

Old Testament

The Message, Form, and Background

by

with contributions by

Leslie C. Allen

John E. Hartley

John E. McKenna

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Survey

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William Sanford LaSor†

David Allan Hubbard†

Frederic Wm. Bush

James R. Battenfield

Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.

William B. Nelson, Jr.

Heythrop Library

114 Mount Street

London

W1K 3AH

UK

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CHAPTER 16

Prophets and Prophecy

In popular usage, a “prophet” is someone who can foretell the future, and “prophecy” means predictions of things to come. Although containing elements of truth, these popular definitions are by no means adequate for the biblical terms. Before studying the prophets we call “Major” and “Minor” (i.e., whose books are longer and shorter) we want to understand the biblical meaning of “prophets” and “prophecy.”¹

I will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses] from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Deut. 18:18

Names Used for the Prophet

Prophet. The most common term for the person and office is “prophet” from Greek *prophētēs*. It means, basically, “one who speaks for a god and interprets his will to man.”² The word is composed of two elements, the second of which means “to speak.” The first can mean “for, forth” and “beforehand,”³ so the word can mean either “to speak for, proclaim,” or “to speak beforehand,

foretell." A prophet, then, is a "forthteller" as well as a "foreteller"; both meanings are implicit, and both usages are found in the Bible.

The Hebrew term, which the Greek attempts to translate, is *nābî*. The derivation and basic meaning, long debated, now seem well established. The root *nb* means "to call," and its vowel-pattern supports the meaning, "one called."⁴ The prophet, then, was one called by God, and as seen in the Old Testament, called to speak for God. Thus the Greek term accurately describes the prophet even if it does not precisely translate the Hebrew.

Biblical usage is best illustrated in God's message to Moses, where Moses is likened to "God" and Aaron is described as his "mouth" (Exod. 4:15f.), and Moses is described as "God to Pharaoh" and Aaron is his "prophet" (7:1f.). The prophet is pictured here as God's mouth.⁵ This meaning is reinforced in the formulas frequently used to introduce or close speeches in the prophetic books: (1) the *messenger formula*, "Thus says (said) the LORD," links the prophet's words to Yahweh's in the same way that a message carries a dispatch verbatim from a king to a battle commander in the field; (2) the *message reception formula*, "the word of the LORD came unto me," stresses the divine source of the message and the consequent authority of the prophet; (3) the *oracle formula*, "says the LORD" (lit. "uttered of the LORD"; Heb. *nē'um yhwē*), has the same force.

"Seer" and Other Terms. The prophet also was called a "seer," meaning "one who sees in a vision." Two different Hebrew words are so translated and, it seems, are completely interchangeable. One passage (1 Sam. 9:9) indicates that the term "seer" was earlier and came to be replaced by "prophet," but if there was ever any clear-cut difference, it had become indistinct by Old Testament times.⁶

Other terms for the prophets include "man of God," "watchman," "messenger of Yahweh," and "man of the Spirit." These terms are actually descriptions of the prophet's activities, although at times they seem to have become titles. They add significant aspects to an understanding of the prophet.

Characteristics of the Prophet

Ecstasy. According to one widely held view, the prophets' major characteristic was ecstatic behavior:

We can now call before our minds a picture of the prophet's activity in public. He might be mingling with the crowd, sometimes on ordinary days, sometimes on special occasions. Suddenly something would happen to him.

His eye would become fixed, strange convulsions would seize upon his limbs, the form of his speech would change. Men would recognize that the Spirit had fallen upon him. The fit would pass, and he would tell to those who stood around the things which he had seen and had heard.⁷

In a few instances in the Old Testament a person was seized by sudden ecstasy. When King Saul was grasped by the Spirit, the people asked: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Sam. 10:11). But there are many more examples of prophets who exhibit normal behavior. One classic study has summarized prophecy like this: God "speaks to His prophets, not in magical processes or through the visions of poor phrenetics, but by a clear intelligible word addressed to the intellect and the heart. The characteristic of the true prophet is that he retains his consciousness and self-control under revelation."⁸ How revelation actually took place is a mystery. The forms vary from external and internal hearing to seeing objects that became catchwords like Jeremiah's almond branch and Amos' basket of fruit, to fantastic visions like Ezekiel's wheels and living creatures and Zechariah's flying scroll. What are more important than the means of revelation are the results: a prophet captured by God's word and compelled to declare it to God's people.

Call. The biblical prophets were certain not only that God had spoken to them, but also that they were called to speak God's message.⁹ In some instances, the call is described in considerable detail, and each account has distinctive elements not found in the others. Thus the call was an individual event, not a stereotyped formula used by prophets to validate their activity. Isaiah seems to have accepted his call willingly, while Jeremiah was reluctant and contended with Yahweh. Amos seems to have had a single call, while Ezekiel cites the day, month, and year of several occasions when the Lord called him and gave him a message.¹⁰ Any purely humanistic explanation that would interpret the experience of a call as merely a convergence of events or a subjective psychological experience is not consonant with the biblical data. Yet, God did use historical situations and personal circumstances in communicating with the prophets.

The descriptions of the call have at least two roles in the prophetic books. First, they validate the authority of the prophet as distinct from that glibly claimed by the false prophets. Second, they contain summaries of the main themes of the prophets' ministries.

Character. Peter, referring to prophecy, said: "Moved by the Holy Spirit saints of God spoke."¹¹ While biblical statements about the holiness of the prophets are rare, it is generally accepted that God would only use holy people as his prophets. One might argue that God saw fit to use those whose moral behavior was not always above reproach in other offices, such as Moses the lawgiver, Aaron the high priest, or David the king. But it is difficult to think

that Nathan would have had any effective word of reproach for David if he himself had been a man of unbridled passions. Still, it is closer to the biblical data to stress the prophet's wholehearted dedication to Yahweh and to the obedience of the covenant rather than his or her moral excellence.

Chronology of the Prophets

Before Samuel. Samuel sometimes is called "the last of the judges and the first of the prophets" (see Acts 3:24; 13:20). However, the term *prophet* is used also of a number of persons prior to Samuel. About all that can be deduced from the material may be summarized as follows: (1) the concept of revelation from God to a chosen servant (the basic element of prophecy) was familiar prior to Samuel; (2) since Moses is taken as the prototype of the prophet (see Deut. 18:18), his prophetic ministry should be taken into account in defining the prophetic task; (3) the idea that prophecy had diminished and then resumed with Samuel is implicit in Eli's reaction to Samuel's call (1 Sam. 3:7-9). The implications are quite significant, for studies of prophecy cannot begin with the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, or even the prophetic sayings of Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha. They certainly must include the prophetic ministry of Moses, and, probably, the prophetic elements in the patriarchs. Hosea seems to highlight the ministries of Moses and Samuel in this description of the historic role of Israel's prophets:

By a prophet the LORD brought Israel up from Egypt,
and by a prophet he was guarded. (Hos. 12:13)

Prophets

Prior to Samuel

Enoch (Jude 14)
"Holy prophets from the beginning" (Luke 1:70; Acts 3:21; Heb. 1:1)
Abraham (Gen. 20:7; cf. Ps. 105:14f.)
Moses (Num. 12:1-8; Deut. 34:10; Hos. 12:13)
Miriam (prophetess; Exod. 15:20)
Eldad, Medad, and the Seventy (Num. 11:24-29)
Deborah (prophetess; Judg. 4:4)

"Man of God" (13:6ff.)
Prophetic vision rare in the days of Eli (1 Sam. 3:1)
Monarchy [*ca.* 1075-931]
Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1) [time of Saul and David]
Gad (2 Sam. 22:5) [Saul and David]
Nathan (12:1) [David]
Ahijah (1 Kgs. 12:22) [Rehoboam and Jeroboam I]
Saul, David, Solomon; experiences with prophetic characteristics
Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun (Ethan) (1 Chr. 25:1)
Iddo (seer; 2 Chr. 9:29) [Solomon, Rehoboam, and Ahijah]
From division of the Monarchy to the Assyrian period [931-*ca.* 800]
Shemaiah (1 Kgs. 12:22) [Rehoboam]
Ahijah, Iddo (see above)
Hanani (seer; 2 Chr. 16:7) [Asa]
Jehu son of Hanani (1 Kgs. 16:1) [Asa and Jehoshaphat]
Elijah (17:1) [Ahab and Ahaziah of Israel]
Elisha (19:16) [Ahab-Jehoash of Israel (860-*ca.* 795)]
Micaiah ben Imlah (22:4) [Ahab]
Jehaziel and Eliezer (2 Chr. 20:14, 37) [Jehoshaphat of Judah]
Zechariah (24:19) [Joash]
Unnamed prophet (1 Kgs. 20:13) [Ahab]
Unnamed prophet (2 Kgs. 9:4) who anointed Jehu
"Sons of the prophets" (1 Kgs. 19:10)
"False" prophets (ch. 13; etc.)
Eighth-century [*ca.* 800-*ca.* 675]
Jonah son of Amittai [Jeroboam II; 2 Kgs. 14:25]
Amos [Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II]
Hosea [before fall of Jehu's dynasty]
Micah [Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah]
Isaiah [Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah]
Oded (2 Chr. 28:9)
Seventh-century [*ca.* 675-597]
Zephaniah [Josiah]
Nahum [between 663 and 612]
Huldah [prophetess in Josiah's day; 2 Kgs. 22:14-20]
Habakkuk [perhaps shortly after 605]
Jeremiah [626-586]
Sixth-century [*ca.* 597-538]
Obadiah
Ezekiel [592-572 (or 570)]
(Daniel [605-538, or considerably later])
Isaiah 40-66 [*ca.* 550-538 (possibly later)]

Postexilic (ca. 538-ca. 450)

Haggai [520]

Zechariah 1-8 [520 and 518]

Joel

Malachi [between ca. 486 and 450]

Zechariah 9-14

Jonah

(Note: problems of dating and authorship of Jonah, Joel, and portions of Isaiah and Zechariah are discussed under the individual prophets.)

*Tenth and Ninth Centuries.*¹² With the call of Samuel, a new period of prophetism begins in the biblical account. Since it coincides with the inauguration of the Monarchy one may conclude that the prophet was specifically intended to serve as the voice of God to the king. The fact that the end of the prophetic activity of the Old Testament is approximately contemporary with the end of the Israelite kingdom would seem to support this view. The books of Samuel and Kings contain numerous pictures of kings consulting with prophets on battle plans and other political decisions, as well as of prophets confronting kings about their behavior and its consequences.¹³

The prophets of the Monarchy and early Divided Kingdom are sometimes called the "oral" or "nonwriting" prophets. This means that the Bible has no books which are solely the products of individual prophets of this period, such as a "prophecy according to Elijah." In contrast, the prophets of the later period of the Divided Kingdom are called "literary" or "writing" prophets. These terms are unfortunate, for they fail to elucidate the facts as derived from the Scriptures. On the one hand, one book (or two) bears the name of Samuel. (Whether he wrote it or not is beside the point.) On the other hand, one should not assume that the "writing" prophets set out to write books of prophecy. The evidence in the book that bears Jeremiah's name indicates that he was for the most part an "oral" prophet, and that the writing down of his prophecy was largely the work of Baruch (Jer. 36:4, 32). It is clear from their contents that most of the prophetic books were first spoken messages, written down later, perhaps by the prophet himself, perhaps by his disciples.¹⁴

Eighth and Seventh Centuries. Prophecy changed markedly in the eighth century. In general, the prophets of the tenth and ninth centuries were "advisors to the kings." They may have had prophetic messages for the people, but most evidence indicates that they counseled the kings, helping them discern the will of God, encouraging them to walk in the way of Yahweh or, more often, rebuking them for failing to do so. In the eighth century, the prophets, following Amos' example, turned their attention more to the people, the nation, or in some cases foreign nations. It seems unlikely that prophetic messages addressed to Edom, Tyre, Egypt, etc., were actually intended to be delivered to

and heard by the rulers of those nations and, if so, that they would have had any effect. More likely, they were intended for Israel, the people of God, in the contemporary generation, and even more, in future generations. The speeches to the nations served to teach their hearers lessons of Yahweh's universal sovereignty which showed itself both in judgment and salvation.

Along with this change of the object of address came the introduction of written prophecies. True, earlier prophetic speeches survive, such as Samuel's words to Saul and David, Nathan's rebuke of David, and the words of Elijah to Ahab or Jezebel. But with the eighth-century prophets came longer messages and collections that constitute books bearing the prophets' names. At the same time, the "sons of the prophets" were less prominent, perhaps having developed into a state-supported institution. They may have become the targets of the true prophets' criticism of "false" prophets (Mic. 3:5-8; Jer. 23:16-22).

A crisis had gripped Israel and Judah by the throat.¹⁵ Within the century, indeed within the lifetime of the eighth-century prophets and in some cases during their prophetic ministry, the northern kingdom would be brought to an end. God's judgment was about to be poured out upon the kingdom of Israel. The kings and the leaders were so enmeshed in sin that there was no hope of rescue. The prophets, therefore, sounded clear warnings, seeking to move the people to repentance. Inscripturation of the prophecies seemed to be a way to get the message to a wider audience, as well as to a future generation.

What had happened to Israel in the eighth century was used as an illustration to Judah, whose end would come at the close of the seventh and beginning of the sixth century (for example, Ezek. 23). The seventh-century prophets therefore shared a more urgent sense of judgment and issued a strengthened plea for repentance. At the same time, the element of hope for the remnant was sounded ever more clearly.

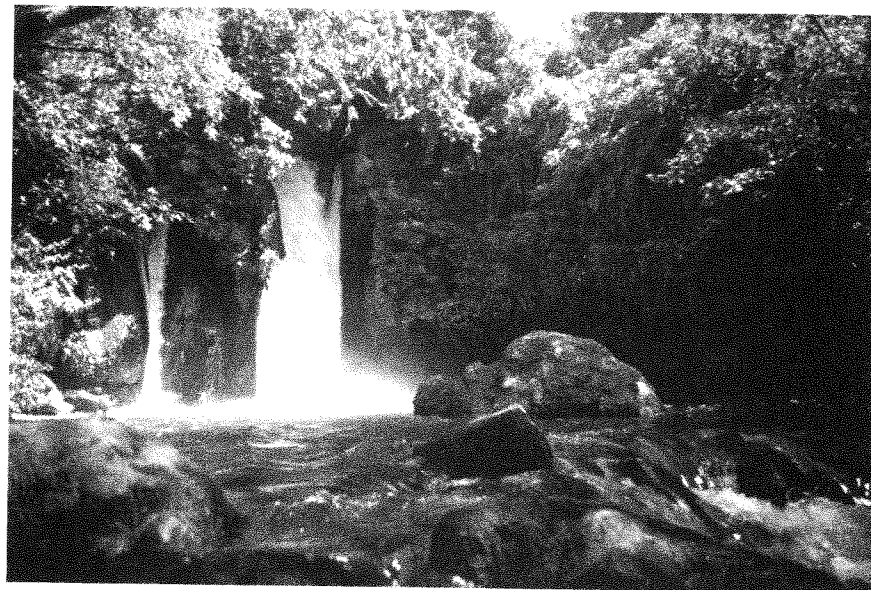
Exile and Postexilic Period. With the end of the southern kingdom and the destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.), the old way of life had come to an end. Many of the people were in captivity, needing hope and encouragement to begin again. They had to be reminded that Yahweh's covenant was still in force, and that he would complete his redemptive purpose in the world. Accordingly, these themes abound in the prophets of the sixth and fifth centuries.

At the same time, Israel's basic beliefs had to be enlarged so Yahweh could be seen as God of all nations, not of Israel alone. The revelation of his purpose, originally expressed in the covenant with Abraham (e.g. Gen. 12:2-3; 18:18), had to be made clear. Israel was to continue to be distinct from the nations (or Gentiles). Nevertheless, Yahweh's purpose was to bring the nations to worship him and learn his laws from Israel. As this became clearer, more references were made to the "latter days" or "those days." The study of events

leading up to and following the “end” of the age (eschatology) began to assume greater prominence.

Specifically, postexilic prophets encouraged rebuilding the temple, reestablishing the kingdom and throne of David, and resuming the formal worship that helped preserve Israel’s separate identity. But even this would not be the ultimate achievement of God’s redemptive program. Troubles, persecution, and even another destruction of Jerusalem lay beyond the immediate future. The temple was nothing like the previous temple in its splendor, and the nation was only a tolerated and insignificant bit of a vast Persian empire. These were not the glory-filled “latter days” that had been foretold. Accordingly, prophetic hope looked to still-future blessings. Apocalyptic elements were introduced, claiming that God himself would intervene to destroy Israel’s enemies and set up his king on Zion. There would be a time of judgment that would be a refining fire for Israel. Then would come an age of righteousness and peace. Having sounded that note, the prophets became silent.

This chronological sequence is reflected in the order of chapters in the *Survey*. It is important to try to grasp the message of each prophet in the context of his life. At the same time, we recognize that the books of the prophets have gone through a process of editing and revision that may have extended over decades or even centuries. In the long run, it is wise to put more emphasis



“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24); waterfall at Banias. (Neal and Joel Bierling)

on the books themselves than on the persons or experiences of the prophets. We know very little about the lives of the majority of them. But we treasure and ponder the results of their ministry as the community of believers, led by God’s Spirit, has preserved them for us in the books that bear the prophets’ names.

Prophecy

In general, there are two simplistic approaches to prophecy, one stressing the predictive element, the other featuring the message as applied to the contemporary situation. In biblical prophecy, both elements are present.

God’s Message to the Present Situation. By simply picking verses from the prophets and pasting them together to give “prophecies that prove the Bible” or “Jesus Christ in prophecy,” one creates the impression that prophecy is “history written in advance.” However, when one studies the prophets, this glamorous concept suddenly disappears. It is necessary to plow through chapters that have nothing to do with the future in order to find a single verse, or even part of a verse, that is “prophecy” in this sense.

A careful study of the prophets and their messages reveals that they are deeply involved in the life and death of their own nation. They speak about the king and his idolatrous practices, prophets who say what they are paid to say, priests who fail to instruct the people in Yahweh’s law, merchants who use false balances, judges who favor the rich and give no justice to the poor, greedy women who drive their husbands to evil practices so they can bask in luxury. All this is prophecy in the biblical sense. The shadow of Mt. Sinai, with its covenant law, tinges everything the prophets say. A prophecy is God’s message to the people and the leaders who rule them in God’s place. It is a message of judgment because God’s people are constantly in need of correction. At the same time, it is a message of hope, for Yahweh has not broken his covenant and will complete his redemptive task when the inescapable judgment has run its course.

God’s Message concerning the Future. God is never concerned with the present simply for the sake of that moment. Ever since creation, he has been working out his plan for humankind. And God never forgets where he is going and what he is doing. The prophets are let in on that purpose (Amos 3:7). Prophecy, therefore, is not simply God’s message to the present situation, but is designed also to show how that situation fits into the larger plan, how God will use it to judge and refine or comfort and encourage the people. Prophecy is God’s message to the present in the light of the ongoing redemptive mission.

On exceptional occasions, he gives rather precise details about what he is going to do. Yet even in "predictive prophecy," the prediction is almost always attached to the present situation. The prophet speaks about what has meaning for his listeners. He does not suddenly forget them and utter a detached "prophecy of things to come." Rather, he takes them from that moment into the sweep of divine redemptive activity and centers on a truth that will become a beacon to God's people.

Since God's redeeming purpose culminates in Jesus Christ, all prophecy somehow must point to Christ. In that sense Christ "fulfills" prophecy, or, rather, prophecy is fulfilled in him. While this may not be what is commonly understood by "fulfillment of prophecy," it is the definition properly derived from the biblical evidence.

Prophecy is a window that God has opened for his people by his servants the prophets. Through it one can see more of God's purpose in his redemptive work than would be possible otherwise. It gives a better understanding of what he has done for and with and through his people in the past, and a clearer comprehension of his purpose in the present. And, while it may never satisfy insatiable demands for specific details of the future, it nevertheless gives a clear view of where God's grace is taking humanity and what obligations therefore are laid upon his people.