

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION:

A survey of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. In addition to familiarization with the content of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, emphasis will be placed on an examination of the phenomena of prophetism in Ancient Israel, principles of hermeneutics relative to the prophetic writings and critical theories as they have been applied to the prophetic books. Attention will be given to the prophetic teaching concerning the premillennial return of the Messiah.

OBJECTIVES OF THE COURSE

1. To examine the phenomena of prophetism in Ancient Israel, including such things as the prophetic call, the inspiration of the prophets, relation of the prophets to the cult, true and false prophets, symbolic acts, comparison to "prophecy" outside Israel, and the apologetic value of biblical prophecy and its fulfillment.
2. To become familiar with the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, including the general content of each book, its historical setting, and purpose of writing.
3. To learn some principles of hermeneutics relative to the prophetic writings, both in theory and application.
4. To become acquainted with critical theories as they have been applied to the prophetic books.

I. Prophetism in Ancient Israel - some general remarks

A. A unique phenomena

I think it can be said that the prophets of ancient Israel constitute a unique phenomena, not only in the history of Israel itself, but also in all of human history. There is nothing which is truly comparable to it, although frequently attempts are made to find parallels in other times and places.

Sometimes it is said that various peoples or nations have a particular ability or genius which is recognized and held in high esteem by other peoples. Thus the Greeks had their sculptors and philosophers,
Rome - military commanders and jurists
England - colonizers
America - economists, business management
Germany - musicians, philosophers, theologians
In the same manner it is said that Israel produced her prophets.

But this approach loses sight of the *principal difference* between Israel's prophets and the various works of genius of other peoples in other times and places. The prophets of Israel constitute a phenomena which is *principally distinct and different* from any other achievement of the human spirit in all of human history. By virtue of its character as divine revelation prophecy in ancient Israel must be defined as a unique phenomena.

The prophets of Israel are presented to us in Scripture as individuals who were endowed by God with the prophetic function in order that God's Word might be given to Israel, and through Israel to all people. The Bible clearly represents the words of the prophets as God's words rather than as the prophet's own word. So the prophetic message recorded in Scripture is not presented to us as a product of human creativity or ingenuity, but rather as a product of divine disclosure in a very special and direct sense. The importance of this cannot be over emphasized.

- B. The prophets were servants of God, invested with the prophetic function of speaking God's Word.

The prophets were servants of God. God himself calls them "My servants the prophets" (2 Kgs 9:7; 17:13; Jer. 7:25; 25:4; 29:19; 35:15; 44:4; 38:17; Zech 1:6) **(contrast false prophets, Jer 23:21-22)**

1. Some of the prophets received a special call to the prophetic task.

- a. Isaiah (Isa 6:1-13)
Particularly impressive. He was apparently in the forecourt of the temple when a vision was given to him.

It was as if suddenly the holy place opened up before him. He saw in the back part that most holy thing, the ark, a rectangular chest, covered with gold and above it the cherubs with stretched out wings. And then the ark become a magnificent throne, the contours of the temple faded away so that the whole world became one great temple. And on the throne sat God a King of all the earth.

Isaiah having seen this immediately becomes conscious of his own sinfulness before God. The confrontation with the Holy God causes him to see his own unholiness. And he feels it as an acute reality - he cannot stand in his unholiness before a Holy God. He cries out, Woe is me . . .

Then one of the seraphs flies to him with a glowing coal taken from the altar and touches Isaiah's mouth. verse 7 . . .
The altar is probably the incense altar, which stood in the temple before the holy of holies where the ark of God was located. On this altar incense was offered to God as a sign of consecration to

Him. Isaiah was by this ceremony, consecrated to the service of the Lord.

When he heard the voice of the Lord as Who shall I send, and who shall go for us? He answered Here am I send me.

The task that he is given vss. 9-13 was not a pleasant one. His message is to be largely one of punishment and judgment, eliciting comparatively little response, with only a brief note of hope that a remnant would remain faithful to the LORD.

b. Jeremiah

We read of Jeremiah's call in chapt 1:4-10. He first tried to avoid the responsibility and difficulty which was tied to the prophetic task by telling the LORD that he felt himself too young and weak for the job. But then the LORD says, Do not say I am young because you shall go to all that I shall send you and whatsoever I command, you will say.

c. Ezekiel

He was called to be a prophet when he was a captive in a foreign land, Babylon. His calling vision is described in Chapters 1-3 of his book.

The prophet saw a strange and magnificent throne carriage, which was carried by four creatures.

Above Ezekiel saw something that looked like a firmament. And above it (vss 26-28) something that looked like a sapphire stone and had the form of a throne. And on it was a figure which looked like a man. Everything looked like fire surrounded by a glow. The glow was like that of a rainbow. In this way the glory of the LORD appeared to Ezekiel. It was majestic and exalted. The prophet could hardly look at it. He also could not exactly describe it.

From the throne came the word of the LORD to the prophet. He is sent to his fellow exiles in Babylon, who in spite of the judgment of God which had befallen them (exile), are still rebellious and have not turned to the LORD.

2:9-3:27. He saw a hand stretched out toward him. In it was a scroll of a book. It was written on in the front and back with lamentations, and mourning and woe. The scroll was to be eaten by the prophet. The symbolism is that the scroll is the message of

God that he must make completely his own. The message is a proclamation of the judgment of God over his people.

d. Amos

Brief statement, Amos 7:15.

2. For some prophets no special calling is recorded but all the prophets give evidence that they know they are endowed with the prophetic function by the LORD himself.

There is not sufficient biblical data to conclude that every prophet received some sort of special "call" to the prophetic task. In fact some individuals who performed this function seem clearly not to have received a "call" (Balaam, Num 22-25) as did Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos. Also some individuals who were set apart for some other particular office or task were at the same time prophets. David, for example, was anointed to be king, but he also performed the prophetic function in the writing of Psalms (cf. Acts 2:29, 30, Ps 16:10; cf. Also 2 Sam 23:2). Ezekiel was a priest (Ez 1:3) but performed the prophetic function.

What is clear is that when the O.T. prophets speak for God they give evidence that they know that they are endowed with the prophetic function by the LORD himself. This is true, whether or not they experienced some special call to perform the prophetic function.

(Young and others claim that the author's of the "2nd division" of the canon were men who held the office of prophet and their authorship guaranteed canonicity to these books. With regard to the "3rd division" [Young] does not claim to know what caused them to be canonized or who collected them. They were written by inspired men who did not hold the office of prophet. Some of them like David and Daniel had the gift of prophecy but not the office.

This is an invented distinction which assumes that the books not expressly attributed to prophets were not prophetic in authorship. N. T. often refers to the whole of the OT apart from Pent. as "the prophets" cf. Matt. 26:56. See further Harris, Inspiration and Canonicity, pp. 170-179.) JETS 33/1 (1990) 75-84.

3. The endowment with the prophetic function by God was a power which a man could not resist.

Amos said, "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The LORD God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" Amos 3:8 (rd. vss 4 ff).

He meant that just as a man must fear when close by him a lion begins to roar, so must a man prophecy when God speaks and gives him that task. It is impossible for him to withdraw from it.

Jeremiah once tried to withdraw from the calling which God had given him. He says "If I say, I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am wary of holding it in, indeed, I cannot" (Jer. 20:9). The prophet must speak.

C. The function of the prophet is the proclamation of the Word of God.

The true prophet does not bring his own word or his own thoughts, but he brings God's Word and God's thoughts. The fundamental difference between the true and the false prophets is that the first proclaim God's Word and the latter their own words (Deut 18:18ff; Jer. 1:9; Jer. 23:16)

1. The expressions with which they introduce their sermons are indicative that the message is God's not their own.

See Young, 171-175.

2. The prophet is to declare the message God gives him regardless of whether or not it is pleasant to him.

Samuel, 1 Sam 15:11, 16:1

Balaam, Num 22-25

Jonah

Ezekiel was to eat the scroll inscribed with the judgments of God. That is, the prophet was to assimilate the Word and become one with it even if it was not the message which he personally desired to give. The message Ezekiel was to bring was not pleasant. It was mourning and woe. But even so the prophet was to bring the message willingly in the name of his God.

3. There is a distinction between the prophet's own word and the Word of God which he spoke.

It was not the prophet's function to proclaim his own thoughts and insights. We must be very careful here to be clear about this distinction. It is incorrect to say that the prophets conveyed their own ideas and that these then served as the ideas of God. This is clear from certain passages where a distinction is made between the prophet's own ideas and the message from God which was given to him.

While it is true that the divine word given through the human instrument of the prophet utilizes the prophet's own personal characteristics (the organic character of divine inspiration), this does not detract from or diminish the divine character of the message.

[Paul's statements in 1 Cor 7:12,25,40 - cf. G. Archer, Ency. Of Bible Difficulties, pp 397-398.

What he says is not a quotation from the teaching of Christ as in vs. 10 (Matt 5:32, 19:3-9). Vs. 40 - "I *think* I have the Spirit of God" does not necessarily imply any uncertainty of unsureness on part of the thinker - it simply says that is his personal opinion or conviction."]

a. David and Nathan.

When David made known to Nathan his wish to build a temple, Nathan approved the idea and even urged him to execute his plan when he said: "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you" (2 Sam 7:3).

But in the night the word of the LORD came to Nathan. The LORD said to Nathan that David should not build him a house. David's son was to do this. David would not build the LORD a house but the LORD would build David a house. In this beautiful play on words God says that he will establish a dynasty for David (house) that will continue forever. The promise of course points forward to the Messiah, who would be born out of the seed of David and who would be an eternal king.

Nathan had to go back to David with this correction to his own words, and replace them with the divine word. The distinction here between the prophet's own word and the Word of God is clear. What is more, the prophet is thoroughly conscious of this distinction.

See J. Schelhaas, "II Samuel 7:1-5," The Law and the Prophets, 283-297.

Schelhaas points out that this does not mean the king's intention was in itself wrong (cf. 1 Kgs 8:18). [But the Lord said to my father David, 'Because it was in your heart to build a temple for my Name, you did well to have this in your heart. Nevertheless, you are not he one to build the temple . . .] But the prophet should have waited for God's revelation. A good intention does not always mean it is God's will to execute the thing desired. That Nathan also desired a temple for the God of Israel was not wrong in itself. The mistake here was that he spoke as man and not as

prophet while his opinion as a prophet was specifically asked for.
CC.1

b. Samuel

1 Samuel 16. Samuel felt sure as he looked at the older son of Jesse that the LORD's anointed was Eliab. But he was wrong. See vss. 6,12,13.

c. Jonah.

If he were to have brought his own message in Nineveh, then this would have been a different word than the word of God which was laid upon him. Precisely because the Word of God did not coincide with his own word he fled in order to avoid the task.

d. Jeremiah

In Jeremiah's controversy with Hananiah (Jeremiah 27,28) Jeremiah gave a prophetic word (Jer. 27), Hananiah gave a contradictory word Jer. 28:1-4). Jeremiah doubted Hananiah, on the basis of previous revelation, but had no further positive reply (vss.5-11) until God gave an additional message (vs. 12-16).

e. The old prophet at Bethel

I Kings 13. The old prophet lied, see esp. vss 18,20, 22.

To say that the prophets brought their own word in the form of God's word is in conflict with the reality which is described for us in these Scriptures.

(See Harris, 176,177,178.)

D. The phenomena of Israel's prophets is as old as the history of Israel itself.

The two are co-extensive. Jeremiah 7:25. I will not trace this out in detail. See Freeman 26-35. Prior to Moses, Noah (Gen 9:25, 27) was clearly a prophet, and Abraham was the first person specifically so designated (Gen 20:7).

E. Besides male prophets Israel also had her prophetesses.

Miriam, the sister of Moses is called a prophetess (Exod 15:20), as well as Deborah (Judg 4:4), and Hulda (2 Kgs 22:14). The wife of Isaiah is called a

prophetess (Isa 8:3), but opinions are divided over whether this is to be understood as a female prophet or as the wife of the prophet.

F. Besides individual prophets there are also bands or companies of prophets referred to in the O.T.

1. References to prophetic bands or companies.

(See Freeman, p. 28ff; Young, p. 83ff.)

The references are not numerous, but are found occasionally in the historical books.

1 Sam 10:5,6. When Saul was anointed by Samuel to be king he received three signs, to show, that this anointing was from God. One of these signs was that when he returned to his home in Gibea, he would meet a company of prophets (NIV: "procession of prophets" / the Hebrew term is **חַבְלֵי נְבִיאִים** - band) coming from a high place, with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps and they will be "prophesying". The question here is what is the meaning of "prophesying" in this text. One meaning for the root **נבא** in BDB is "prophesy in ecstatic state". *NRSV*: "they will be in a prophetic frenzy." Berkely "they shall be in ecstasy." Young (p. 86) says "here not meaningless raving but devout praising of God to accompaniment of music. If we employ the word "ecstasy" to describe the prophets, we must use the word with care. . . .The source of the "ecstatic" condition, . . is not to be found in the presence of music, . . . nor in contagion, . . . but only in the "rushing upon" of the Spirit of God upon Saul."

1 Sam 19:20ff. Also in Rama there was such a group or company of prophets with which David came in contact when he fled from Saul. When Saul went to Rama to get David he as well as his messengers shared the ecstatic condition of the band of prophets associated with Samuel.

1 Kgs 18:13. In the days of Elijah, Obadiah, a high official of Ahab's hid two groups of fifty prophets in a cave.

1 Kgs 20:41. An unnamed prophet is recognized by Ahab as belonging to a prophetic group (after Ahab had spared the life of Ben Hadad).

In the time of Elisha there were groups of prophets in:

Bethel, 2 Kgs 2:3

Jericho, 2 Kgs 2:5, (probably more than 50, 2 Kgs 2:7)

Gilgal, 2 Kgs 4:38 (sitting before Elisha).

The function of these companies is not altogether clear. They may have been assistants or disciples of Samuel, Elijah and Elisha entrusted with the task of promoting true religion in their local communities. In the case of 1 Kgs 20:35-43 it seems that an individual member of one of these companies was himself a prophet in the normal sense of the word, a bearer of divine revelation. This, however, is the only specific reference to such an activity.

Freeman (p.33) suggests three activities:

1. receivers of special instruction
2. leaders of public praise and worship
3. messengers, 2 Kgs 9:1 (anoints Jehu at the command of Elisha); 1 Kgs 20:35-43 (rebuke to Ahab)

2. Members of these companies came to be called "bene-hannebi'im" (בְּנֵי־הַנְּבִיִּים).

This phrase occurs 9 times in the OT (aside from the negative statement of Amos 7:14 where he said he was not a "prophets son").

All of these occurrences are between 1 Kgs 20 and 2 Kgs 9 in the time of Ahab to the revolution of Jehu (ca 974-841). (1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:3,5,7,15; 4:1,38; 5:22; 6:1) The NIV translates as "company of the prophets in 2 Kgs 2:3,5,7,15; 4:1,38; 5:22; 6:1.

In Biblical usage the term בֶּן can mean:

1. male child
2. descendent (cf Matt. 1:1)
3. member of a group

Certainly the expression does not mean these men were children of prophets, something like "preachers kids." It seems likely that the third meaning is the intended idea. These men belonged to the position or station in life of prophet.

Neh 12:28. "Sons of the singers" is to be understood as people that belong to a choir.

Ps 18:45 (18:44 ET). "Sons of the strangers" is to be understood as "strangers"

Ps 72:4 "The children of the needy" (NIV, NASB, KJV) most likely is to be understood simply as the "needy" (RSV).

By analogy to this we are to understand by the term "sons of the prophets" those persons who belong to the category or class of people known as prophets.

3. The term "school of the prophets."

It used to be advocated by some that the groups of prophets were to be understood as a gathering much like an educational institution, where all sorts of subjects were taught in connection with the law so that the theological and religious character of the law could be maintained and propagated. Young men could in this way be instructed by one of the great teachers in order to teach others what was learned. Besides instruction in the law other subjects such as history, sacred poetry and music were supposed to have been taught.

Even though this idea is an old one, it is found even in some targums (Aramaic translations of the O.T) there is no clear basis or evidence for it in the Scripture. The term itself (school of the prophets) does not occur, and there is nothing to indicate that prophets in general received a special training or education in order to be capable of performing their task or function. We do not read of any special education or instruction in connection with any prophet. They were called out of their normal work by God and given His message to give to the people. The prophet Amos for example was called from after the sheep to declare God's word (Amos 7:15).

1 Sam 19:20 - Samuel stood as their leader. 2 Kgs 4:38 - Elisha acts as a leader.

The prophets were not an ancient equivalent to present day theologians or seminarians.

The prophets were men and women who received their message directly from God.

2 Kgs 22:14, 2 Chron. 24:22 Huldah the prophetess dwelt in the Jerusalem college. KJV. **בְּמִשְׁכַּת** is usually translated second or double - never translated college in any other occurrence. Here it probably refers to the 2nd quarter of the city.

4. The companies of the prophets apparently lived in their own communities.

As we have noted there were groups of prophets in Bethel, Jericho, Gilgal, probably Gibeon (1 Sam 10:5) and Ramah (1 Sam 19:20). Some have suggested that the prophets lived together in some sort of cloister or abbey. Alleged evidence for this is that they ate communally (2 Kgs 4:38)

and that they constructed a communal housing structure (2 Kgs 6:2). Here they speak of a "place" in the singular.

One need not draw this conclusion however too hastily. The fact that the prophets ate together in Gilgal on this occasion does not prove this was customary. It was a time of famine, and Elisha invited the prophets to a meal at which they were fed in a miraculous way. The meal could easily have been eaten in the open air rather than in a building.

The term "place" in 2 Kgs 6:2 could be understood as a place where various dwellings could be built. The it would refer to a prophet neighborhood rather than a cloister or some sort. The phrase could also be translated "a place for us to sit" and merely be a reference to some type of assembly hall.

2 Kgs 4:1-7 implies that there were separate dwelling places for the members of the prophetic companies.

This means we should probably understand Naioth in Ramah as a prophet neighborhood. Naioth in the Hebrew text is related to a root that means to dwell or abide. From this root is also derived the noun naweh (נָוֵה) meaning abode or habitation. Thus it means "habitations." This seems more likely to be a complex of houses and a neighborhood where the prophets lived rather than one large building. Samuel then brought David to this prophet section of town in Ramah to protect him from Saul.

5. The degeneration of the prophetic function within the companies. It seems that slowly a degeneration set in with these groups of prophets. Possibly various people associated with the groups for material advantage, without having been called by God. Perhaps they were primarily concerned with the livelihood which various people provided for the prophetic companies. Elijah received twenty loaves of barley and full ears of corn (2 Kg 4:42). It appears that the groups of prophets lived from gifts of this sort. King Ahab had prophets in his service, who because they were dependent on him for their livelihood prophesied what they knew he would like to hear (1 Kgs 22:6ff, esp 8,18). Micah speaks of prophets that "if one feeds them they proclaim peace, if he does not they prepare to wage war against him." (Micah 3:5, see also vs 11).
6. The canonical prophets are distinguished from these companies

There is no evidence that any of the great prophets (writing prophets) belonged to a group or guild of prophets. Nor do we read of any one of

them receiving money or a livelihood from the people. In fact it appears that Amos explicitly rejects being considered part of a prophetic group.

Amos came from Tekoa, of Judah. When he preached at Bethel in the northern kingdom, he was told by Amaziah the priest there : "Get out you seer Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do you prophesying there" (Amos 7:12).

Amos responded indignantly "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees" (7:14)

There is difference of opinion, however, over this translation. The reason is that there is no verb and the tense has to be taken from the context.

Those who suggest a past tense (KJV, NIV) understand Amos to be saying the he has not made himself a prophet, but God called him to the task. Amos is saying that he was just a common farmer, but then God called him to the prophetic function. Amos is thus not denying that he is a prophet, he only wants to say he was not this originally.

Others (better in context) understand the purpose of Amos' statement differently and prefer a present tense translation (NASB, New Schofield). In this view Amos is saying to Amaziah I am not a prophet in the sense in which you understand, namely someone who prophesies in order to earn his bread. Remember Amaziah had said, " Go back to the land of Judah and earn your bread there." As far as Amaziah is concerned, a prophet is someone who does what he does for his livelihood. But Amos responds by saying "I am not that kind of a "prophet", and I am not "the son of a prophet" either. By this latter expression it appears that he is saying I do not belong to any group of prophets because I don't need to do that for my livelihood. I am a herdsman and grower of sycamore figs. I sustain myself in this way, so I have not become a prophet for material advantage. But the Lord came to me and said "Go prophecy to my people", and it is for this reason that I am here in the temple at Bethel.

Amaziah's remark betrays the presupposition that to him a prophet was in the business for money. Amos responds, I'm not that. I am a herdsman.

If this latter understanding is correct then it suggests several things:

1. In those days "prophesying" had become a certain type of livelihood.
2. Amos wanted it clear he was not such a prophet.

3. Amos is not denying he is a prophet in the proper sense of the word, but that he has nothing to do with the "prophets" which both he and Amaziah were familiar.

G. The canonical prophets, or writing prophets.

Amos was one of the so-called great or writing prophets in Israel. The term writing prophets is used of those who have given us a writing bearing their name in the OT canon. Thus the writing prophets are the same as the canonical prophets.

These labels or categorizations are useful, but are both open to misunderstanding. For example, we know that there were prophets who wrote, whose writings have not been preserved in the canon. Chronicles speaks of the writings of the prophets Ahia, Iddo, and Elijah (2 Chron 9:29; 13:22; 21:12).

The term "canonical prophets" is also a somewhat deficient designation because it does not include the historical books (in Jewish tradition known as the former prophets, Jos-2 Kgs) within its category. Certainly the historical books are prophetic in nature in that they present a divinely inspired interpretation of Israel's place in the unfolding of the history of redemption.

(inspiration test for canonicity - a major test for inspiration was acceptance of the book by the community of God's people, ultimately self authentication is the test of canonicity)