

UNIT TWO: GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK WITH ISRAEL

SESSION TEN: THE PROPHETS

Summary of the Tenth Session of the Course

Who were they?

Early prophets in Israel were probably ecstasies – people who were seized by the spirit of God and thrown into a frenzy. See the story of Saul's prophesying among the prophets in I Samuel 10:9-13. We find also the idea of the prophet as a seer – one who foretells the future.

In the class, we discussed this idea of the prophet as seer, because that is the meaning popularly associated with the word prophet. Yes, Israel's great prophets did foretell what would happen in the future, but the foretelling itself was not the point, nor was their foretelling like that of an oracle. In the Greek play, *Oedipus Rex*, for example, the oracle tells Oedipus he will kill his father and marry his mother, and there is no way he can escape that fate. His attempt to escape it by fleeing leads him to tragedy. Israel's prophets are entirely different; they do not deal in fate at all. They are not crystal ball gazers with a direct line to God.

Actually, the prophets sometimes foretell the future, but they also interpret the past and the present. What they really do is speak Yahweh God's word directly to people in a particular time, place, and situation. In the previous session, we had seen the prophet Nathan deliver Yahweh's word of judgment to King David, who had murdered Uriah and married his wife, Bathsheba. In that story (see II Samuel 12), Nathan does foretell that the sword will never depart from David's house, but the foretelling is not the point. Nathan delivers God's judgment upon the king, and what might be called foretelling (an objective, dispassionate concept) is really the pronouncement of Yahweh's judgment, which is very subjective and passionate – very much involved with David as a person and Israel as God's people.

In this session, our main concern was with the great prophets – people such as Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Prophet of the Exile. In the past, they were often called the "writing prophets" because we have biblical books named for them, but scholars no longer assume the prophet who delivers the prophecies in the book is necessarily its writer. We now see the writing and editing process as much more complex than the simple matter of the prophet writing down his own words to preserve them.

Some of these great prophets may have been prophets by profession, but others were not. Amos makes a point of saying he is neither a prophet (professionally) nor a prophet's son.

The great prophets were people called by Yahweh God to speak God's word to the people. We looked at some of the calls related in the Bible: Isaiah 6:1-8, Jeremiah 1:4-10, and Isaiah 40:1-11. We discussed the last one, which comes in the middle of a prophetic book rather than at the beginning. Most scholars (except fundamentalists) now consider chapter 40 of Isaiah to be the start of material from a new prophet (not Isaiah of Jerusalem) in a new time and place: Babylon during the exile. Isaiah of Jerusalem lived and prophesied during the 8th Century B.C. The destruction of Jerusalem and beginning of the Babylonian exile came in 587-586 B.C. This prophet speaks to the Jews toward the end of their exile. So, either Isaiah is a very old prophet or we are listening to a new one whose name we do not know; we call him the Prophet of the Exile, and Isaiah, chapters 40-55 are called Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah. Chapters 56-66 are called Trito-Isaiah or Third Isaiah. Whether Third Isaiah contains the prophecies of a third prophet or the Prophet of the Exile is a matter of debate, and the identification of material in Third Isaiah seems even more complex than just that choice. Anyway, prophets spoke to particular people in particular times, places, and situations; and, in chapters 40-55, we have a new time, place, and situation – as well as a new and different message.

Briefly, we discussed the alternative. Some more fundamental scholars contend that God gave Isaiah of Jerusalem the word to speak for all times, meaning his later prophecies were foretellings in the extreme sense of being oracles neither he nor his listeners could possibly understand because they spoke to a situation that did not yet exist. The idea is that God wanted all this material written down for a future generation. This view violates the integrity of prophecy as God's word to people demanding their response in the present; it leaves us with a picture of a prophet preaching nonsense (in its own time). It also takes the edge off prophecy by having the prophet resolve God's judgment with a time of restoration before the judgment even comes. That's like making up before you have the argument: it takes away the possibility that the argument itself might actually change your attitudes and bring about more kindness and consideration. It neutralizes prophecy's impact upon people. Truly, God speaks to us where we are, not where we will be someday but are not yet. I am not saying God makes no promises for the future; God does indeed, but those promises are intelligible in the present and call us to change the way we think and live in the present. They do not resolve our problems before we even have them. Prophecy does not turn human life and history into a book already written.

The Prophet's Task

The primary task of the prophet is to deliver Yahweh God's word to the people for whom it is intended. The prophet not only interprets life and history from God's viewpoint and tells what will happen if the people do not change their course, but also sets the events into motion. That idea is hard for us, because we think of words as merely telling or describing, not causing events. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God's word creates or causes what it speaks. In Israelite thinking, even human words have a touch of this creative power, particularly such words as blessings and curses. We have already seen that aging, blind Isaac is unable to retract the blessing he has given his younger son Jacob, thinking him to be the older son, Esau. He cannot rectify his error because

the word of blessing has already been spoken and so has been put into effect. By speaking Yahweh's word to people in a particular time, place, and situation, the prophet sets in motion the events for which that word calls, whether they are to be events of judgment or salvation.

The secondary task of the prophet is often overlooked: the prophet must also speak to Yahweh for the people. So, the prophet must know Yahweh and, also, know the people; and, in the Bible, knowledge implies relationship and empathy. The prophet may not stand back and analyze his people without caring; he must immerse himself in their life and be one of them. He must know what they know; he must walk in their sandals. He must even learn to care about them and their lives more deeply than they do. The people, especially their leaders, often remain stubbornly unaware of what their true situation is in relation to Yahweh. They do not know or consider Yahweh as they make their plans. So, they are not troubled by the judgment that is coming upon them, but the prophet must be. It is his responsibility to plead with Yahweh for the people's life. In Ezekiel's terms, the prophet must step into the breach – the place where the wall is broken and the battle is raging. Martin Luther laid this same responsibility upon Christians called by God: to step into the place where the battle is raging. The prophet must care most about Yahweh God and almost as much about the people. About himself, he often does not have the luxury of caring very much. Here, we see how firmly Jesus stood in the tradition of the prophets. He was crucified in the breach. He hung between God and the people.

The Knowledge of Yahweh

Knowing Yahweh requires much more than knowing *about* Yahweh. This knowledge is relational. As comedians have noted and worked into their routines, the Israelites used the verb “to know” for conjugal relations: the man knew his wife, and she conceived and bore a child. To know anyone is, in this language, to be personally and sometimes intimately involved with that person. To know Yahweh God is to think and feel along with God, admittedly on a limited basis. The prophet became caught up in the turmoil of God: Yahweh's deep love for his people and bitter disappointment in them, Yahweh's grief at their insistence on bringing judgment down upon themselves, Yahweh's joy at their return. The prophet had to know and feel Yahweh's hatred of injustice and oppression, Yahweh's compassion for the poor and afflicted, and Yahweh's rage at the leaders who abused their power and turned their people from God. The prophet had to learn to care about the things God cared about, to see situations from God's point of view, and to want for the people what God wanted for them – even beyond judgment and destruction. To bring Yahweh's word to bear upon life and history, they had to know their God.

Being a prophet was no part-time job. Hosea had to marry a harlot and have children with her, because Yahweh loved a harlot (Israel) and fathered children of harlotry with her (the people of Israel). Amos had to defy the king and speak what was viewed as treason in the royal sanctuary at Bethel. Jeremiah, more than anyone, had to go against his own nation and appear to be a traitor.

The Prophetic Compulsion

The prophets were not volunteers (despite Isaiah's, "Here am I; send me."); they were compelled by God to speak the word to the people. Jeremiah even says he tried to hold it in and not speak it, because it brought him nothing but grief and misery, but he could not. We read Jeremiah 20:7-9 where he says so and complains about Yahweh's having forced him to become a prophet against his will. We also read Amos 3:3-8, which is less contentious but speaks of the compulsion nonetheless: "The Lord Yahweh has spoken; who can but prophecy?"

The Prophetic Message

Because the prophet speaks Yahweh's word to particular people in specific times, places, and situations, there is no single prophetic message. The prophets are not teachers of general religious truth nor preservers of religious tradition. On the contrary, they often speak against religious truth and practice as they are being abused by the current worshipers and leaders.

Still, we can find some constants within (or behind) the various prophetic messages, even if they are not applied with the consistency we expect from doctrine. We discussed the apparent inconsistency of parental love (the constant) in dealing with real, live children. At one time, parental love speaks soothingly and reassuringly; at another, it speaks angrily and harshly. The love is constant but must speak differently in different situations. There are times to be flexible as a parent and times to be firm. Sometimes the parent may seem to be a friend, but at other times the parent must be the parent, not the friend.

We looked for some constants. I suggested Yahweh's love for the people as the greatest one. Yahweh gets angry because of this love, is grieved because of it, and refuses because of it to give up the people to their own chosen paths toward self-destruction. Yahweh's hatred for injustice and oppression is another constant. Yahweh's insistence upon being Israel's only God is another, as is Yahweh's contempt for phony religion used as a coverup for greed and injustice. Yahweh disdains all human power and pride but has compassion and respect for the humble. Yahweh's judgment and right to judgment over all things human is definitely a constant, but so is Yahweh's longing to forgive and restore the people.

Two Types of Sin

The two types of sin condemned by the prophets may be represented by Amos and Hosea, the two great prophets to the northern kingdom, Israel. Amos rails against injustice and oppression, whereas Hosea focuses on Israel's abandonment of Yahweh in worshiping the Baals (and in worshiping Yahweh as though he were a Baal). These two general categories of sin correspond to the two commandments Jesus brings together (from the Old Testament) as the summary of the torah: You shall love the Lord (Yahweh) your God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength; and you

shall love your neighbor as yourself. The one kind of sin is committed directly against Yahweh and is the rejection of God's love and mercy. The other kind is committed against Yahweh by violating the neighbor and is a rejection of Yahweh's love for that neighbor.

Prophets of Doom and of Salvation

The phrase "prophet of doom" refers popularly to anyone who speaks negatively and casts gloom over other people's optimism. Most of the great prophets were prophets of doom because they spoke God's judgment upon the people who would not turn back and be forgiven. Yahweh, however, is a God who repents (as strange as that may sound to us), and Yahweh would always rather forgive and heal than punish and destroy. Here, again, we see that the prophets do not merely foretell the future. Even when they foretell the doom to come, the hope is that their words will turn the people around and bring them back to Yahweh.

The clearest example of a prophet of salvation is the Prophet of the Exile (Isaiah 40-55). His message told of Yahweh's intention to lead the Jewish exiles home again and restore them to being Israel, the covenant people. His task was to overcome their cynicism and discouragement with hope and trust in Yahweh. He too speaks harshly at times, because the people refuse to believe and let themselves hope again.

Because Yahweh is faithful, the promise is never lost, not even in times of judgment and destruction. As they pronounce doom upon the people, the prophets also look beyond the judgment to a time of renewal – and, more than renewal, of much greater fulfillment of Yahweh's desire for the people and for the entire created order. We call these prophecies "eschatological" – a term that literally means "of the last things" but which refers in theology to the promises of the kingdom of God, of a new creation, of a time of unopposed peace and well-being. The Old Testament speaks of this time as "that day." "When that day comes," is a frequent lead-in to such prophecies. When that day comes, Yahweh's love, justice, and mercy will reign unopposed in all the world and in the human mind and heart. Yahweh will give the people a new spirit and a new heart (a heart of flesh that is responsive to God's love), and he will write the torah on their hearts (wills). The stump of the cut-down tree of the house of Jesse (David's father) will produce a new branch – a new anointed one (*messiah*) – who will restore Israel to Yahweh, bring peace to the earth, and even usher in a new natural order (where "they will not hurt or destroy"). Then "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea." Then, there will be a great feast – the eschatological banquet – and death will be removed forever, and there will be no more tears or shame.

Unfinished Business

We did not have time to talk about the false prophets or the cessation of prophecy in Israel. False prophets are those who speak "'Peace, peace,' (*shalom, shalom*) were there is no peace," and

who treat the people's deep wounds lightly, superficially. They are the court prophets who prophesy whatever the people and their leaders want to hear. They pronounce God's blessing upon the *status quo* of the society and assure the nation Yahweh is firmly on its side. False prophets are always popular, and they make real prophets sound like cynics and traitors. Real prophets may be scarce, but false prophets are with us always, and today they have TV shows. They support those in power, and to the poor they preach only loyalty (to those in power) and personal morality, but never justice.

There came a time in Judah when anyone with a little too much wine in him could pass himself off as a prophet. Between the court prophets and the self-styled ranters, real prophecy had little chance of being heard. How were people to distinguish one prophet from another when both declared, "Thus says Yahweh"? How are people to distinguish one Christian preacher from another today? Which Yahweh did a prophet represent (real or false)? Which Jesus is being proclaimed?

During the time between the Old and New Testaments, prophesy passed into apocalyptic, such as we find in parts of Daniel, in sections of the gospels and epistles, and in the book of Revelation. So, it became more a literary production than a word spoken directly to a human situation, and it became cryptic under the watchful eyes of tyrants.

Another Question

After the class, some of us got into a conversation about interpretation. Because the great prophets spoke God's word to particular people in a particular time, place, and situation, what do the prophecies mean to us? We are not those people, and we do not live in their time, place, or situation.

Clearly, the priests of Judaism believed the prophets' words continued to speak God's word to the people, because they preserved the prophetic books as scripture. The rabbis agreed. So have Christians. Indeed, it would be almost impossible to hear Jesus or know him rightly without the prophets.

The process of interpreting an 8th Century B.C. prophet to 21st Century A.D. people is known as *hermeneutics* (from the Greek word for methods of interpretation). The same process applies to hearing Jesus' teaching today, even if that task seems easier on the surface. My own contention is that, the more we learn of the prophetic works, the easier it becomes to hear them speak to us. People have not changed much since the 8th Century B.C. nor have human situations, except in their more superficial details. As we learn their language (their way of speaking, not Hebrew itself – although we have to learn from people who do know Hebrew), their customs, their historical situations, and their traditions, we understand them better and better. We also find it easier to "listen for God's word to us" through the prophets. The Bible still speaks for God to us, in the Old Testament as well as the New, and the New is greatly impoverished (even perverted) without the Old.

If we had time in this course to study specific prophetic books and passages, we could make the connections from their time to ours. This task belongs to preaching and teaching in the church, and it belongs to each of us in private study. Some passages are easy. Who can hear Amos thunder for Yahweh that God is sick of the people's worship and sacrifice because there is no justice in the land nor any integrity without making the connection too our own times? "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an unfailing stream!"

No one, however intelligent or educated in other disciplines, can simply read the Bible with any real hope of understanding it. Thankfully, many people have committed their lives to studying it and have shared their learning with us. In recent decades, the rate of learning in biblical scholarship has accelerated tremendously. One remaining problem is that most of the help available is written by scholars for scholars, not for lay people; and much of the material available in Bible book stores for lay people is worthless at best. There is a great void. Actually, the greater gap we need to bridge may not be the one between Amos and us but the one between the biblical scholars and intelligent, interested people trying to listen to the Bible for the word of God.