

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

The third major division of the books of the Old Testament is the Prophets. There are sixteen books in this section of the Bible, four of which (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel and Daniel) are called Major Prophets, based on their voluminous writings, as compared to the other twelve books, called Minor Prophets, which are shorter.

Prophets as spokespersons for God. The English word prophet comes from the Greek *prophetos* which literally means to “speak on behalf of another.” In Israel, prophets are men and women whom God raised up to speak his word to the people of their time in the rough and tumble of daily life. When we use the word prophet to refer to God’s spokesperson, the term can be applied to Abraham, Moses, Miriam (Ex 15:20), Nathan, Samuel, Deborah, Elijah, and Elisha.

In this third major section of the Bible, we are using the term prophet to refer to the *writing* prophets whose messages are written down and gathered together in a book that has their name. They lived in the eighth, seventh and sixth centuries B.C. and are remembered for communicating the “Word of the Lord” to the people. The titles of the books under individual names, such as Amos and Hosea, do not imply that they contain just the words of Amos and Hosea, but also words *about*, and in the *tradition* of, the prophet. In his book *Reading the Old Testament*, Fr. Lawrence Boadt writes: “Editors frequently added words taken from disciples of the prophet, or even unknown prophetic words that are similar in theme and which add to the thought of the prophet in whose book they are included. Even more dramatically, later generations who cherished the words of an Amos or Micah occasionally added new applications and comments from their own centuries to the collected words of the long-dead prophet” (p.313).

Called by God from diverse backgrounds. The prophets’ only claim to a hearing is that their message is not their own but God’s. In prophetic writings we will frequently come across the line: “The Word of the Lord came to me.” That is about the only thing the writing prophets of Israel and Judah have in common; otherwise, they differ vastly from each other in education, experience and

preaching emphasis. For example, Amos is a shepherd, Isaiah a palace advisor (Foreign Secretary to kings), and Ezechiel a priest. Prophecy is not an inherited vocation; there never is a house of prophecy as there is a house of kings. And prophecy is not restricted to a particular tribe or family, as Israelite priesthood is restricted to the tribe of Levi. Each prophet is personally called by God and sent to carry God’s Word to his people.

Focused mainly on the present. In his book, *From Genesis to Apocalypse*, Fr. Roland Fahey writes. “*The prophets were not primarily predictors of the future but commentators on the present. This is not to say that there was no future component to their oracles; there certainly was, but their primary concern is with the prevailing situation. They did not live in a state of prophetic rapture. From the evidence it can be said that they led normal lives until that moment when they realized that “the Word of the Lord came” to them. The prophetic psychology involved some sort of insight into a revealed truth that then found expression in a personal way, such as figures of speech and symbolic action*”(p. 125).

A preached message. The writings of the prophets are a *preached* message before becoming a written message. Fr. John Power writes: “*Because they were preachers, their chief aim was to move an audience to action. They did not offer arguments or proofs; they presented God as a just God, a loving God, an almighty God, and they flung his holiness in the face of the people. Again, because they were preachers they used all the tricks of the preacher’s trade—flights of oratory, parables, paradoxes and puns. They exhorted, threatened, coaxed—and insulted their hearers. They stormed the will with a torrent of words and images, and often they underlined their words with dramatic gestures and symbolic actions*” (Set My Exiles Free, p.112).

Fidelity to the Sinai covenant. The focus of the prophets’ message is fidelity to their nation’s covenant with God. The two big sins that they constantly condemn are idolatry and social injustice. In their preaching, words of condemnation are often called “oracles of woes,” and words of encouragement are “oracles of salvation.”

A message of hope. If we were to read only sections of the prophets, we might come away thinking that they were prophets of doom. A close reading of these writings leads us to see that there is always a ray of hope surrounding their gloomy predictions. This ray of hope has three forms, all of them facets of the same central truth:

- Survival of a chosen purified group usually called a “remnant.”
- The coming of a triumphant liberator, a Messiah.
- The universality of the salvation that this Messiah will bring. He will be a liberator not merely of Israel but of all humanity.

Prophets’ gift to Israel and Judah. Commenting on the prophet’s gift to Israel (Northern Kingdom) and Judah (Southern Kingdom), Fr. John Power writes: *“The prophets looked out over human history with the eye of faith. They saw, underneath the ups and downs of daily life, the finger of God tracing a pattern of events that would finally lead men back to him. They kept alive the hope that great things lay in store for men. Even in the darkest hours, they pointed to a messianic dawn. They were men who received no recognition, no human gratitude, no recompense. They walked through a dark tunnel of hostility, but continued steadfastly to promise a golden era at the end of it, an era that not one of them lived to see”* (Set My Exiles Free, p.122).

Three groups of prophets. Chronologically, we speak of prophets in terms of three periods, according to their relationship to the Babylonian exile in the sixth century.

- ***Pre-exilic prophets:*** Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah (chs1-39), Micah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Obadiah.
- ***Prophets of the exile:*** Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah (chs 40-55), Lamentations, and Baruch.
- ***Post-exilic prophets:*** Trito Isaiah (chapters 56-66)Haggai, Zechariah, Trito (Third) Isaiah (chs 56-66), Joel, Jonah and Malachi.

You will notice that Daniel is not mentioned above. Nearly all scholars agree that the Book of Daniel does not belong among the prophets. It more suitably corresponds to the same period as 1-2 Maccabees – which is where I have placed it.

My commentary on each of the prophets will follow the above three groupings.