

Lights for the nations:

a quick course on the prophets

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1.

Prophecy in a situation – national politics

The prophets of the Old Testament were inspired by God to speak to a situation and a time in the life of the nation. This explains why the books of the individual prophets introduce the prophet by name, date and place of activity. The message of the prophet can only be fully understood in the context of the time and place in which it was given. This also explains why the message of the prophet is so concerned with the politics of the nation (that is, how the nation is run or governed) and with international politics (that is, with the nation's dealings with other countries and particularly with the great superpowers of the day).

To understand the Biblical prophet's involvement in politics we need to understand some of the changes that took place in the government and way of life of the Israelites after they gained control of the land of Canaan.

Problems of land, law and government

Many of the political problems of the Israelites arose from the difficulties of adapting a tribal society to settled agricultural life in Canaan. In a tribal society every Israelite family had the right to use the land and there was no division between the rich and the poor. When they settled in Canaan various laws had to be instituted to protect the rights of all Israelites to land and to protect against its loss to the family and tribes. This was necessary because the Canaanites had very different ideas about the land. Land could be bought and sold and was owned by the rich (who alone had rights as citizens) and was worked by the poor people and slaves. In addition, the Canaanites, like most other settled people of the time, had kings.

Some passages in the Bible that give some idea of the Israelites attitudes towards land can be found in the story of Ruth (especially Ruth 4:9), and Jeremiah 32:6.

Read the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-20).

This text shows how religiously important land rights were. Even a king had no power to "expropriate" land.

When Israel decided to have kings, which they needed to organize a permanent army to protect them against their enemies (such as the Philistines), there was a heavy cost to be paid in taxes and land. Even though the first kings of Israel were ordinary people without great wealth, later kings soon helped to destroy land rights and equality among the people of Israel. Kings, like any form of government, are not free.

You can read what this meant in 1 Samuel 8:4-20.

The ruin of Israel

The king and the rich were tempted to grab more and more land (Isaiah 5:8; Micah 2:1-2). They began to break up the old covenant community of free people under God. Poor farmers got into debt, lost their land, became tenants or hired workers and finally became slaves. This whole process was helped by dishonest merchants who cheated the poor, by corrupt courts and greedy civil servants.

Justice and righteousness

The prophets spoke out against this ruin of Israel, this oppression of the poor. When most of the prophets wrote it was against the background not so much of an isolated, individual act of injustice, like the Naboth's Vineyard incident, but of a whole society divided into rich and corrupt rulers and landowners in the cities and an oppressed and starving poor in the countryside.

It is not that the prophets simply wanted a return to old nomadic tribal days. They knew that to be unrealistic. What God demanded was **justice** (a right order in the world and society) and **righteousness** (right behaviour in relation to this just order).

Read Isaiah 5:7-8 and Amos 5:21-24.

The poor and oppressed had a special place in God's concern. God had brought Israel out of Egypt and given them a land so that they would be a free people in a free land who would serve God and their fellow men. Injustice and oppression destroyed this community. Many of the prophets foretold doom and sang funeral songs over Israel. They saw clearly that the injustice of rulers and the rich had started something that would inevitably lead to their own destruction.

2.

Prophecy before the exile

The first group of writing prophets are those who worked during the periods of the Assyrian empire (during which time the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed) and the Babylonian empire (during which time Judah was conquered and many of its people exiled to Babylonia).

These prophets are sometimes called the ‘prophets of doom because many of them warned the people of Israel of the inevitable doom that awaited those who had broken the Covenant and turned away from God.

Introduction

The prophets from the times of Amos to Ezekiel are noted for the warnings they gave to Israel and Judah of the destruction that awaited them because of sin and rebellion against God.

Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah preached during the time of the Assyrian empire. Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Obadiah saw the rise of the Babylonian empire and its defeat of Judah and the taking of Judah’s leaders and important citizens into exile.

The message of these prophets was that the people of Israel had an important task in the world – that of being the chosen people of God. Yet people often fail in their calling and this was the case with the Israelites. The leaders of the divided kingdoms of Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south) led their people to ruin and disaster.

In this situation God called a number of great prophets, often called the pre-exilic prophets, to warn and guide his people. This they did for more than a hundred years until both kingdoms were destroyed and a remnant of the people were forced into exile in Babylonia. Their message is of God’s judgement on sin and disloyalty and yet also of his love. The message remains as true today as it did then.

In the time of the Assyrian empire

In the early part of this period there was no nation strong enough to threaten the Israelites. It was a time of peace and wealth for both Israel and Judah (but also of great oppression of the poor). The prophets Amos and Hosea condemned the injustice and false worship in the northern kingdom. They warned of trouble to come.

Assyria to the north became powerful under new kings and Israel was destroyed in 721 B.C. Judah submitted to the Assyrians, but several times rebelled against their control after making alliances with the Egyptians. Each time, the Assyrians regained control and punished the people of Judah. Egypt could give no help. Isaiah the prophet urged the kings and people to put their faith in God and not trust in foreign alliances. Both he and the prophet Micah also attacked injustice and false worship.

Amos

Amos, a herdsman from the village of Tekoa in Judah, prophesied at Bethel, the religious centre of the northern kingdom about 750 B.C. He began with a series of judgements upon various nations and then turned his attack upon sinful Israel. Israel's punishment would be all the greater because she was the chosen nation. Amos was not a professional prophet and was probably deported back to Judah by the High Priest of Bethel.

The message of Amos was that God demanded justice. Because he is just, his people must be just. They were not. The wealthy lived in luxury gained by oppressing and cheating the poor. Amos exposed all kinds of injustice. He rejected the people's claims that God was pleased with their worship and sacrifices. The future, he warned them, the Day of the LORD, to which they looked forward to as a great day of triumph over their enemies, would in reality be a day of disaster, defeat by an enemy and exile.

Read Amos 3:1-2; 5:1-7.

Hosea

A prophet of the northern kingdom, he was probably active from about 745 to the fall of Samaria in 721 B. He foretold the inevitable destruction that Israel deserved because it had forsaken the LORD for the Canaanite fertility gods, had a violent history of assassination of kings and made foolish treaties with foreign nations. Ritual and sacrifice would not save Israel, only repentance, mercy and love. Hosea speaks of the undying love of God for Israel; he cares for his people like a father for his child or a husband for his wife. Part of the book of Hosea is about a real experience he had, or an acted parable, with a faithless wife. God only punished as a last desperate measure to teach Israel. He had always been willing to forgive if only Israel had shown any sign of repentance.

Read Hosea 2.

Isaiah

Isaiah, whose prophecies are found in chapters 1 to 39 of the Book of Isaiah, was an upper-class citizen of Jerusalem. He was called in a vision in which he saw God as the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah saw the people were not holy, and therefore were unfit for God's work in the world. But he said that he was willing to be God's agent, which he was as the spiritual guide to the kings of Israel during a series of crises over a long period from 742 to 700 or even perhaps 688 B.C. However, his advice was frequently rejected.

He attacked injustice and false worship. He warned of the threat from Assyria, which he saw as God's tool to punish Israel's sin. Isaiah said Judah must have absolute faith in God and not trust in foolish alliances and military strength. If the leaders of Israel failed to trust God they would be replaced. God would choose and appoint a new deliverer and leader descended from David who would rule in justice. This anointed one would embody within himself God's own presence.

Isaiah taught that the city of Jerusalem would not be destroyed, even though the people of Judah would be severely punished for their sins. A remnant of survivors would share in God's plans for the future. Nothing would remain of the enemy nations.

Read Isaiah 1:1-20; 9.

Micah

Micah repeated Amos' call for justice and righteousness. He lived at the same time as Isaiah, though probably in the countryside of Judah, and preached from sometime before 721 to 701 B.C. He spoke out against those who oppressed and corrupted the people. He denounced the popular belief that since Israel was God's people she was safe and that Jerusalem would never be destroyed. Therefore, because of their sins, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah would be destroyed. But God is merciful and repentance could lead to renewal and peace. His book contains the famous summary of Old Testament religion : "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (6:8).

Read Micah 3.

3.

In the time of the Babylonian empire

The Assyrian empire overreached itself and weakened, while Babylonia began to grow in strength. In 621 B.C. King Josiah carried out a reform of religion in Judah, which involved a rejection of Assyrian authority. In 598 B.C. Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians. After a rebellion, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and exiled its leaders to Babylonia. Jeremiah was the great prophet of this period. Zephaniah agreed with him that the Babylonians were coming to destroy sinful Judah, but most of the other prophets only condemned Judah's enemies.

Zephaniah

This prophet from Jerusalem probably worked just before the reforms of King Josiah in 621 B.C. He condemned false worship and the general corruption of the officials of Judah. Like Amos he warned of a disastrous Day of the LORD in which not even Jerusalem would be safe. He summoned Judah to decision and repentance while they still had a chance. He did see hope for a righteous remnant. He prophesied the fall of Assyria and the destruction of various enemies of Judah.

Read Zephaniah 2:13-3:5.

Nahum

His short book is a savage song of joy which prophesies the fall of Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian empire, which fell in 612 B.C. Its great poetry pictures God's punishment of Assyria's national pride and cruelty.

Read Nahum 3:1-7.

Habakkuk

Some time before 605 B.C., Habakkuk tried to understand why sinful rulers and the heathen Babylonian empire with all its violence and wickedness were so successful. Why did God allow it if he was just and the all powerful Lord of nature and history? Why did the Babylonians "swallow up those more righteous than themselves"? Habakkuk did not get a clear answer, though he was told that the Babylonian empire contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Faith was required - "the righteous will live by his faith" in God.

Read Habakkuk 1:12-17; 3:17-18.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah was called as a young man and preached from 626 B.C. till after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. He lived during the closing years of the kingdom of Judah and was frequently persecuted by the authorities because of his constant declaration that Judah was doomed because it kept on rebelling against God's leadership. He warned, against making treaties with other nations – it was useless to resist the Babylonians, since God was using them as instruments to punish his people. He also condemned false religion. He said little about Josiah's reform in 621 B.C., probably because he realized that something greater – a true change of heart – was needed. The people's sense of security in Jerusalem, temple and cult was an illusion. Only obedience to God would bring safety.

Jeremiah was a sensitive and lonely man who suffered greatly from the burden of his harsh message and the way he and his message were rejected by rulers, people, and false prophets. His story was recorded by his secretary, Baruch. Jeremiah did promise that God would make a New Covenant with his people in which they would truly know him. This would come after their purification in exile.

Jeremiah urged the exiles in Babylonia to settle down and be patient. He gave them no false hopes of an early return.

Read Jeremiah 22:8-17; 31:27-34.

Ezekiel

Ezekiel was an influential priest exiled to Babylonia in 598 B.C. He was active from 593 to 571 B.C. He was an educated man with a wide knowledge, particularly of history. His prophecies often tell of strange visions or are acted-out parables. He bitterly denounced Israel's sins and predicted the fall of Jerusalem.

In all his prophecies he stressed the glory and honour of God. He said that each individual is responsible for his or her own sin. God punishes only those who personally deserve to be punished. Ezekiel even suggested that God loves even the sinner and does not punish sins that have been repented. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. he prophesied hope, comparing Israel to a valley of dry bones that would be brought to life as a restored nation under a just and merciful king and with a new temple.

Read Ezekiel 33:1-20; 36:22-32.

Obadiah

This short book expresses hatred of the Edomites who had joined Babylonia in invading Judah and taken advantage of her misfortune after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Edom would be repaid by some disaster.

Read Obadiah 15-18.

4.

Prophecy during the exile

Defeat is always a shock. The fall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 B.C by the Babylonians led to a great crisis in Israel's faith. The Israelites had lost all that had been promised by God and what they had believed to be safe – the promised land, the temple, the city of Jerusalem on Mount Zion, the Davidic monarchy. The Covenant with God had not protected them and it could seem that a heathen god had defeated the God of Israel.

In spite of the warnings of the prophets, the Israelites were unprepared for their defeat and the prophets of the period of the exile had to explain the meaning of what had happened to them. One group of writers, historians and preservers of Israel's traditions said that Israel deserved, to be destroyed because of breaking the commandments and covenant, taking part in false worship, and rejecting the prophets God sent to warn them,

A message of hope was given by Ezekiel and by other prophetic writings now found in Isaiah Chapters 40 to 55. This 'second Isaiah' saw that there was only one God and creator of the universe. God was Lord of history (even the king of the growing Persian empire was an instrument of God's will). God was preparing a new King, a new Exodus, in the future of Israel.

In second Isaiah are also found poems about the suffering servant of the LORD and promises of a Messiah.

Read Isaiah 49:6; 40:1-5; 44:21-28; 54:4-8.

5.

Prophecy after the exile

The second main group of writing prophets come from the period of the Persian empire. They worked from the time of the ending of the Exile in Babylonia until prophecy in Israel seemed to end (some time before the Greeks under Alexander the Great destroyed the Persian Empire). Their message was not one of doom like that of the pre-exilic prophets, but rather one of encouragement to people whose hopes were very weak.

Some of the prophets played an important part in restoring the temple and its worship.

In the time of the Persian empire

After Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C he gave permission for the Jews to return to Judah and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The return to Jerusalem and the building up of the broken community was a difficult task. The return was not accompanied by miraculous events. The prophecies of Second Isaiah were not fulfilled.

It took a long time (till 516 B.C) before the temple was rebuilt and the people had to be encouraged truly to be the people of God. Nehemiah and Ezra, loyal Jews who held positions in the Persian administration, played a key role in rebuilding the community. The great task of the prophets in this difficult time, when hopes were low and disappointment strong, was to see that the period was one of salvation in which the LORD was doing something new.

'Third Isaiah'

Isaiah chapters 55 to 66 contains writings that probably come from a disciple or disciples of Second Isaiah. These prophecies deal with the difficult conditions and disappointments of the returned, exiles. They condemn the failure of the ruling classes to do their duty (56:9-12), and expose false worship and the lack of compassion and justice. They portray the Jews of the time as being people of little faith. They do however promise that God would glorify Jerusalem. The message can be summed up as that of 61:1, "to preach good news to the poor".

Read Isaiah 58:1-12; 61; 62.

Haggai

Haggai prophesied in 520 B.C., a time of rebellion in the Persian empire under King Darius. Haggai urged the Jews to take advantage of the troubles to complete the rebuilding of the temple. The nation had not regained its prosperity and well-being because it had neglected this great task of building the temple. This rebuilding should be done by the Jews alone. However, Haggai did hope for a day when all nations would come and worship God in Jerusalem. He singled out the governor, a Jew of Davidic Descent called Zerubbabel, as the Messiah, a liberator leader or king. He had led the temple building,

Read Haggai 1:3-12.

Zechariah

He prophesied from 520 to 518 EC and like Haggai encouraged the completion of the temple. However, he also speaks about the need for justice as the pre-exilic prophets had done (7:4-10). Zechariah saw visions which required interpretation. He also saw Zerubbabel as a Messiah and says that the High Priest Joshua will be co-leader. Chapters 9 to 14 are probably by later writers.

Read Zechariah 8:1-17.

Malachi

Malachi, who worked about 460 B.C., attacked abuses in the community in the form of a debate with the people of Judah in which he answers their questions. These showed that they were not always sincere in their worship of God, partly because they were disappointed that Judah remained a poor little province in the Persian empire. He protested at the rubbishy sacrifices they made and the non-payment of tithes. He opposed divorce and mixed marriages that might threaten the purity of the Jewish faith. His book contains the promise that Elijah the prophet would return before the Day of the LORD (4:5).

Read Malachi 2:10-16; 3:1-5.

Joel

In about 400 B.C. Judah was attacked by a plague of locusts. Joel saw this as a sign and call to national mourning. It was a warning of the coming Day of the LORD in which Israel's shame would end and God would judge the nations that had scattered the Israelites over the world.

Read Joel 2:12-13; 2:28-32.

Jonah

The Book of Jonah is probably not really a prophecy but rather a story or parable about a prophet. It teaches in the most beautiful way that God cares for all human beings, even for the cruellest enemies of Israel such as the Assyrians of Ninevah. The prophets failed in their duty if they failed to work for the good of all people. There was no way they could escape this duty. There is no prophetic self-righteousness in this story. It is rather self-critical and turns the reader's gaze away from the prophet to the God who sends.

Read Jonah 4.

6.

Prophecy and the future

The prophets were expecting something. They hoped (and feared) for the future and it is important for us to know the meaning of their hope – for we Christians living today do so in what was, to the prophets, the future.

In understanding their hopes for the future it is necessary to summarise what it is that characterises the message of the prophets. This can be done in the following statements:

God acts in history

God is holy and just

God recalls his people to their foundations

God is not contained in his temple or nation

God has put a heavy burden of responsibility on the prophets

God acts in history

Read Isaiah 10:5-19.

God spoke to the prophets in a historical situation. God revealed himself – in his glory, as judge and saviour – in history. The prophets tell us that God is in control of the universe and of human history on earth. God even used his enemies and heathen nations to do his will (though as Isaiah points out, they thought they were doing their own will and would suffer God's judgement in turn). Hence it is useless to rely on alliances and military power to stop what God wanted done.

God is holy and just

The holy and just God demands that his people be the same. Hence history is a great moral struggle between good and evil, between God and the unjust.

Read Amos 2:6-8; 9:1-10

In their loyalty to this God the prophets fearlessly attacked the sins of all, however mighty they were. The ruin of a nation was a sign of the people's separation from God, It was obedience to God and his commandments that produced a sound society

God recalls his people to their foundations

Even when the prophets spoke of God doing something new they saw that this new thing as reflected God's saving acts in the past, such as the Exodus. The prophets recalled the people to the kind of relationship they had with God in the days of the Exodus, the making of the Covenant at Sinai, and the days of young faithfulness in the desert.

Read Micah 6:2-4

God is not contained in his temple or nation

The prophets testify to God's freedom. He is not 'owned' by the Israelites or contained within their temple or religious ways or always on their side. God is not controlled by the religious rites of Israel (any more than he is today by those who say he should be on the side of "Western civilization" or "Israeli state"). This point is made very clear in Ezekiel's magnificent vision of the glory of God leaving the Temple and Jerusalem because of their sinful state and going to be with the exiles in heathen Babylonia (Ezekiel 11 and 12).

Read Micah 6: 6 - 8

God has put a heavy burden of responsibility on the prophets

Read Amos 7: 1 - 6

The prophets suffered for their message. Even the harsh Amos cried out to God in pain when he saw the threatened judgement on Israel. The prophets themselves become signs of God's judgement on Israel. They are made to experience what the judgement will be like sooner than the rest of Israel so as to act as an example. Ezekiel talks of the task of the prophet as being to build up the holes in the wall protecting Israel so that it may survive God's attack on the Day of the LORD (Ezekiel 13: 5). Thus the prophet was to act as an intercessor for the nation (compare what Psalm 106:23 says about Moses as intercessor and filler of holes in walls).

Prophecy unfulfilled and fulfilled

Many prophetic warnings came true in history. But some warnings and promises were not fulfilled. This did not seem to worry the true prophets or those who collected their sayings. It must be remembered that God is master and not servant of his words. He also changes his mind (Amos 7:6; Jonah 3:10- 4: 2).

However, not in the sense of specific predictions, but as a whole, the prophetic writings give us a sense of ever increasing expectation and hope of fulfilment. The prophets had always pointed towards the Day of the LORD when the people of Israel would meet God face to face in judgement (as in Amos 4:12; 5:18-20) or salvation (as in Isaiah 61:1-2). For the prophets Israel's life and death depended on the meeting with the LORD who was to come. Jewish prophecy ended pointing beyond itself. It was able to do this not just because it foretold the

future but because the prophets saw into the heart of God's nature and awaited a true meeting with this God.

Read: John 3: 26-30

Christians have identified the man Jesus of Nazareth with the loving kindness and purpose of God that the prophets had been so close to. Therefore the statement in the Nicene creed is a fitting assessment of the prophets;

“We believe in the Holy Spirit ... He has spoken through the prophets”.