

The prophets of God

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A. Introduction

1. The Old Testament scriptures were often described as the Law and the Prophets in the time of Jesus. The Law was given by Moses; prophets came to the fore during the time of Israel's kings.
2. Some only spoke; others wrote down their prophecies. Those who wrote are usually divided into the major and minor canonical prophets (based on the size of their books, not the significance of their words).
3. Biblical prophecy is almost always political and is deeply couched in the morality of God and his people, challenging and encouraging a return to God's covenant. Because prophets see what others can't see they are often misunderstood; Because they challenge corruption and hypocrisy they are often persecuted (Luke 11:47-48).
4. Governments need prophets both to guide and to challenge. It always profits to heed a prophet, especially if he is a true one! However, there are also false prophets.

B. The voice of the prophets

1. Prophecy is a specialised form of communication of the will and word of God. It differs from preaching and teaching and is more than just exhortation. In the New Testament, apostles and prophets are of foundational importance for the establishing of sound doctrine and new churches—Ephesians 2:20; 3:5.
 - a. Prophets both foretell and forth-tell—prediction and proclamation. Sometimes the predictions are remarkable, at other times they are simply forcing people to face the obvious.
 - b. Prophecy must be understood in its historic setting, however, it is often like a folded telescope that is opened section by section. It's fulfilment may be multiple – i.e. immediate, future, future future, and far future.
 - c. Prophecy was nearly always given in poetic form when written. It is seldom prosaic and formal. The language is vivid, emotive, compelling and visual. Prophets have little interest in small print. Theirs is the writing on the subway wall, the graffiti on the billboards, the performance art in the public square, the caricatures in the cartoons. They mock and they shock; they reveal and conceal; they provoke and they evoke; they break and remake. Prophets were always people of passion, observational artists who bridged the divide between God's word and the conduct of their hearers.
 - d. Times of crisis release the imagination. During the exile God raised up the exiled prophets Ezekiel and Daniel, and the restoration prophet, Zechariah. Their writing is called apocalyptic (revelatory) and is akin to some modern fantasy. It is

characterised by powerful and disturbing visual imagery, word-pictures and actions that often focus on 'end-time events' (eschatology). John's Revelation is New Testament apocalyptic.

- e. The prophets' use of symbolism opens our eyes to the otherwise invisible parallel spiritual world called the heavenly places. This has tremendous implications for our worship and preaching. Mere outward form or lecturing will fail to bring us into the presence of God. We need sanctified, anointed, Word-birther art in our churches. Woe to the preacher without prophetic imagination, illustration or drama!
2. Israel had the two greatest charismatic prophets, Elijah and Elisha, and two of the mightiest ethical prophets, Amos and Hosea. Judah produced the messianic prophet, Isaiah, the mystical prophets, Daniel and Ezekiel, and the passionate prophet, Jeremiah. In all, the Bible records the names of some thirty prophets, thirteen of whom wrote their work down, some of it in consecutive order and some of it as collected pieces.

C. Major themes of the canonical prophets

1. We cannot deal here with the vast amount of content in the prophets, yet certain big themes come through that we should note.
 - a. The heart of God is revealed in the writings of Hosea and Jeremiah. God is the passionate lover of his people who agonises over having to punish them for their spiritual adultery.
 - b. Isaiah and Micah both prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. The Servant Songs in Isaiah describe both the character and the work of the Messiah and clearly point to Jesus.
 - c. The sovereignty of God is a major theme in Isaiah, Habbakuk, Daniel and Ezekiel. Great events are shaking the nations but behind it all God is working out his perfect plan.
 - d. Amos thunders out God's call for righteousness and justice. God lays on the well-off a responsibility to care for the poor and needy, or else!
 - e. Joel, Obadiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Nahum and Zephaniah all prophesy about God's judgement and mercy. God always in wrath remembers mercy and much prefers to remain in mercy mode.
 - f. The idea of a faithful saved remnant is revealed through Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah. These are the true Israelites who had Abraham's saving faith and who would in due course bring that faith back to Israel.

Recommended reading *Isaiah 1-39; Isaiah 40-66; Jeremiah & Lamentations* by John Houghton CWR Cover to Cover series.

Prophet	King	Context	Themes
Obadiah	Ahaziah	Edom	Judgement for not helping their cousins in the wilderness and when facing Philistines attack. 10, 21.
Joel	Joash	Judah	A locust plague portends the far worse Day of the Lord that will usher in a period of future blessing 2:28-32
Amos	Jeroboam II	Israel	Judgement for consumerism, injustice and oppression of the poor 4:1-2. Yet future restoration is promised 9:11.
Hosea	Zechariah	Israel	Marriage to faithless wife a prophetic metaphor for God's grief, anger and compassion for idolatrous Israel 4:1-3; 6:1-4
Jonah	Azariah	Nineveh	Reluctant prophet brings Nineveh to repentance but resents it. 2:8-9; 4:11.
Micah	Jotham	Judah	Judgement on political, legal & religious corruption and exploitation, yet restoration follows repentance 6:8; 7:18; 5:2.
Isaiah	Uzziah-Hezekiah	Judah	Judgement on religion without morality 1:13-17. The remnant & the day of the Lord & the Messiah 6:11-12; 7:14; 9:6-7; 53:1-12. Miraculous deliverance, future restoration & salvation of the world 55:1-11; 61:1-3.
Nahum	Manasseh	Nineveh	Judgement on invincible Nineveh for Assyrian cruelty 1:7-8, 15.
Zephaniah	Amon	Judah	The Day of the Lord is coming so repent. 2:3
Jeremiah	Josiah-Zedekiah	Judah	Judgement & compassion interwoven in a call to repentance. The fall of Jerusalem and promise of restoration after 70 years exile 31:31-34. Fall of Babylon & Egypt prophesied. Laments.
Habakkuk	Jehohaz	Judah	How long will God tolerate wickedness? Why does he use an even more wicked nation to judge? 3:17-19
Daniel	Jehoiakim	Exiles	Visions of an exile about the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of men into the far future. Prayer that unlocked the restoration 9:1-4.
Ezekiel	Zedekiah	Exiles	Departure of God's glory because of sin & idolatry 10:1-8. Fall of Jerusalem. Judgement on nations. Restoration & new covenant 36:25-28.
Haggai	Persia	Remnant	Encouragement to rebuild the Temple 1:5-8. Prepare for the Messiah 2:7-9.
Zechariah	Persia	Remnant	Prepare for the King 8:3; 9:9 The reign of Christ 14:9.
Malachi	Persia	Remnant	An appeal to backsliders to repent 2:10. Promise of John the Baptist 3:1. Prove God faithful 3:7, 16.