. Wright attempted through his research to determine the impressions of the average Galilean contemporaries of Jesus as they watched him walking the dusty roads, challenging certain aspects of the Jewish worldview in no uncertain terms, spreading word of the coming kingdom of the god of Israel and celebrating and manifesting this said kingdom through open table-fellowship. Wright (1996:150) offers two arguments in favour of Jesus as prophet before even starting out on his journey:

- The model of Jesus as prophet offers the amenity of being able to function as springboard for further study and of gathering in a multitude of other features of Jesus' life which might otherwise have remained in the wings.
- In what Wright (1996:150) considers to be "one of the strongest arguments for the prophetic portrait" he maintains this portrait to be the one that

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

makes the best sense within the contexts of Judaism in general, of popular movements in particular, and most particularly of John the Baptist.

Through his extensive endeavours, Wright has reached the conclusion that, based on the evidence, Jesus had been perceived by friend and foe alike, by the villagers who saw and listened to him, as prophet. His speech and actions had for them evoked and contemporised pictures stored in collective and individual memories of traditional prophets even while surpassing it. Through his mighty works this prophet Jesus was inaugurating the kingdom of Israel's god with the welcome and warning announced by the double-edged sword of his word. These are indicators of the praxis of a prophet ranked at least as high as Elijah or Elisha. In his kingdom programme he threw down the gauntlet before Israel and its sacred cows, the cherished symbols the names of which were engraved in the palms of their hands. To reduce the view enjoyed upon reaching Wright's destination to a pocket-sized snapshot: All evidence, according to Wright (1996:150), points to the probability that Jesus was seen as and saw himself as a prophet. Jesus' praxis and worldview typify him as a prophet bearing an urgent eschatological, or, to be more specific, apocalyptic, message for Israel and fulfilling through the movement he was initiating the divinely ordained destiny of Israel..

We may reiterate what we surmised in the beginning: That Jesus saw himself as prophet called to announce the word of Israel's god to his recalcitrant people and assemble them around him as the true people of YHWH is a probability, but Wright (1996:196) finds himself open to the further possibility that he saw himself as the prophet of Deuteronomy, the prophet to end all prophecies, the prophet through whose work the history of Israel would reach its climax.

In his foray into the Jewish contemporary mindeset of Jesus and his contemporaries, he discovered that, for a first-century Jew, and in particular for a Jew who believed himself to be a prophet, his interpretation of what his god and the god of his people is doing at a given moment in history, would be of supreme importance. Wright (1996:462) encountered a Jesus convinced of the necessity, as part of his role, of engaging in battle with the Satan. This would mean launching

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

an attack on Israel's idolatrous nationalism under the guise of allegiance to the reign of YHWH. Jesus stood at the ready as protagonist of the kingdom of Israel's god to do battle against the antagonists, in particular the Pharisees and the chief priests. Jesus had to fulfil his vocation in the face of their resistance, opposition and overt rejection of his message and its validity. His prophetic role was in no way made easier by the ambiguity of his disciples, the co-protagonists who sometimes wavered and joined ranks with the antagonists, or fled from them. Neither was his burden in any way lightened by the stubborn and militant resistance of the antagonists, which was intensified by their clinging to the fortress of their cherished, god-given national and cultural symbols that had become the major stakes in the endorsement of their power.

7.3 R A Horsley

Horsley (1999:1) examines Q. As the curtain rises, the focus is all on the figure of Jesus, as Q's minimalist décor, omitting tales of miracle, redirects all attention to him. The audience avidly awaits the words spoken by the great prophet and are not disappointed.

The Gospel of Mark, dubbed the oldest gospel account by a lavish portion of scholarship, has its own theological propensity, and it is therefore, according to Horsley (1999:1) imperative to search behind this gospel for a historical source from which to construct the life of Jesus. Behind Mark lay the other brainchild of the two-source theory, Q. Horsley (1999:1) writes: "Q seemed like a godsend of a whole collection of seemingly reliable sayings readily available as source materials in the quest for the historical Jesus."

Horsley has turned the pages of this prophet's portfolio in Q, reminiscing on his performances in the leading roles of Moses, Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, or just the prophets of ancient times in the sweeping scope of the genre.

Travelling the road with Horsley, one has been made aware of the unmapped footpaths of oral performance which had preceded Horsley's Q-route. Horsley's

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

Careful navigation has shown that repeated oral enactment of Q ensured its transmission and yielded a prophet, firmly embedded within his Jewish culture, dedicating himself to the Mosaic covenantal tradition and its renewal, the latter in a way reminiscent of the prophet Elijah.

In his interpretation of the information yielded by Q as source, Horsley has emphasised throughout the importance of employing a realistic historical sociology and has avoided depoliticising Jesus and his mission. He has found in the Q discourses a resemblance between Jesus and political prophets such as Elijah and Elisha. These prophets had in their offices effectively illustrated the merger between politics and religion which was the order of their day, a tendency displayed with similar savoir faire by Jesus. Q diligently paints a picture of Jesus as another prophet in the firing line of persecuted and executed prophets of the past.

Horsley's scrutiny of the Q discourses has revealed a Jesus declaring himself the prophet who, through his mission, is fulfilling the longings of his people as they had been so voiced by prophets of the past, a prophet enacting the role of Moses, a prophet who had interacted closely with God, who had led his people to freedom and who had established a covenantal relationship between Israel and God.

The apocalyptic vision of the prophetic Jesus of Q is not the cataclysmic termination of the present order, but God's kingdom announced by means of a political metaphor, a symbolic realignment of society according to the principles of the covenant.

The Q prophet discovered by Horsley (in Horsley & Draper 1999:226) had an intense social consciousness: "The Q covenant renewal, addressed to ordinary people, proclaims the kingdom of God for the poor and is concerned with the solidarity and survival of the village community."

7.4 J D G Dunn

We quoted at the starting line of our journey with Dunn, his confident statement (Dunn 2003:657): “Little doubt need be entertained that Jesus was seen in the role of a prophet during his mission. The testimony of the Jesus tradition is both quite widespread and consistent across its breadth.” The veracity of this statement has been proven along the way.

Dunn (2003:662, 663), like Horsley’s Q source, finds evidence of texts indicating Jesus as prophet, standing in a long line of rejected prophets. Dunn’s memory theory serves him with a recollection of Jesus ostensibly drawing on texts in Isaiah to inform his own mission, conscious of the full weight of his prophetic commissioning. An image burned within the minds of his followers and audiences is that of Jesus ostensibly self-consciously shaping his mission in the mould of the classic prophets even in the finest detail of the end of his life which united him with his predecessors in *Prophetenschicksal*.

Meandering with Dunn (2003:664) one may take in the sights of Jesus engaged in activities that are clearly prophetic: Jesus’ choosing his twelve disciples, partaking of meals in the company of tax-collectors and sinners, healings and exorcising those suffering illness and possession, entering Jerusalem while bemoaning its fate and that of the prophets, overthrowing the tables in the Temple and partaking of the last supper. Dunn is convinced that Jesus repeatedly conducted himself in a manner strongly reminiscent of the great prophets of the past (see Dunn 2003:664) and his prophetic insight and foresight are well-established in memory.

Dunn (2003:666) indicates however, that all of this is true not only in the accustomed sense of the word, but in the superlative sense of prophetic significance. He has shown that the scholar can assume with relative certainty Jesus’ self-perception as a prophet standing in the tradition of the prophets; a prophet divinely endowed with an eschatological significance in his mission (and thus himself) which transcended the older prophetic categories” (Dunn 2003:666).

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

We have set out on these various journeys hoping to determine why scholars from many and various persuasions reach the same destination: The discovery of the prophetic aspect of the visage of Jesus. This we have clearly achieved by means of the routes chosen by the three scholars in question.

Our next step was to compare the view of Jesus as prophet with that of other prophets and to view them collectively against the backdrop of scholarship on the topic of the prophetic phenomenon. This has proven to be a highly rewarding enterprise and one which has shed much light on the person and passion of Jesus.

In closing: With the sources in hand as map-books or tour-guides, one walks down memory lane to encounter Jesus performing miracles, acts of healing or exorcisms, one hears him talking, teaching, encouraging and reprimanding, one sees him fleeing the ever-enclosing crowds in search of solitary communion with God. And one realises that there is hardly a word that has been written in chapter 5 which is not, in some way, reminiscent of Jesus:

- The time in which he lived was fecund for prophetic intervention – social and economic injustice was rife, syncretism, exclusivism and alliances to benefit personal favour and position seem to have been the order of the day.
- Jesus, in the firm conviction, nay knowledge, of being the emissary of his Father, was in complete surrender to the divine will and unreservedly at God's disposal.
- He was filled with power and authority to the extent that scholars suspect in him a consciousness of being more than a prophet. However, a closer look at prophecy reveals that his

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consciousness of divine authority does not in fact supersede that of the true prophet.

- One would encounter difficulty in arguing against the evidence pointing to his being thorn-in-the-flesh, subversive and influential.
- If collective memory serves us correctly, further evidence that he was remembered as a prophet would be the circle of disciples he gathered around him like numerous other prophets before him.
- He was a conveyor of the Word of God, in its fullest and richest sense of that Word being endowed with creative power. To such an extent did he identify with the Word entrusted to him, that, in the memories that crystallized into the Gospel of John, he was the Word that became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
- Like the prophets of antiquity, he employed everything at his disposal, including his own life and its termination, in the effort to successfully convey God's message. Not least of these means were his signature parable style-form and symbolic acts. His symbolic acts include the choosing of twelve disciples, the entry into Jerusalem and the temple action, but symbolism can be read into many more of his actions, such as his exorcisms.
- He suffered a great deal, through his crucifixion, but also through the rejection, suspicion and alienation with which he was confronted in his ministry. His life as well as his death aligned him with the fact of prophetic suffering and the often terminal fate of the emissary of God.
- The double-edged sword of the message he conveyed from God – encompassing divine love and divine wrath - was profoundly pertinent to the time in which he lived. It has, however, in the

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

tradition of the evergreen quality of the prophetic message, transcended Jesus' own time and is equally fresh and topical in the year 2005.

- His message carried the stamp of the divine authority of which he felt himself acutely aware to the extent that one is reminded of the angelic messengers in the Old Testament. Just as they had seemed to be interchangeable with the persona of the God they represented, so one senses sometimes a shifting of dimensions in the presence of Jesus so that the man seems to make way for/ be trans-substantiated by the One who sent him and clothed him in authority.
- In this way the personal pronoun “I” on the lips of Jesus, just as on the lips of prophets from time immemorial, was heavily laden with meaning and implication.
- Amidst his suffering his communion in prayer with his Father sustained him. It set him apart so that his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray and it strengthened him for whatever lay ahead in his service of God.
- The Gospel of Luke especially attests to the way in which Jesus is remembered as isolating himself in prayer before going out to the people to whom he was sent. Solitary periods of prayer seemed to empower and prepare him for singular acts of power, but, as with the ancient prophets, the power was not given for him to relish in, but to use in servitude of God and his people whom He sought to address through his emissary, guardian of God's people.

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

- In whichever way one chooses to interpret “eschatology” and “wisdom”, they seem to be ubiquitous features in prophecy and no less so in the teaching of Jesus.

All this said, however, it has in the past been difficult and it is difficult now (perhaps even more so now for lack of a true frame of reference or modern analogy) to capture the essence of prophecy amidst the changing shape it seems to assume. What kind of a prophet was Jesus, if indeed he was one. What was his aim, what did he think he was doing and accomplishing? Was he trying to establish a kingdom, and if he was, how would this kingdom look?

My conclusion is that Jesus was remembered as, and indeed was, a prophet – a prophet of the true kind – a prophet of God, the prophet in whom God is ambient. He was the kind of prophet who exists within two dimensions; the first being the mundane dimension, the one visible to all, the second the dimension circumfused by the divine, present in the here and now but visible to none but the prophets. The last of these is dominant in the lives of the prophets – the greater reality.

What kind of a prophet was Jesus? The kind called by God, the kind God needed him to be at that specific time-juncture. What was his aim? His aim was God’s aim, his will to do, not his own will, but to let God’s will be done. The prophet needs no teacher, because he is instructed by God in what to do.

The true prophet deflects attention away from himself to God, “the One who sent me”. If this is true of the words and actions of Jesus, it is as though the crucifix points upwards like an arrow in his death with all its symbolic implications as he shares the fate of the

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prophets: “See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you...” (Ex 24:8).⁵⁶

I believe that Jesus was perceived as the pinnacle of prophecy, the one who was plunged into the deepest depths and was exalted to the highest heights for God’s cause.

The point of origin, *raison d’être* and final word in prophecy, and especially in the life of Jesus, is God’s will. This implies that the scholar who, like Borg, Wright, Horsley, Dunn and many others, see shades of prophecy in what he said and did and how he died, will ultimately, in their quest to fully understand its implications, have to decide whether they believe that God sends prophets, and sent Jesus in particular, to align people to God’s will.

⁵⁶ See Dunn (2003:8).