

03. Prophecy in Ancient Israel



Prophets (Hebrew *Nevi'im*).

The 'Former Prophets' comprise 6 scrolls:

Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings and 2 Kings.

The 'Latter Prophets' are prophets whose oracles have come down to us in the scrolls that carry their name. These comprise 4 Scrolls:

1. Isaiah 2. Jeremiah 3. Ezekiel,

4. the Twelve Minor (shorter) Prophecies:

8th century BC: Amos, Hosea, Micah

7th century BC: Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk,

6th century BC: Haggai, Zechariah

5th century BC: Obadiah, Malachi, Jonah, Joel

The Greek word **prophêtês** means ‘one who proclaims’.

From their communion with God prophets proclaimed to the people what they understood as God’s will.

The prophet is to listen and proclaim
to see and enlighten

‘Son of man, I have made you a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall **enlighten** them from me’(Ezekiel 3:17 **zhr**).

The prophets saw themselves as part of a prophetic tradition the beginnings of which are lost in the mists of pre-history.

There are two main 'prophets' in the Torah

Abraham is called a prophet'(Genesis 20:7), and in Genesis 18:2 we are told that he 'stood before YHWH'.

Hosea speaks of **Moses** as a prophet (Hosea 12:13), and in the community there was an accepted trust that YHWH would continue to raise up prophets like Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:15-18).

'You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do'(Jethro to Moses, Exodus 18:19-20).

Prophecy as a common phenomenon in the Ancient Near East

‘I lifted up my hands to Baalshamayn, and Baalshamayn answered me, and Baalshamayn spoke to me through seers and messengers; and Baalshamayn said to me: Fear not because it was I who made you king, and I shall stand with you, and I shall deliver you from all these kings who have forced a siege upon you.’

‘I, Ishtar, will go before you and behind you. Fear not’.

‘Fear not, Ashurbanipal! Now, as I have spoken it will come to pass. I shall grant it to you. Over the people of the four languages and over the armament of the princes you will exercise sovereignty.’

Prophecy as a common phenomenon in the Ancient Near East

{The kings} of the countries confer together:

Come, {let us rise} against Ashurbanipal ...

Ninlil answered: {The kings} of the lands I shall overthrow,
place under the yoke, their feet in {strong fetters} ...

Fear not! As she that bears for her child, so I care for you;
I have placed you like an amulet on my breast.

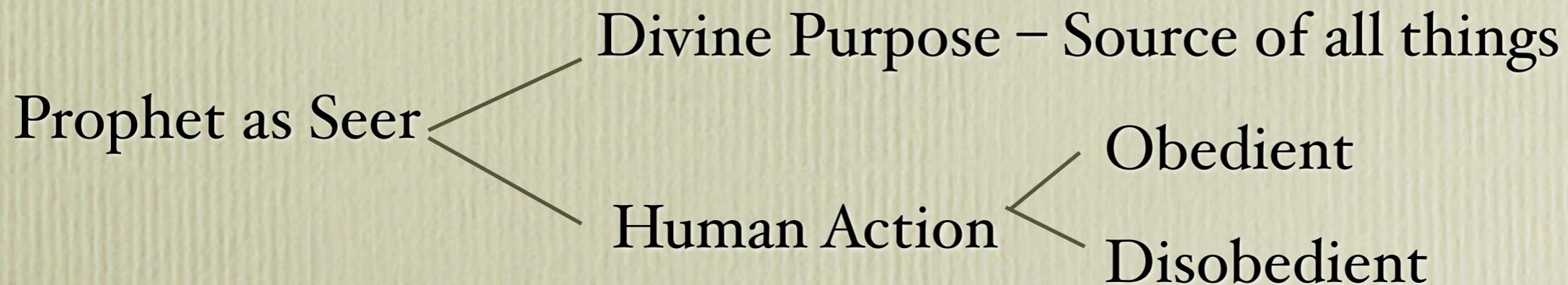
Fear not, my son whom I have raised.'

Balaam in Numbers 22-24

Future predictions and divine-human interaction

At first glance this appears simple.

- God knows everything.
- God can know ('see') the future.
- God can reveal the future to his prophets.



Future predictions based on intelligent observation

(eg., build-up of military; problematic alliances; social unrest)

‘Predictions’ written back into the text in the light of what actually happened.

1 Kings 13 - Josiah to reconquer the north

Genesis 9:25-27 - Noah on relationship between Shem and Canaan

Genesis 15:13-16 - YHWH's promise to Abram

Genesis 49:1-27 - Jacob 'foretells' destiny of his sons

Numbers 24:14-24 - Balaam's 'oracle'

Unfulfilled predictions

The triumph of the Davidic dynasty. A reunited Israel and Judah [Isaiah 11:12-14]. Ezekiel's declaration [26:1-14, 21] that Nebuchadnezzar would destroy Tyre proved wrong. Ezekiel 29:17-20 went on to declare that Yahweh would give Nebuchadnezzar Egypt instead, but this did not eventuate either. Elisha predicted that Israel and Judah would capture the king of Moab. In fact, however, he sacrificed his eldest son to the god of Moab and defeated Israel's army [2 Kings 3].

Perhaps the key insight needed to understand prophetic 'predictions' is to recognize that when Old Testament prophecy is concerned with future events on the human plain, it is presented and understood with an implied or expressed condition.

If people ignore the truth they will have to suffer the consequences. If they listen to God's word, they will enjoy the consequent blessing.

The prophet's inspired vision penetrates beyond the horizontal plain of historical events.

The prophet is primarily concerned with the overarching providence of God which transcends the plain of human decision but is always present to it, gracing it.

God's purpose transcends human decision and indecision, as does God's promise for the future.

Whether or not we will enjoy God's blessings depends on whether or not we choose to respond to grace.

But independent of our response, God's providence covers our future. It is God's grace which now and in the future inspires both our actions and our will to do them.

Prophecies of warning ('curses') were primarily faith-statements.

They reminded the listeners

of who God is,

of the fact that God's judgments are just,

and of God's 'anger', that is to say, God's passionate concern for repentance and passionate determination to right what is wrong.

On the human, historical plain, they functioned as warnings to bring about repentance, lest evil bear its rotten fruit.

Prophecies of blessing were also primarily faith-statements.

They reminded people of God's transcendent, loving providence.

In addition they were hope-statements, encouraging fidelity and obedience so as to establish the conditions in which God's will could be realised, and God's blessing enjoyed.

Prophecy and critique of the present

Far more significant in Old Testament prophecy than prediction of the future is the critique which the prophets make of their contemporary society in God's name. Personal encounter with YHWH sharpened their awareness of the contrast between social behaviour and the authentic Yahwist religious insights. Their task was to 'declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin'(Amos 4:12), insisting that sin must be punished (so including a call to repentance), but also insisting that there was something that transcended punishment, namely, YHWH's fidelity to who YHWH is: YHWH's promises would be kept.

Dianne Bergant

‘The prophetic word was always relevant in the historical moment of proclamation.

Since it was born out of religious or political crisis, its purpose was to speak to that crisis.

It clung to the past to the extent that it was in continuity with the fundamental religious traditions.

It predicted the future to the extent that that future would be the consequence of the present.

The primary intent of prophecy was to call the people to fidelity to their religious responsibilities here and now.’

It is for this reason that it is important to read the prophetic literature in the light of the specific historical circumstances to which the words were addressed or in which the writings were recorded.

The power of the prophetic utterance comes precisely from its specific nature.

Once this is grasped, it is up to us, following the example of the disciples of the prophets, to apply what they say to our changed circumstances, not by a literal application of their words, but by a faithful following of their inspired insights.

Wide range of 'prophetic experiences

nābî' ('prophet'), rō'eh ('seer'), ḥōzeh ('one who enlightens'), 'îš 'ĕlohîm ('man of God').

1. Intelligent observation of 'the signs of the times'

2. Critique of charlatan practices

'Though these nations whom you are to dispossess listen to their soothsayers and fortune-tellers, the Lord your God will not permit you to do so'(Deuteronomy 18:14). often repeated!

3. Dreams, visions, ecstasy, trance, as well as perceptive and critical judgment, both of the times and of the will of YHWH, and many other factors were at play in the prophetic experience and in the way this experience was conveyed.

‘Listen to the words I say ... Open your mouth and eat what I am about to give you ... Then go and speak’(Ezekiel 2:8 and 3:1).

‘You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me: you were the stronger. I am a laughing-stock, everybody’s butt ... The word of Yahweh has meant for me insult, derision, all day long. I used to say “I will not think about him, I will not speak in his name any more.” Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not bear it’(Jeremiah 20:7-9).

Discerning true from false prophecy

Moses is presented as the exemplar of all true prophets.

To be accepted as authentic prophecy, oracles had to be uttered in the name of YHWH (Deuteronomy 13:1-5) and be consistent with the inspired words and deeds of Moses.

Consistency with approved prophecy (Jeremiah 23:9-22).

When prophecies included future predictions, their authenticity could be guaranteed only when their predictions came true.

(1 Samuel 3:19-20; 1 Kings 17:1; Deuteronomy 18:15-22)

‘Prophet no less than priest, all practise fraud.
They dress my people’s wound without concern.
Peace! Peace! they say, but there is no peace’(Jeremiah 6:3 = 8:10).

‘Do not listen to what the prophets say, they are deluding you.
They retail visions of their own,
and not what comes from the mouth of Yahweh’(Jeremiah 23:16).

‘I have not sent them, yet they are running;
I have not spoken to them, yet they are prophesying’(Jeremiah 23:21).

‘Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream as his own!
And let him who receives a word from me deliver it accurately! ...
Does not my word burn like a fire?
Is it not like a hammer shattering a rock?’(Jeremiah 23:28-29).

‘I never sent them or commissioned them,
and they serve no good purpose for this people.’(Jeremiah 23:32)

‘Say to those who make up prophecies out of their own heads:
The Lord Yahweh says, “Woe to the foolish prophets
who follow their own spirit, without seeing anything!
Like jackals in a ruin, so are your prophets, Israel.
They have never ventured into the breach;
they have never bothered to fortify the House of Israel,
to stand fast in battle.
They have empty visions and give lying prophecies
and say: ‘It is Yahweh who speaks’,
although Yahweh has not sent them ...
Instead of my people rebuilding the wall,
these men come and slap on plaster”’(Ezekiel 13:1-6,10).

The genesis of a prophetic scroll

Some of the prophets committed their oracles to writing:

‘YHWH said to me: Take a large tablet and write on it ... and have it attested for me by reliable witnesses’(Isaiah 8:1-2).

‘Write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever’(Isaiah 30:8).

‘The words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon’(Jeremiah 29:1-28).

‘YHWH answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it’(Habakkuk 2:2).

Since they believed that it was God himself who was communicating with his people through the events of their history, the authors readily prefaced their inspired insights with expressions such as ‘YHWH said’ – a way of stating that the words that followed expressed God’s will as best they were able to discern it.

The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH, the Lord of creation and the Lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world.

They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God’s love and covenant with them, and to discern God’s will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful.

Much of what we have, however, is the work of disciples,
or of court or cult officials,
who committed to writing the oracles of the prophets.
Later generations attempted to understand themselves
in the light of preserved and treasured prophecy.
They saw the prophetic oracles in a new light
from their own circumstances.
They understood particular historical events
as realisations of the transcendent hope
or of the warnings of the prophet. We can do the same.

They expected that God's will would be beyond their ability to comprehend fully, and so they approached the inspired word expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered there. They liked to break it open to see the sparks of light that issued from it, revealing the divine enlightenment hidden within.

The texts expressed inspired insights into the presence and action of a living God in their history. No text could hold it all, and so the history of the development of the Older Testament is a history of prayerful debate, discussion and refinement, always in the light of historical experience.

Inspiration cannot be understood if we think of it as applying only to those who produced the final text as we have it. All along the line people were attentive to the movement of God's Spirit in their hearts, in the way they lived and in the way they gave expression to their experiences.

Surely Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were inspired to do what they did. And what about the many Israelites who lived lives that were faithful to the covenant they believed they had with God? What about those who expressed their response to God in the poems, prayers and folk tales that kept their history alive for their children's children?

Generations of scholars were responsible for the evolving sources that the final authors drew on, and there were those who cherished these ancient scrolls and copied them and made sure they were handed on. Inspiration has to cover this whole process of reflecting, listening, discussion and prayer.

In his *A History of Prophecy in Israel* page 3 Joseph Blenkinsopp states that the prophetic books of the Old Testament reveal:

‘a cumulative process of appropriation, assimilation, and adaptation that ... shades off into an increasingly frequent recycling and reinterpreting of older prophetic material.’

As the Second Vatican Council states, we can be confident that these texts express ‘without error that truth which God willed to be put down in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation’(Dei Verbum, 11).

Before all else the Bible is a truthful statement of God’s faithful love, expressed of course in the limited, imperfect, and historically conditioned way in which human authors necessarily speak and write of such matters. The community considers these texts foundational, and continues to experience God’s inspiration through them.

Those who claim that the sacred scriptures are inspired are not claiming that they are free from error in areas that are not central to the witness that they give of God's action in the history of Israel and of how the people ought to respond. It is essential also to recognise that even in this their central thrust, they are human documents and, as we shall hope to show, they are not free from mistaken assumptions that were part of their time and their culture. However, with all these necessary limitations, they continue to inspire, for in their precise beauty they reveal God.

Problem 1. They assumed that their enemies were God's enemies

Problem 2. Imperfect monotheism.

They insisted on worshipping only YHWH,
but assumed that there were other gods.

Problem 3. They assumed that whatever happens must be God's will

So success must be a sign of divine approval

So failure must be a sign of divine punishment

Problem 4. Divinely sanctioned violence

Jesus 'fulfils' the prophecies

We frequently hear the Gospel writers declaring that something that Jesus did or said was 'to fulfil the scriptures'. They are not suggesting that the ancient writers foresaw Jesus. They are reaching out to their Jewish brothers and sisters in an attempt to highlight the fact that the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish establishment was a mistake.

If they would only look at their sacred writings at depth, they would see that Jesus' actions and words were consistent with what was best in the traditions of Israel.

Not only that. Jesus brought the spirituality of Israel to its full flowering while transcending its limitations. In the words placed on the lips of Simeon by Luke: Jesus is God's salvation 'prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel'(Luke 2:30-32).

Jesus quotes from the Isaiah scroll

‘YHWH said, “Go and say to this people:
‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’
Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears, and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed’ (Isaiah 6:9-10).

Quoted by Jesus when asked why he spoke in parables:
(Matthew 13:14-15)

‘The Lord said: these people draw near with their mouths
and honour me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me.
Their worship of me is a human commandment
learned by rote’(Isaiah 29:13).

quoted by Jesus to those complain that the disciples failed to wash their hands
Matthew. 15:8-9

‘The eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert’(Isaiah 35:5-6).

Jesus’ reply to the question posed by John’s disciples

‘The blind receive their sight, the lame walk,
the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them’(Matthew 11:5).

As Jesus is about to go to Gethsemane, he says:

‘I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was counted among the lawless’”(Isaiah 53:12); and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.’(Luke 22:37)

Jesus is reaching out to those who are rejecting him:

‘It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ (Isaiah 54:13). Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.’(John 6:45)

‘Jesus was teaching and saying, “Is it not written,
‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’(Mark 11:17).

‘I will them bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples’(Isaiah 56:7).

Luke 4:18-19

Jesus reads this passage in the Nazareth synagogue , and then declares that it is being fulfilled in him, here and now.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”(Isaiah 61:1-2).