

*“Equipping believers for growth and service by encountering God through his word.”*

The Bible for Today

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# Who or What are Prophets?

- Moral and ethical innovators in Judaism?
- Great preachers?
- Moral philosophers?
- Raving ecstasies?
- Predictors of the future and end of the world?

A varying understanding depending on who you talk with....*but*....we can know their role and function in Israel and in the Bible with careful study.

# The Prophets of the Old Testament

- Former and Latter Prophets--TaNaK (historical books like Kings and Samuel and prophets like Isaiah and the Twelve)
- Major and Minor Prophets:
  - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel and “The Twelve”
  - The length of the writing gives designation, not their message

# Origin of Prophet

- Hebrew, *nabi* or *nebi'im*; Greek, *prophetes* (both men and women)
- *Nabi* meaning “to call, one who calls, one who is called;” other OT images/ terms: visionary, seer, man of God
- An integral part of Israel, but also known in other parts of the Middle East; in Israel both Temple prophets and those not involved in it
- OT prophecy seems to end after the Exile, but no clear ending of this role/ function in Israel

# Side Note: Early Christian Prophecy

- Important in the early church (Acts 2:14-21)
- Understood as one of the gifts of the Spirit
- *However....* False prophets began raising up in the early church, so tests to determine true from false (Mt. 7:15, 24:11, 24; Mk. 13:22; Acts 13:6; 2Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1; Rev. 2:20, 19:20, 20:10)
- Because of false prophecy, the church probably worked to suppress it and it died away as a normal part of the faith community

# The Nature of Prophecy

## Misunderstanding of the term:

- Old Testament context is not about “foretelling or predicting what is to come”
- An announcement of the future, but in their own context; to *speak for God* in their time and situations

## Spokesperson for God:

- Many prophets in the Old Testament; we hear *about them*, but in latter books we *hear God through them* (compare Elijah to Amos)

# The Nature of Prophecy

## Historical distance:

- We are removed from the religious, historical and cultural life of Israel; difficult for us to understand all that is said in its context

Difficult to understand eschatological references, cross cultural and historical contexts: *We were not there....*

# Activity of the Prophets

- Gave oracles/ messages at the direction of God
- To act like a prophet (from Hebrew verb); physically demonstrating the message
- Clothing, speech, and oracles (the main feature understood by people in society; society knew a true from false prophet)

# The Prophet's Theology: Foundational to ALL

- ❑ God's people were elected by God & are to have a special relationship with him via the covenant
- ❑ God's people refused to fulfill their covenant obligations by:

*Unethical behavior in how they live*

*Social and economic injustice against poor and powerless*

*Worshipping other gods*

*Disgrace in how they worship God; abuse in religion*

- ❑ Rebellion will be punished by God; although the nature & severity is not always known

God's final word however is: *HESED*

# Prophecy: Role & Function in Israel

## Covenant Enforcement Mediators:

- The covenant has blessing and cursing depending on obedience; Lev. 26, Deut. 4 and 28-32
- *Corporate blessings*: life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect & safety
- *Corporate curses*: death, disease, dearth, danger, destruction, defeat, deportation, destitution & disgrace

# Prophecy: Role & Function in Israel

## God's message, not the prophet's:

- God selected and called them, they did not seek the office or title
- The message is given as speaking on God's behalf; "Thus says the Lord..."

[Prophets often struggle with this calling and does not bask in what God asks them to do—cf. Jonah]

# Prophecy: Role & Function in Israel

## Direct representatives of God:

- The social reforms and thoughts of God are already in the Torah; the prophets were to remind society of what God said; they do not speak independently

## Prophet's message is unoriginal:

- Sharing the covenant message given to Moses by God in a new voice, but not new ideas; no altering or change of the Torah (cf. Hosea 4:2)

# True and False Prophets: Jer. 23:9-40

## False Prophet:

- ❖ Says what the people want to hear
- ❖ Speaks their own mind & do not listen to God
- ❖ Pacify the people; judgment will not happen
- ❖ Err in vision; they do not concern themselves with Torah—the message already given
- ❖ Their predictions do not come true
- ❖ Their message is not consistent with the Torah
- ❖ They personally live immoral lifestyles

# True Prophets

## True Prophets

- ❖ A forth-teller, not a predictor
- ❖ What they say will come true
- ❖ Stands in the council of God; personally connected to God
- ❖ Attempts to *turn the people* to God; toward obedience
- ❖ A guardian of the Mosaic Tradition & ethical monotheism
- ❖ High ethical standards
- ❖ Political patriotism is not equal to God's will

# The True Prophet's Message/ Oracle

- Usually in poetic form
- Often uses satire or actions to demonstrate or teach
- Messages are brief
- Presents a lawsuit against the people for disobedience to the covenant

Micah 6:1-8 & Hosea 4

The Never Ending Prophetic Question:  
*“How long will it be before you return to God?”*

# Prophetic Language Used

- Covenant
- Covenant loyalty—*HESED*
- Knowing, experiencing God, not just intellectually
- Torah (instruction/ teaching)
- Sin (missing the mark)
- Transgression (both individual & corporate)
- Iniquity (both individual & corporate)
- Return—*shub*
- Remnant will be connected to God
- “The Day of the Lord”— “The Day of Yahweh”

# Prophetic Periods

## Assyrian Era—8<sup>th</sup> Century BC

Amos (750 BC)

Hosea (746-735 BC)

Isaiah (742-700 BC)

Micah (700 BC?)

## Babylonian Era—7<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC

Zephaniah (640-609 BC)

Nahum (612 BC)

Habakkuk (587 BC)

Jeremiah (626-587 BC)

Obadiah (587 BC)

Ezekiel (597 BC)

Second Isaiah (550-539 BC)

Haggai (560 BC)

## Postexilic Era

Zechariah (520 BC)

Third Isaiah (500 BC)

Joel—uncertain

Malachi—uncertain

Jonah (400 BC)

## Highlight Passages:

- God's Steadfast Love: Hosea 11:1-11
- The Birth of A Savior: Micah 5:2-5
- Walking with God: Micah 6:6-8
- The New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-33
- Outpouring of the Holy Spirit: Joel 2:28-32
- The Servant Songs: Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-7, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12
- God's Care: Habakkuk 3:16-19

# The Bible for Today

- We have to be true students of God's word--disciples; we cannot simply be cursory or casual readers
- Invest some resources in suggested books for ongoing personal study
- Be careful to think our way of understanding a subject in scripture is the way without study; we must be scriptural students
- The prophetic message today: *We are called to repentance with God through Christ AND God loves us.*

# A Few Suggested Sources

- Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003)
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- Robert R. Wilson, “Prophet,” *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Paul Achtemeier, gen. ed. (San Francisco, California: Harper & Row, 1985)
- David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, Tyndale Commentary, Vol. 25 (Intervarsity Press: Illinois, 1989)