

The Prophets and their task

Introduction

The Prophets take up a very large part of our Bibles. In addition to the four major Prophets – Isaiah; Jeremiah; Ezekiel and Daniel – there are twelve so-called “Minor Prophets”. This makes a total of sixteen books out of the Old Testament. Some of these books are very large and can be quite complex to read. The terms “Major” and “Minor” have only been given in relation to the lengths of their writings – it has no bearing on their contents or the importance of their writings. The “Minor Prophets” wrote shorter books, whilst the “Major Prophets” wrote longer books.

Of course, in addition to these sixteen Prophets who wrote down their messages, there were many other Prophets who did not leave any writings behind. For example, there were Elijah and Elisha, and then the “Schools of the Prophets”, many of whom are not named in the Bible. Sometimes you would read of a “man of God” who appeared with a short message and then disappeared. We might learn little of what they said but quite a lot about them and what they did. With the writing prophets it seems that we learn a lot about they said but little about them and what they did (Jonah being the exception).

In the case of this “non-writing Prophets” the OT records more about what they did than what they actually said. This is why they are included in the narrative portions of the OT. It is for this reason that in the Hebrew Bible the books of Samuel and Kings are included in the section known as “The Prophets”, נְבִיאִים (naviim).

Part of the task of a preacher is to try to make the more complex parts of the Bible understandable to the people, whilst at the same time making these parts relevant with a present day message. This is quite an undertaking.

I can recall, early in my ministry, starting a bible study course in Hosea. I found it began well but as I progressed it seemed to become increasingly harder, but I valiantly pressed on believing that having begun I ought to finish.

In later years I decided that before attempting such a mammoth series I ought to begin looking at the Prophets as a whole; try to work out for the congregation the purpose and role of the Prophets and then present large over-views of their writings. Beginning with a bigger picture helps us when we, later, consider the details.

My suggestion here is that we consider in the first lecture the purpose and tasks of the Prophets in general terms and then, in the successive lectures, consider a number of their writings taking in the bigger picture so that we do not become lost in the details. We will consider an over-view of the following Prophets - Amos; Hosea; Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

However, in this lecture it is important for us to consider what is the role, purpose and task of the Prophet. We will then consider our findings in relation to their writings.

1. The meaning of “Prophecy” and the Prophet

The prophets spoke and wrote their messages between 760 – 460 BC. They addressed a vast range of issues, although, as we shall see later, the core of these messages was quite singular. Whilst their writings contained much that differed from one another, they did have a single message that was repeatedly being presented to their nation.

The meaning of prophecy is often misunderstood. People like to think of prophecy as largely foretelling the future – speaking about things that have yet to happen. It is commonly thought that the prophets only spoke about the coming Messiah and the age of the New Covenant, or the return of Israel to their lands.

This, unfortunately, is a complete misunderstanding of the role and purpose of the prophets. Did you know that less than two percent of OT prophecy is messianic; less than five percent specifically describes the age of the New Covenant (ie, NT age), and less than one percent concerns events yet to happen?

This means that a very large portion of the material addresses other issues. It also means that the prophet did not consider himself as essentially a person commenting on the future, and that their *“forward looking”* role was only a very small part of their mission.

When the Prophets did talk about the future it was largely to do with Israel’s future, that is the immediate future of their own nation whether that was Israel (in the case of Amos) or Judah (in the case of Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel).

What is the meaning of the term *“Prophecy”*? In the Old Testament the term prophecy נָבֵא (naba) originally meant *“to bubble up, to boil up with great enthusiasm, to become enthused, to act as inspired”*.

The term is used in 1 Kings 18:29 where the prophets of Baal jumped around their altar trying to get their gods to bring fire down from heaven as part of the contest on Mount Carmel. In the RSV and ESV the Hebrew word נָבֵא (naba) is translated as *“rave”*, but in the NIV it is *“frantic prophesying”*. Either translation will do, but the sense of the passage seems to favour the RSV because it depicts the over-the-top enthusiasm of the Baal worshippers, they *“raved”*, they became noisy, almost demented with enthusiasm.

Now, in the Old Testament the same word is used of the prophet not to portray his enthusiasm in the manner of his delivery, but rather to portray his *“inspirational utterance”*. The prophet *“bubbled up”* with inspiration as he spoke from Yahweh. Sometimes the prophets did act strangely and earned the title of being like *“mad men”*. One thinks of Ezekiel and his constructing mud ramparts, lying on one side etc. Then there was Isaiah hiding a loin cloth going naked and then retrieving it, or Elisha calling for a musical instrument through which to prophesy. But, the point about the prophet was that he spoke *“inspirational utterances”*, because, like a bubbling fountain he poured out the spoken words of God.

There is a narrative in Exodus that might help us with this matter. In Exodus 4:10 we read of Moses complaining to God that he cannot go and speak to Pharaoh because he was not articulate enough, he was not good with words, *“Moses said to the LORD, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.”* God then says that He will use Aaron the brother of Moses to do the actual talking. Then we read this strange

passage in Exodus 7:1, "*Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet".*

This illustrates for us the meaning of prophecy. The man speaks God's words. Whether they are words of warning, encouragement, predictions of the future, it does not matter. What does matter is that here is a man who is "*bubbling up with inspirational utterance*".

Therefore, to think of the prophet as one who predicted the future is to miss the point. They were essentially men who spoke from God. They gave "inspirational utterances" and in their enthusiasm they appeared to "bubble up" with their messages.

2. The Prophets and their History

It is important to realise that the writings of the Prophets comprise a number of speeches, or messages delivered at different times and in different places. This is what makes it difficult to sit and read a whole book in one sitting. The book comprised a collection or oracles given at different times, addressing different issues. Also, these messages were not necessarily spoken in the order that they are found in the books themselves.

Another important issue is that of the historical context. If we read the Prophets without giving heed to the surrounding history we will find it very difficult to work out what they are saying and why they are saying it. For example, it is important to know the particular moral and spiritual situations in the nation to which the Prophets were addressing. The historical books of Kings are vitally important to understanding the Prophets.

In relation to this it is also helpful to know to which nation each Prophet was directing the speeches. Some Prophets spoke to Israel in the North (Amos; Hosea; Jonah) whilst the great number of Prophets addressed the southern two tribes known as Judah (Isaiah; Micah; Jeremiah; Zephaniah; Habakkuk), and other nations (Nahum addresses Assyria; Obadiah speaks to Edom), and then two other Prophets direct their attention to Judah in exile in Babylon (Ezekiel and Daniel), and finally, Haggai and Zechariah address Judah restored to its land.

JUDAH	Prophets in	ISRAEL	Prophets in Israel
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	Judah		
Rehoboam 931-913		Jeroboam I 931-910	
Abijam 913-911		Nadab 910-909	
Asa 911-870		Baasha 909-886	
		Elah 886-885	
		Zimri 885-884	
		Tibni 884-874	
		Ahab 874-853	Elijah
Jehoshaphat 870-848			
		Ahaziah 853-852	Elisha
Jehoram 848-841		Joram 852-841	
Athaliah 841-835		Jehu 841-814	
Joash 835-796	Joel	Jehoahaz 814-798	
Amaziah 796-767		Jehoash 798-782	

Uzziah 740	767-	Isaiah	Jeroboam II 735	782-	Amos, Hosea, Jonah
			Zachariah 752	735-	
			Shallum	752	
			Menahem	752-	
					ASSYRIA
					Tiglath-Pileser III 745-727
Jotham 740-732		Micah	Pekahiah		
			Pekah	740-	
			732		
Ahaz 732-716			Hoshea	732-	FALL OF DAMASCUS 732
			723		
					Israel into Exile 722

JUDAH		PROPHETS IN JUDAH	ASSYRIA
Hezekiah	723-687	Isaiah (continued)	
Manasseh	687-642		
Amon	642-640		
Josiah	640-609	Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum	FALL OF ASSYRIA 609
Jehoahaz	609		

		BABYLON
Jehoiakim 609-597	Habakkuk	
	Lamentations	First deportation to Babylon 605
Jehoiachin 597		Second deportation to Babylon 597
Zedekiah 597-587		
THE FALL OF JERUSALEM 587		
Judah in Exile in Babylon	Ezekiel; Daniel	
		THE FALL OF BABYLON 539
THE JEWS		PERSIAN EMPIRE
Zerubbabel return to Jerusalem 538		Cyrus 539-530
		Cambyses 530-522
Temple building continued 520	Haggai, Zechariah	Darius I 522-486
Temple completed 516	Obadiah, Malachi	

Figure 1: Chronology

3. The essential Function of a Prophet

3:1 The Prophet's message did not originate from themselves.

It came from God. The Prophet would often prefix his messages with the words, "Thus says the Lord..." Sometimes the message of the Prophet comes through the use of the first person singular, "I", as if Yahweh is speaking directing through the Prophet. The Prophet often had a difficult message to deliver and it became known as a "burden" (Zech 9:1, 12:1).

They often did not relish the idea of having say the things that God told them. Think of the Prophets who had to tell Judah that they were going into Exile (Jeremiah 27, 28) and that they should surrender to this opposing nation. Think of Ezekiel having to tell the people that they would not be returning to their land for a long time and that their sacred Temple was going to be destroyed. Think of Isaiah having to outline the nature of Israel's sin (Isaiah 5). But worse were the oracles of Ezekiel where he graphically and, with disgusting sexual language, has to portray Judah's revolting sin. Think of the Prophet's who had to submit themselves to harsh physical experiences such as Isaiah who had to walk naked; Ezekiel whose wife died as an example to the exiles; Hosea who had to marry a prostitute.

A Prophet was always "called" to his task – he never took it upon himself. A glance at the opening of most of the books of the Prophets give a short statement detailing the Prophet's call (Ezek 1-3, very dramatic; Amos 7:14-15 a significant testimony; Isaiah 6, a whole chapter about the call).

Some prophets so-called, tried to take it upon themselves to enter this role but were heavily criticised (Jer 14:14ff accused of lying; 23:21f accused of never having stood in the counsel of Yahweh; Ezekiel 13:1ff accused of painting over the cracks with whitewash).

3:2 The Prophets were Covenant Enforcers

When the Prophets delivered their messages it was in relation to the most important event that ever happened in the life of the nation. What was this most important and significant event that made Israel so different from her neighbouring nations? What marked out Israel as a nation that was different? What was it that signified Israel as a "Holy Nation", set apart?

Sinai. It is what happened at Sinai that made Israel a special nation completely different from any other nation on the face of the earth. What was this? It was the giving of the Law of Yahweh. The Law that is so perfectly summarised and abbreviated in the Ten Commandments, but expanded throughout the books of Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers and Deuteronomy.

When Yahweh formed the nation of Israel this was to be a people so very different and separated from all the other peoples of the earth. This is the meaning of “holy”. Listen to Deuteronomy 14:2 *“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth”*.

What was it that marked out this nation from all the other nations? It was the Law of Yahweh. Their obedience to His Law would be the distinguishing mark; it would make the other nations look at them with wonder and awe, Deuteronomy 4:5 *“See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶ Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?”*.

Whilst the Law was a positive structure and its obedience would bring blessing, there was also a negative element signifying punishment and judgement if disobeyed. The lists of “blessings” and “cursings” in Deuteronomy chapter 28 demonstrates the two sides of the Law. Yahweh did not only give the Law through the Covenant but he also enforced it.

The giving of the Law was a significant part of the Covenant that Yahweh made at Sinai with the nation of Israel. The Law was made up of two parts¹. In the first place there was the moral element which is portrayed in the Ten Commandments. The second part of the Law concerned the ritual of the sacrifices. This ceremonial aspect of the Law was given to provide Israel with forgiveness for when they broke the Law and returned to Yahweh in repentance. So, when the blood sacrifice symbolized the washing away of sins, it was expected that the individual and the nation would

¹ A third part of the Law dealt with the civil aspects of Israel’s life.

continue in obedience to the moral aspect of the Law. These two aspects went together.

Sadly, the history of Israel shows that the nation in general chose to disobey the Law. But they went further than this. Their leaders chose to misinterpret the Law of the Covenant. The Priests and the false prophets chose to emphasize the ceremonial Law over and above the moral aspect of the Law. They told the people that so long as they continued to present their sacrifices, irrespective of the moral and spiritual state of their lives, Yahweh would be satisfied. They attached a pagan concept to their relationship with Yahweh. The smoke of the burnt offerings would substitute for a life of obedience.

Now, when the Prophets came on the scene they had one essential message. The message was, "*Get back to the moral Law*". They said that Yahweh was not pleased with the ritual if it was not accompanied by a life of obedience. Consequently, it is true to say that the Prophets were simply Yahweh's "*Covenant Enforcers*". They were His spokesmen, calling the nation back to the moral and spiritual element of the Law.

For example, Isaiah, at the beginning of his book makes this matter very clear and uses direct language to spell this out for the nation. In doing so he points out that Yahweh is rejecting their sacrifices because of their moral failures. This is what he says, Isaiah 1:11 "*What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.* ¹² "*When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts?* ¹³ *Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.* ¹⁴ *Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.* ¹⁵ *When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.* ¹⁶ *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil,* ¹⁷ *learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause*".

This is typical of most of the Prophets' messages. God did not merely give the Law, He also enforces it. Positive enforcement is blessing; negative enforcement is curse. It is all about re-enforcing the moral Covenant.

The National Theology! What is this? There were two Covenants that God made with His people. In the first place there is the Covenant at Sinai with its moral and ceremonial elements. Secondly, there is the Davidic Covenant whereby God made a promise that there would never cease to be a King on the throne of David. This is recorded in 2 Chron 6:16 *"Now therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father what you have promised him, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel'"*, which is partly recorded also in 2 Samuel 7:26, *"And your name will be magnified forever, saying, 'The LORD of hosts is God over Israel,' and the house of your servant David will be established before you"*. This is also emphasized in the royal Psalms, such as Psalm 89:3-4, *"You have said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: ⁴ I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations"*.

The belief arose in Israel and Judah that Yahweh would maintain the house of David for ever; that Jerusalem would never fall into the hands of the enemy; that Yahweh would protect the throne of David against all opposition. It became a dogma in Israel that Yahweh had chosen Zion as his eternal dwelling place and made a covenant with David that his line would rule forever.

It was believed that the only requirement from the people of God was that they continue the Temple sacrifices. In all of this the moral requirements of the Sinai Covenant were lost.

This, then, formed the background of this section of Isaiah, and that of the most of the other Prophets. They were fighting against this "National Theology; a theology that was not of God. Their task was to disillusion the people about their interpretation of the Davidic Covenant and bring them back to the necessity of the Sinaitic Covenant. Yes, Yahweh will keep His promises regarding the throne of David, but not in the way anticipated by the people. Punishment through exile would not nullify His promises. The only hope for the people was to return to the moral code of the Covenant of Sinai.

In other words, the Prophets were raised up by God to continue the work of Moses. They were no different than Moses who also warned the people of the dangers of straying from the ethical and moral requirements of the Sinaitic Covenant. We have already noted the “blessings” and “curses” rehearsed in Deuteronomy 28 under the direction of Moses. The task of the Prophets, therefore, was to return to this Mosaic emphasis reminding the people that their behaviour would either merit blessings or curses. It is necessary to read these sections of the Pentateuch (Lev 26, Deut 4, 28-31) to have a better understanding of the Prophets’ message.

In a sense, the Prophets did not add anything new. Their development of the Messianic promises were more detailed because they had lost all hope in the nation, believing that the people would never heed their message and repent or change their ways. The Prophets saw that the only hope for the nation lay a long way ahead in the future, and so their emphasis on the coming Messiah in an age of spiritual revival was all they could hope for.

As we read the Prophets we need to observe a two fold pattern: (1) An identification of Israel’s sin; (2) A prediction of the blessing or curse that will follow. Most of the time, this is what the Prophets were conveying to the nation.

Conclusion

How do we reach a conclusion which can make this information relevant to ourselves? How could we preach about the prophets in a way that makes sense of their message within our own Churches? This is my application.

I am deeply impressed by God's patience and long-suffering as I read the prophets. There is a statement found in 2 Chronicles 36:15-16 which summarises for us God's seemingly endless patience expressed through the Prophets. It reads, *"The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy"*. The key word here is *"persistently"*, or as the NIV has *"again and again"*.

Jeremiah catches hold of this theme when he says, *"For I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice"* (Jeremiah 11:7, see also 7:13,25,25:3,4, 29:19,32:33,35:14,15,44:4).

The Psalmist will say that Yahweh is *"slow to anger"* (Psalm 86:15 *"But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness"*). The history of Israel and Judah demonstrates the years and years of God's patient dealings with His people. Again and again He sent out his Prophets to warn and urge the people to return to the moral code.

I am amazed at the patience of God. His patience with Israel and His patience with .~ His Church, and more especially, His patience with me.

However long is the patience of God, there is an end to His patience. When it reaches the point where there is *"no remedy"* (2 Chron 36:16) the wrath of God is expressed, even against His own people. The lesson that we take from this brief survey of the Prophets is two fold.

In the first place we are impressed at God's patience; and secondly we are taught not to presume upon His patience. No one can play around with God and sin! It is a dangerous game to play. God will not tolerate sin, disobedience and a refusal to listen to His Word.

Romans 2:4 to be a special warning in the light of the OT Prophets' ministry,

"Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" Presuming upon God's patience is showing contempt.

Perhaps there is a call here for the people of God to wake up! Repeatedly within our Churches the call is for us to live holy lives. Ignoring God's words a dangerous thing to do. His patience is not there to allow us room in which to continue to sin; rather His patience is there to "lead us to repentance".

Richard Lee. 22 August 2008