

Old Testament : Prophecy

A There was a failure of prophecy in the 5th Century BC:

Malachi was probably the last of the prophets. This caused some concern to the Jews, who felt that it might be yet another sign that God had deserted them.

I Maccabees 4v46; 9v27; 14v41;

Luke 9v8,19;

Hebrews 1v1

II Peter 3v21

Are there modern prophets? Greenpeace might be one example.

B The Method of the Prophets

Prophecy is not primarily about predicting the future, but about showing the hand of God, active in events. We might say: forthtell not foretell.

i) There is very often an analysis of the political/economic/strategic etc situation.

NB Other nations are seen as agents of God's decisions and judgements

Amos 6v14 - Assyria

1st Isaiah 7v1-9,8v5-8 - Assyria 30v1,15-17 - Egypt

Jeremiah 2v18,36

Hosea 8v9, 7v9,11 - Assyria & Egypt

2nd Isaiah 44v28,45v1

Ezekiel 23v1-27

ii) The prophets drew much inspiration from their own lives and from everyday images

Jeremiah watched a potter Jer 18v1-10

Hosea married Gomer, an unfaithful wife Hosea 1v2

Hosea saw Israel as a son Hosea ch 11

iii) The prophets were people of God's word: not surprisingly they used word play, like punning, for example, or giving names to people.

Amos and a basket of summer fruit Amos 8v1,2

Jeremiah and the almond tree Jer 1v11,12

Jeremiah and the pot boiling over Jer 1v13

Jeremiah and a basket of figs Jer 24v1-7

Isaiah's song of the vineyard Is 5v7

Isaiah 7v3,4 Shear-jashub = only a remnant

Hosea 1v6,9 Lo-ruhamah = not loved; Lo-ammi = not my people

Jer 20v3 Mago-missabib = terror let loose

iv) An important part of prophecy was the acting out of the prophecy: this was not just a

dramatic way to get the message across, it inaugurated the fulfilment of the prophecy, made it come true. The best example is the incident between Jeremiah and Hananiah: where Jeremiah prophesied invasion and the yoke of foreign rule, by wearing a wooden yoke. Hananiah broke the yoke and prophesied an end to the invasion. Jeremiah said nothing, but went away. He returned, some months later, wearing an iron yoke, and saying that because the Israelites had failed to believe about the wooden yoke, so the invasion would be harder, and longer lasting, like iron.

Jeremiah & Hananiah Jer ch 27v1- ch 28v17

Jeremiah and the spoiled cloth Jer 13v1-11

Jeremiah not married Jer 16v1

Jeremiah and the piece of land Jer 32v6-25,42-44

Jeremiah and scroll Jer 51v60-64

Jeremiah and the foundation stones Jer 43v8-13

I Kings 11v29-31; ch 22

II Kings 13v14-19

Isaiah ch 20

Ezekiel 4v1-3; 4v4-8; 4v9-17; 5v1-4; 12v3-16; 2v17-20; 21v8-17; 37v15-23

NB the prophets' suffering, on behalf of the people, can perhaps be seen to have links with this idea.

C Theological structure

i) The prophets often mentioned the experience of a compelling (and unwelcome) call: Moses, sometimes seen as the first of the prophets, tried to avoid his call with excuses (Exodus ch 4). The other prophets were exactly the same.

Amos 7v14,15

1st Isaiah 6v1-9

Jeremiah 1v4-10

Ezekiel ch 1v28 - ch 2v8

2nd Isaiah 49v1-6

ii) This call could not be avoided, nor God's words held in or kept to the prophet himself:

Jeremiah 20v9

Amos 3v8

iii) Sometimes the word charismatic is used of the prophets: in fact the independent prophets would hardly fit into that category, for they did not have visions, or rely on music or trances, or great exhibitions of God's power. Instead they had the conviction of God's word, felt to be given to them directly. This gift and communication was not 'to order', and they were sometimes at a loss (see Jeremiah and Hananiah - Jeremiah had to go away in silence: Jer ch 27 & 28)

iv) They often described sitting in the council of the Almighty (a bit like a divine cabinet or staff meeting) as an observer, and then being given "the word of the Lord". When they did not use this imagery, there was still the personal element: that God had spoken to them directly (as opposed to in a vision, or whatever)

Numbers 12v6-8

Amos ch 7
Jeremiah 23v22
Ezekiel 13v9
Isaiah 6v8

v) The main issues the prophets tackled were those of justice, hope, faithfulness, salvation..... To get the flavour of this, we need to read one or more of the books right through, but the issue of justice deserves particular treatment here: it continues to be influential in modern political theology.

Is 1v10-17
Micah ch 2, ch 3
Amos ch 4, ch 5, ch 6, ch 8
Jeremiah ch 5, ch 7, ch 34
Ezekiel ch 22
Hosea ch 4

vi) Also the issue of hope. The prophets very often talked about disaster (indeed it was claimed to be the hall-mark of a true prophet), but at the same time they had a message of hope. This was problematic, because some of the people felt that God would be on their side whatever they did: (the idea of an unconditional covenant, as for example writings 'pro' the monarchy often claimed.) To generalise, the prophets' message of hope was based on God's great love and mercy, which would continue even through His anger.

Amos 5v6
1st Isaiah 1v25; 28v12,16; 30v15
Jeremiah 31v31-34; 32v37-41
2nd Isaiah 52v7-10; 55v1-3

vii) The Old Testament is considered to be quite difficult to read and understand, apart from two or three bits: we tell the stories of the 'historical' books; we use the Psalms, particularly those which are straightforward Praise psalms; we can latch onto the personal element in the prophets - they are individual, they seem almost 'modern'.

viii) The prophets suffered: their message was largely unpopular, (not surprising, when for example Jeremiah told the King to open the gates of the city to an invading army) and so they were thrown into prison, down wells etc. But this was not all: they had great self-doubt - about the validity of their message, and about their own suitability. Finally, they themselves bore the weight of the suffering of Israel: this is particularly so for Hosea, and his unfaithful wife; for Jeremiah, who did not get married, and for 2nd Isaiah (see the four Suffering Servant Songs).

Jeremiah everywhere; self doubt: Jer 20v14-18
Suffering servant Is 42v1-4; 49v1-6; 50v4-9; 52v13 - 53v12
Hosea 11v8

ix) They also had to have great courage, in facing rulers and people with unwelcome news:

see also Nathan and David II Samuel ch 12
Elijah and Ahab II Kings ch 21

D True?

I) There were two kinds of prophets: the independent prophets and the institutional prophets. The institutional prophets seem to have had some association with the Temple, or other shrines. Their **job** was to promise salvation, and to bring it about: a king would expect to be able to go and consult them at any time of crisis or decision. They used similar methods of enactment precisely for this purpose: the enactment was the beginning of the fulfilment of the prophecy. They used particular methods to divine God's word: ecstatic trances, music, dreams, visions, strong drink etc. They were institutional, supported by the state (= temple, king &c) they often operated in groups or 'schools'. They were found in other religions and nations as well as in Israel.

II) The independent prophets are the ones remembered. They represent a complete contrast. They were independent both of the state, and of other prophets; they relied on the Word of the Lord, which sometimes did not come to them; they generally prophesied disaster. There was often conflict between the two, with the independent prophets isolated, and insisting that they alone had God's authority and word.

Balaam Numbers ch 22v4 - ch 24v25

Saul and the company of prophets I Sam 10v5,10

Elijah and the prophets of Baal I Kings 18v17-40

Institutional prophets: I Kings 22v5-7

Seeking guidance II Kings 19v2; 22v12-20

Elisha and the company of prophets II Kings ch 2

Peace where there is no peace Jer 23v17; 6v14

iii) Surrounded by various prophecies, and by institutional and independent prophets, telling true from false was an important issue for the people. There were various attempts made to give criteria, to test prophecies, but none was really satisfactory.

a) did it come true? but

i) some prophecies which had come true long before Jesus were considered to be still active and applying to Jesus - that is, truth is not a 'one-off' thing

ii) some prophecies even now have not been fulfilled and some of these could not be fulfilled until the end of the world

iii) how can this test help at the time, when any fulfilment is in the future?

iv) prophecy is not about prediction of the future, it is about God active here and now

b) does it prophesy destruction?

Jeremiah 28v6-9

Deuteronomy 13v1-5; 18v20-22

Ezekiel 13v8-16 but

i) quite a number of biblical prophecies talk about hope (see above (c))

c) In the end, the question is unresolved, for it is up to the people to ask themselves, as the prophets themselves had to, "Is it the Word of the Lord?"