

V. The preaching of the prophets

A. General remarks

1. The prophets were first and foremost proclaimers of God's word.

The prophets received their divine revelation not to keep it to themselves, but to proclaim it to others. They did this primarily by preaching. Their books are to a large degree a written record of their oral proclamations.

The idea that they customarily delivered their proclamation in an ecstatic condition as some assert must be rejected. They delivered their message in words that were understandable and from what indications there are in Scripture it was delivered in a sober and normal manner of speaking. That they were sometimes considered in the eyes of the people as strange is not sufficient evidence for advocating ecstatic means of proclamation.

2. The message of the prophets was a faithful proclamation of God's revelation but not to the exclusion of a personal element in the form of its presentation.

The question can be asked, what is the relation between the revelation and the proclamation of it by the prophets. Here one must not place a division or tension between the revelation and the proclamation. The preaching of the prophets was a faithful representation of what God revealed to them. Yet the personal element of the individual prophet is utilized in this representation. This accounts for the differences in language, style and choice of words, as well as personality traits that can be found in the different prophetic books. It is clear that Jeremiah was a very different sort of person than Amos or Isaiah. Amos by his word choice shows himself to be of agricultural background. Jeremiah is obviously a very sensitive man, while Isaiah lets us see little or nothing of his inner personality. He is someone with strong character and an exalted literary style. Many differences of this type can be seen.

It is to be admitted that there is an element of mystery here that cannot be fully analyzed or explained.

Cf., Vos, "Idea of Biblical Theology," p. 14 (CC p. 7).

B. Some formal characteristics of the prophetic proclamation.

1. Their messages are direct and living, not abstract and dry.

The prophets did not give dry formal addresses, but spoke in a vivid and forceful way to the conscience of their audience.

Examples:

Jeremiah 7; the temple sermon of Jeremiah
Joel 2:3-11; description of plague of locusts
Nahum 2:4-13; description of fall of Nineveh

2. The prophets often use a play on words to get a point across.

Isaiah is particularly strong in this.

Example: Isaiah 5:7:

בִּיקֹר לְמִשְׁפָּט וְהִנֵּה מִשְׁפָּחַ

לְצַדִּיקָה וְהִנֵּה צַעֲקָה:

NIV: And he looked for *justice*, but saw *bloodshed*;
for *righteousness*, but heard *cries of distress*.

KJV: And he looked for *judgment*, but behold *oppression*;
for *righteousness*, but behold *a cry*.

Example: Isaiah 7:9

אִם לֹא תִאֱמִינּוּ כִּי לֹא תִאֱמָנוּ:

KJV: If ye will not *believe*, surely ye shall not be *established*.

NIV: If you do not *stand firm in your faith*, you will not *stand at all*.

Example: Jeremiah 23:33 (following LXX and Vulgate; cf., NIV ft. nt)

"When one of this people or a prophet or a priest ask you, 'What is the LORD's *burden*?' Then you shall say to them 'You are the *burden*!' And I will cast you off says the LORD."

The Hebrew text presupposed by LXX:

מִה־מִשָּׂא יְהוָה וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם אַתֶּם הַמִּשָּׂא

MT, KJV, NIV

. . . what is the burden of the LORD? Thou shalt then say into them "What burden?"

אַת־מִה־מִשָּׂא

The prophet uses the word burden in two senses. In the first occurrence it means a "message" of the LORD. In the second instance it means a "weight" or "burden." And when the mockers come to Jeremiah and ask for the "burden" (message) of the LORD, then the prophet is to answer that they are the burden (weight) that weighs heavily on the LORD, but he is going to cast them off.

LXX: "And if this people or the priest or the prophet should ask, 'What is the burden of the LORD?' Then you shall say to them, 'You are the burden, and I will dash you down saith the LORD.' "

3. The prophets often utilize poetic expression.

Prophetic discourse is often cast in poetic form. Great sections of the prophetic books are poetry. One of the most important characteristics of Hebrew poetry is parallelism of various kinds. In parallelism each verse consists in 2 parts in which the second part either repeats, reverses or builds on the thought of the first part in different words (synonymous, antithetical, synthetic parallelism).

Notice Isa 2:2 ff. The KJV does not reflect the poetic structure in its typeset, so the reader is not assisted in noticing the parallelisms.

Read in NIV: Isa 2:2ff.

Isa 55:6ff

4. The prophets often use imagery or figurative language.

Isa 28:1-4 has a few examples. Read in NIV. Samaria is referred to as a crown on the head of a drunken man. Assyria is spoken of as a hail storm of destruction.

The figurative language here is rather clear. In other places it is not always easy to tell whether a specific statement is intended to be taken figuratively or literally.

An extended and elaborate use of figurative language is found in allegory, which was also occasionally utilized by the prophets.

Isaiah 5:1-7. Israel is pictured as the LORD's vineyard. The vineyard has been cared for by the LORD. But in place of good grapes it brought forth worthless ones. In place of justice, bloodshed.

Ezekiel also uses some beautiful allegories. One of these is the lament of Ezekiel over the trade city of Tyre. Here the city of Tyre is pictured as a great merchant ship on the sea. Ezekiel 27 - Read from NIV.

C. Some characteristics of the content of the prophetic proclamation.

1. The prophets do not bring a new religion or morality.

What they preach is not something they have newly discovered. Their message is not distinguished by entirely new religious concepts. Their primary emphasis is to turn the people back to what God had previously revealed to Israel. There is a deepening and further development in some instances of what was previously revealed, and the progress of redemptive history is made clearer by their prophecies, so that we can speak of progress, but not of essential change in the revelation of God by the prophets. The prophets were not the great innovators who established the idea of ethical monotheism.

2. The message of the prophets centers in four areas.

These are not easily separated and are inter-related, but emphases of the prophets can be classified under the element of the message which is predominant and stressed.

a. Religious or theological.

This includes teaching about God, his relation to his people, and warnings against idolatry and religious formalism.

1) General teaching about God

stress on his oneness, monotheism, one God alone.

stress on his power and sovereignty - he is the creator and maintainer of all things, he governs all things so that even the heathen world powers are obedient to his will

stress on his holiness and justice - he is a god that judges sin

stress on his love and mercy - he seeks out his people and even in his judgment there is mercy. He seeks by it to bring repentance and to turn his people back to a place where they can enjoy his favor.

2) General teaching about God's relationship to his people

Here the attention is directed toward the unique relationship that God sustained with his people, that of the covenant relationship (even though the term b'rith is not frequently utilized). B'rith occurs 65 x:

Isa 11x; Jer 23x; Dan 18x; Hos 5x; Zech 2x; Mal 6x. Not used in Oba, Joel, Jonah, Amos, Micah, Nahum, Zeph, Habakkuk.

Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, 17, (51ff; **CC p.7**). Hillers, Covenant, 140ff.

God revealed himself to Israel as the faithful God of the covenant. It is the covenant relationship which is behind:

The messages of warning and judgment which the prophets bring rather frequently

God's right to the worship and obedience of his people

God's covenant mercy which is seen in his gracious forgiveness and the preservation of a faithful remnant.

3) The prophets regularly call the people of Israel back to their covenantal obligations as they were described in the Mosaic law by warning against idolatry and religious formalism.

they condemn false worship, idolatry and heathen practices that were forbidden Israel

they preach against religious formalism that is not motivated by heart devotion to the LORD

b. Morality and social relationships

There is perhaps more attention given to matters of this sort than one might suspect.

The reason for this is that social relationships were seen in the closest connection with true religion. God's law had much to say about love for one's neighbor and what this entailed in daily life. True religion involves concern for and the practice of social justice.

The prophets thus find the basis for the widespread social evils in their day in apostasy from the LORD and a turning away from the obligations of the covenant.

The prophets speak out against such things as:

Materialism as seen in the exploitation of poor and weak for personal material gain. See Jer 22:13 (of Jehoiakim); Amos 8:4-6.

Misplaced values as seen in dress and manner of life. See Isa 3:16-26.

Corruption in the courts. Isa 1:23; 5:23; Micah 3:9-11 (cf. Ex 23:8; Deut 16:19).

c. Political issues

The prophets speak rather frequently on political issues.

In internal politics the relationship between the prophet and the king is of particular importance.

Kingship was established by the word of a prophet (1 Sam 8:7ff).

From this time forward the prophets brought God's word to the kings with a word of warning or rebuke (cf., Elijah/Ahab; Isaiah/Ahaz). On other occasions the kings

sought a word from the prophet (1 Kgs 22:5; 2 Kgs 19:2ff, Hezekiah, Isaiah; 2 Kgs 22:23ff, Josiah, Huldah).

Vos, 204: "To this kingdom-producing movement the rise and development of prophetism attach themselves. The prophets were guardians of the unfolding theocracy, and the guardianship was exercised at its center, the kingdom. The purpose was to keep it a true representation of the kingdom of Jehovah. It sometimes almost appears as if the prophets were sent to the kings instead of to the people" (CC p.7)

The prophets also frequently spoke concerning foreign relations.

They opposed alliances with heathen nations (Isa 30:1; 31:1). These frequently involved religious compromises, displayed a lack of trust in the LORD, and brought heathen influences into Israel. See 2 Chron 16:8; Isa 7:4-9; Isa 30:15.

The prophets also prophesied concerning the rise and fall of many nations round about Israel, and viewed all of these events as being directed by a sovereign God, the LORD of history.

The enemy powers, Syria, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon are seen as instruments in the hand of God to carry out his purposes of judgment on his apostate people. For this reason Jeremiah has no sympathy for any attempt to throw off the yoke of Babylon. God sent these people for judgment on Israel, but God also sent Cyrus "his servant" to overthrow the Babylonian power when it gloried in its own might.

d. Eschatology

In broad terms this is teaching in the Old Testament prophets that speaks of future judgment for the ungodly and future joy and peace for the godly under the rule of the Messiah.

As Freeman points out there are two streams of Messianic prophecy that develop out of the promise to Abraham ("I will make of thee a great nation . . . in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed").

The one stream emphasizes the a great future for the nation or kingdom of Israel, ruled over by the Davidic monarch, the Messianic King.

The other stream stresses the work of the Messiah as the suffering servant, to be slain on behalf of His people.

The prophetic books, then, contain prophecies concerning the kingdom that will be established in connection with the second coming of Christ, as well as prophecies concerning the work of the suffering servant, that were fulfilled in connection with the first coming of Christ.

At this point we will not discuss the problems concerning the framework within which we set these prophecies.