

INTRODUCING.....

THE PROPHETS

The Pilgrim's Guide to the Bible

No. 34

'The prophetic movement is the most astonishing phenomenon of the entire history of Israel.' (Hans Walter Wolff: *the OT, a Guide to its Writings.*)

The books of prophecy take us through to the end of the Old Testament. Beginning with the prophet Isaiah, and ending with Malachi, there are seventeen books of prophecy in the Old Testament.

What is a prophet?

In the OT, a prophet was God's spokesman. His task was to deliver the word of the Lord to the people, and he was appointed by God for this task. His message was generally relevant to his original audience – he was giving a message that they needed to hear. The idea that he was predicting the future is something which we can see with hindsight, but primarily, he was speaking to the people of his own time, reflecting upon the political/moral/social situation in which he was living.

The prophetic movement can be traced back as far as Moses and Aaron. (Exodus 4:14-16; 7:1-2). Moses himself serves as a prototype prophet - he was called by God; he served solely at the Lord's initiative; he delivered His message to the nation; he had the gift of interpreting historical events with a theological perspective; he was so immersed in his job that he saw it as his duty to make intercession on behalf of the nation; he combined the roles of proclamation and prediction - whilst addressing the present situation, he could also refer to future outcomes and implications.

The early history of the prophetic movement is found in the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings. Samuel himself was one of the great prophets. Nathan was a prophet during the reign of King David and delivered a very significant prophecy to the king,

which brought him to his knees in repentance. Elijah and Elisha were both active in the northern state of Israel during times of great evil and civil unrest.

The prophetic movement reaches its high point in the figures whose works are collected together in the books called “the later prophets” - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the twelve Minor Prophets (minor, only in so far as the books are short – their messages are profound). These prophets delivered messages both to the people of Israel and Judah and also to the surrounding nations. The later history of the prophetic movement is found in what is called apocalyptic literature, written on an epic scale, addressing the great issues of world history. The book of Daniel contains the most graphic example of this kind of prophecy, although the tradition continues through the inter-testamental period and appears again and very graphically at the end of the New Testament, in the Book of Revelation.

There are common themes amongst the prophets:

- They are called by God. They have a vision and hear the Lord’s voice. e.g. *“The words of Amos”, “the vision of Isaiah”, “the word of the Lord that came to Hosea”*.
- They have a personal encounter with God. (*Elijah - 1 Kings 19:12 – 13 “the gentle whisper”; Isaiah 6 ‘Here am I send me’*).
- They are sent by God. *“Go and say to the people,”* is a common refrain.
- They are clearly identified in time and place (Amos 1:1; 7:15). Information about the dating of events is essential, because we can only understand their message in relation to the moment in history in which it was first delivered.
- Their personalities are absorbed into the Lord’s activity in Israel: *And the LORD told Samuel: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.” (1 Sam 8:7); “When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD.” (Hosea 1:2)*
- They do not derive their message from their own desires and intentions. It is the Lord who overwhelms them. *“I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” (Jeremiah 1:6).*
- They do not become prophets in frenzy or ecstasy, but whilst fully conscious. They are just ordinary, working people (*Amos was a shepherd, Isaiah was a priest*). They listen, observe and answer. Each brings his individual gifts and personality to his work and accepts responsibility for his statements.
- Whilst addressing their present audience, they are also aware that there may be future implications to their message. They are announcing something that is radically new. The visions of Amos culminate in him seeing the end of the nation of Israel. Jeremiah is assured that the Lord’s word determines the future. They include warnings and calls to repentance. They point towards the promise of redemption, in terms of return from exile, and the message of the God who is coming. The Messianic hope - the promise of the coming Messiah originates with the prophets.
- They faced attack for making their stand. Often, they were lonely and

persecuted, and ridiculed. *'I have become a laughingstock all the day. Everyone mocks me.'* (Jeremiah 20:7)

Prophecy was intimately associated with politics from the start. The prophet's primary task was to deliver Yahweh's word for a specific situation. Under pressure, they could become the servants of nationalism - proclaiming what kings wanted to hear, rather than the word of the Lord. So we read about false prophets who existed alongside the prophetic movement. Individuals often broke away from mainstream prophecy when it ceased to be true to the Lord, to remain faithful to their calling. 2 Sam 12:1-14 - Nathan rebukes David. 1 Kings 18 - Elijah rebukes the prophets of Baal.

Jeremiah characterizes false prophets by saying that *"they commit adultery and walk in lies"*. (23:14) The life of the messenger reveals whether he is submissive to the Lord's will or is following his own designs. The decisive factor in determining true from false prophets is their relationship with the Lord. True prophets had independence of action. Micah says of the deceitful prophets that they *"cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths."* (3:5). He saw himself as empowered by the Lord to proclaim the truth, *'to declare to Jacob his transgressions and to Israel his sins.'* (3:8). Later, Jeremiah bemoaned, *"They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you'."* (23:17) For this reason, the true prophet is quite often the one who brings bad news. (Jeremiah 27 and 28).

The message of the prophets.

Prophecy was God's means of communication with His chosen people. Their basic themes could be summarized under two headings – judgment and hope:

- they call their hearers to turn to God in penitence, and renounce evil.
- they look forward to the coming of God as judge and redeemer.

How did they receive their message?

- Internal prompting; awareness of what God was doing as the result of their personal prayer, meditation, study, and observation; awareness of God's activity in the world. Amos condemns the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. Jeremiah gets inspiration by sitting in the potter's workshop and seeing there an analogy of God moulding His people.
- The prompting of the Holy Spirit. This is a more spontaneous method - being so overwhelmed by the Spirit that you feel compelled to say something. *Micah 3:8 'But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might.'*
- Visions and dreams. There are plenty of examples of prophets receiving direct

visions or dreams from God, which they felt compelled to share. Ezekiel - the vision of the dry bones. The Magi - warned in a dream not to go back to Herod.

How did they deliver their message?

- Through their speech: all types of style are used - narrative, poetry, psalms, sermons, allegory, and direct pronouncement to monarchs, individuals or nations. Their language was powerful. It influenced events. They were listened to.
- Through their lives: often the prophets were called upon to live out their message, e.g. the story of Hosea – told to marry a prostitute and forgive her, as a sign of God's willingness to forgive His people, who had 'prostituted' themselves to other gods. They were a visible sign to their audience of their message. At the very least, their lifestyle was a reflection of what they were called to proclaim.
- Through their actions: sometimes they used dramatic actions to reinforce their message, not just as visual aids, but deeds which proclaimed what God had done. They were also miracle workers. See Moses, Elijah, Elisha.

The prophets had to interpret and reinterpret their faith in the light of national events. The fall of Jerusalem and subsequent exile was a national and religious disaster. The prophets had to explain and understand God's promises in the light of the exile - especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They also spoke of the return of the exiles. After the return to the Promised Land, they were encouraged and enthused by prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah, and a new hope begins to emerge.

The Messianic Hope

Over the centuries, as the prophetic message developed, it provided the source from which arose the Messianic expectations of Judaism. Although individual prophets were writing for the people of their own time, their unfulfilled predictions were interpreted as meaning that the Lord would eventually break into world history, and bring about a new age of peace and prosperity. We see the origins of this expectation as early as the book of Deuteronomy:

'The Lord will raise up a prophet like me,' (18:15).

In 2 Samuel 7:16, Nathan promises David that his throne will last forever.

The Major Prophets, though warning of exile and destruction, also look forward to this future hope:

There shall come forth a shoot from the root of Jesse. (Isaiah 11:1)

I will raise up for David a righteous branch. (Jeremiah 23:5-6)

I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David. (Ezekiel 34:23)

It is this 'Messianic element' in the prophets' teaching that makes their message so relevant to Christians today. They show us how God is working his purposes out and point us towards the New Testament with God's chosen means of offering redemption to the world. No passage does this more clearly than Isaiah 53, which clearly points forward to Jesus and his sacrifice upon the cross:

²He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

³ He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.

⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his
offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

¹¹ After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify
many, and he will bear their iniquities.

¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53)

How should we interpret OT prophecies today?

The Old Testament prophecies are not easy to read, because unlike most other Biblical books, there is not a storyline, and they need to be understood in the context in which they were first delivered. A bit of background information is essential. However, they are rich in meaning and full of spiritual value for us today, and very often they can be read with several layers of meaning. Rather like peeling an onion, each layer has a different meaning. As you read the Books of Prophecy, consider the following questions:

- What is the date of the oracle? To whom was it written? What was the historical situation?
- What is the message that is being delivered?
- If Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecy, does it apply solely to him?
- Has this prophecy anything to say to us today in our situation?
- Is there a future fulfilment of the prophecy, a 'now but not yet', an apocalyptic angle within the message?

PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Prophetic movement is based primarily in the Old Testament, but of course, prophecy is not only mentioned, but is encouraged in the New Testament.

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:1).

There is a continuity between prophecy in the Old and New Testaments. The gospels begin with the stories of Zechariah and John the Baptist, both of whom stand in the same tradition as the OT prophets, and who herald the arrival of the Messiah.

The New Testament is the fulfilment and authentication of the message of the OT prophets. The OT prophets are raised to the level of proclaimers of eternal truth as we see their message verified in the greatest event of all - the coming of Christ. Jesus himself regards them as the 'heralds' who pointed towards God's activity in the world.

When we turn to the story of the early church, and the teaching in the New Testament Epistles, prophecy takes on a different type of organisation. Although

there are some figures who can be regarded as prophets, for the most part, it is the church, not individuals, which provides the basis of the prophetic ministry. Prophecy is still intended to be a part of the life of the church, and its main thrust is towards the building up, and edifying of the church, but the church is still given a clear prophetic role towards society.

The prophet Joel points towards a day when all believers, not just a chosen few, will prophecy:

'I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.' Joel (2:28-29)

Peter, in his great Pentecost sermon (Acts 2), considers Joel's prophecy to be fulfilled. All who belong to the community of faith may be used within the ministry of prophecy. Prophecy within the church tends to be directed towards its own membership or internal organization. It is used for the building up of faith, or for exhortations or reminders of the importance of remaining true to God. Some prophecy may be directed towards society and tends to have an ethical, or moral dimension (in the spirit of much OT prophecy), consisting of general warnings about life-style, truth, justice, social relationships.

The New Testament makes a distinction between the gift of prophecy and the role of the prophet. 1 Cor 12:10 lists the gift of prophecy amongst the spiritual gifts which are available to all believers, which may be granted by God at any particular time, for a specific reason. Prophecy is a part of the general witness of the church - one means of pointing humans towards God. It will focus upon what God is doing and saying in, to and through the church. So prophecy concerns what God is saying, not what humans are saying. An individual is normally given a specific message to deliver. (This could be an insight into what is happening - perhaps a wise comment at a meeting, or perhaps a more directly 'divine' message) 1 Cor 14:3 offers a neat summary of what prophecy is meant to be. 'He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.' They may be some individuals who are recognized as having the 'gift of prophecy' and hence are regarded as 'prophets', but perhaps more often, this gift of prophecy is be a one-off gift that God will give to an individual on a particular occasion.

The God-given intention of the prophecy is to help to build up and edify the church. Prophets have a role in revealing to the church God's direction in which it is to go.

It should be noted that prophets should be in full possession of their faculties, and able to restrain the impulse to speak in the interests of decency and in order.

Paul offers the Corinthians sound advice on how the gift of prophecy should be used:

What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at the most three – should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and

Speak to himself and to God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace – as in all the congregations of the Lord's people. (1 Corinthians 14: 26 – 33)

Prophecy is an essential gift but must always be exercised under the authority of God, for the purpose of the edification and building up of God's work.