

Introduction to Hebrew Prophecy

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Etymology and Definition

The English word “prophet” comes from the Greek *prophētēs*, “one who speaks forth, or proclaims.” In Hebrew prophecy, the prophet is the one who serves as a spokesperson of YHWH. While this definition risks oversimplification, the nuances and complexities of Hebrew prophecy all rest on the prophet’s function as one who declares YHWH’s message or will.

“The Prophets” as a Division of the Hebrew Bible

There are three Divisions of the Hebrew Bible: The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Law (or Torah) includes the books of Genesis-Deuteronomy; this section is also known as the Pentateuch, which means “five books.” The division known as the Prophets is subdivided into the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets include Judges-Kings, books written in narrative form. The first prophets appear in these books, and what they say and do is talked about in the third person. The Latter Prophets include four books in the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve (that is, the twelve books of minor prophets in the English Bible are all part of one book in the Hebrew Bible). Among the Latter Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are known as the major prophets—not because they are more important but simply because of the volume of their writings. The Book of the Twelve includes the books which we refer to as the minor prophets (again, due to volume and not importance). With the exception of Jonah, all of the Latter Prophets are first person accounts, not third person narratives. (If this seems a little confusing, don’t feel bad: English translators didn’t preserve the three divisions which are found in the Hebrew Bible; they sprinkled among the Prophets books from the Writings—for instance, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Psalms, Job—so that neither the Prophets nor the Writings appear in English Bibles intact. For further clarification of (1) the Prophets and how they are classified and (2) a list of books in the Hebrew Bible, see the Appendix in these notes.)

Language of Hebrew Prophecy

Several terms are associated with prophecy in the Hebrew Bible:

- the earliest term is “*seer*,” usually someone who has dreams or visions or uses divination (for example, casting lots); this term largely disappears after the early monarchy, and 1 Sam 9:9 explicitly notes that the term “prophet” now refers to one who had been known as a “seer”;
- the term “*man of God*” is used to refer to a prophet almost 70 times; this term emphasizes the main feature of Hebrew prophecy, that the prophet’s authority is entirely dependent on the prophet’s relationship to YHWH;
- the “*sons of the prophets*,” usually rendered “the company of prophets” in inclusive-language translations, occurs 11 times and refers to prophetic groups, or guilds, all during the time of Elijah and Elisha; the guild had an acknowledged leader, and his successor was measured by whether the company perceived that the spirit of the predecessor had fallen on his successor (2 Kings 2:15);
- the main term, “*prophet*,” translates the Hebrew word *navi*, “one through whom God’s word is spoken,” and is used some 300 times; the plural, *nevi’im*, is the name of the second division of the Hebrew Bible.

Major Functions of the Prophet

There are three major functions of the prophet:

1. *spokesperson for YHWH*. As such the prophet
 - interprets the meaning of an event (often a catastrophe).
 - announces moral judgment on God’s behalf.
 - calls for justice on behalf of the powerless and poor.
 - advises kings and military leaders.

2. *worship leader*. As such the prophet

- speaks to the people on behalf of God (proclamation, instruction, interpretation).
- speaks to God on behalf of the people (intercession).
- occasionally offers sacrifice. (A note about priests and prophets: on the one hand, the two were distinct: the priesthood was hereditary while being a prophet was not, and priests were the primary custodians of the cultic and ritual life of Israel. On the other hand, priests and prophets shared certain functions, especially worship leadership; and some people are classified as both, including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah).

3. *preserver and (re)interpreter of tradition*. As such the prophet

- preserves YHWH's past acts which define the covenant relationship.
- finds new meanings in past and present events.
- predicts future events as confirmation of YHWH's present will. While "prophecy" in our culture is often associated with predicting the future, Hebrew prophets predicted events only as a sign, or confirmation, of YHWH's will and the truth of their prophecy. The prophet is a proclaimer rather a predictor, and prophecy is more forthtelling rather than foretelling.

The Development of Hebrew Prophecy

As any survey of the Hebrew canon or Jewish history shows, prophecy develops in several ways in the Hebrew Bible. Most notably, it grows in importance. Writers in the Pentateuch mention in passing that a person is a prophet, but that person's prophecy has little prominence in those stories. By the time we reach 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings (books included in the Former Prophets), being a prophet has greater significance: (1) it is central to the identity of the prophet; (2) the prophet has greater significance religiously, sociologically, and politically; and (3) literarily, the prophets—especially Elijah and Elisha—have greater significance in the plot. Finally, in the Latter Prophets, the prophet is considered important enough that these book records the prophets' actual words. Their role as spokesperson for YHWH is formalized with widely used formulas, particularly, "The word of the LORD came to me, saying"; "Thus says YHWH"; and "Son of Man, prophecy (or speak to this people), saying" Indeed, the increasing significance of prophecy is seen in the very development of the canon: the section known as the Law is followed by a (longer) section known as the Prophets.

Metaphor and Parable

The prophets were not reluctant to offer imperatives or explicit instructions on behalf of YHWH. In very straightforward language, they urge the people to repent (or return to God), to love God, to be faithful, to be righteous, to act justly, to offer mercy, and to care for the marginalized (especially the poor). But the prophets also show themselves to be very adept with metaphorical language. To mention just a few of their metaphors: Amos 7 uses the image of a plumb line to suggest that God is measuring the people against an unchanging standard. Hosea uses the language of fidelity and adultery to chasten the people for their unfaithfulness to God. Jeremiah expresses hope with the picture of broken clay being remodeled by the potter (ch 18). Ezekiel 34 chastens the religious leaders by comparing them to shepherds who neglect and abuse their sheep. The prophets also use parables, the most famous being Nathan's confrontation of King David (2 Sam 12). Isaiah 5 contains a parable (or allegory) of a vineyard, which depicts the unfaithfulness and injustices of God's people—and the very serious consequences of these actions. Notably for Christians, this parable seems to be the backdrop for Jesus' parable of the vineyard in Matthew 21.

Prophetic Actions

While the prophets are remembered primarily for their oracles, or proclamations, they sometimes employed symbolic actions which expressed God's will or God's message. Most known for their prophetic actions are Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Examples of prophetic actions include:

- Hosea is commanded to marry a "prostitute" (NRSV, "whore" KJV) to signify that the people had committed "prostitution" (NRSV, "whoredom" KJV) by their unfaithfulness to the LORD. Hosea also gives his children names which symbolize the sin of the people and the righteous judgment of YHWH.
- Conversely, Jeremiah is commanded not to marry at all—or even to attend any weddings—as a warning of the impending exile, when sorrow will overshadow the occasions that normally bring joy. Jeremiah also prophesies to the people wearing a yoke, a symbol that the people will come under the yoke (rule) of the king of Babylon. Hananiah, Jeremiah's rival, breaks the yoke, a prophetic action intended to contradict Jeremiah's message. But Jeremiah returns wearing an iron yoke, symbolizing that no false prophet can change the sovereign message of YHWH.
- Ezekiel offers many prophetic actions, including
 - lying on his side, first for 390 days and then for 40 days; the number of days corresponds to the number of years that Israel and Judah, respectively, will spend in exile.
 - shaving his head. He then burns one third of the hair, chops up one third of the hair, and scatters one third of the hair to the wind, signifying what will happen to people during the conquest: some will die by the sword, some will burn in the destruction of the city, and some will be carried off (scattered) into exile.
 - eating bread cooked on dung, symbolizing that during the exile, the people will not be able to observe ritual purity.

The Theology of the Prophets

It was never the intent of the prophet to produce a systematic theology. To the contrary, the vast majority of the time, the prophets spoke specific messages in response to particular circumstances. (In this regard, the prophets parallel the letters of the New Testament: they were usually written to speak to specific situations, not to offer to offer theological generalities.) Nonetheless, one can identify themes which run through the prophetic books.

There is one true God. The prophets span the time when neighboring nations worshipped many different gods. Like the Law (see Dt 6:4), the prophets insist that there is one true and living God. This is God is both the creator of the world and the author of the covenant with Israel through Abraham.

God is sovereign. Like the Hebrew Bible in general, the dominant assumption, belief, and assertion of the prophets is the sovereignty of God. Because God created humanity, God is entitled to set the standards by which human beings live. When humans do not conform to God's will, the sovereign God is entitled to judge them, correct them, and punish them. At the same time, God is entitled to be merciful whenever God chooses, even if that mercy is whimsical by any other standard. Humans have neither the capacity nor the right to impugn God's sovereignty: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Is 55:9)

God is holy. Whatever is right, or righteous, or good, is so because it is consistent with the character and actions of God; whatever is wrong, or unrighteous, or evil, is so because it is inconsistent the character and actions of God.

God is merciful. Though God would be entitled to hold humans to God's own (unachievable) standard, God constantly shows mercy—a manifestation of God's *hesed*, which refers both to God's covenant love, God's love for the people Israel, and to God's steadfast love for all people, because the Gentiles (or nations) are also God's creation.

God is just. Everything that God asks or demands of humans—the covenant, faithfulness, obedience, justice in our dealings with one another, mercy for the marginalized—all of these things are for our good; and it is fair for God to ask, even demand, what it is in our best interest. In Israel's case, God's demands are both proscribed and achieved through the Law, the covenant, and the cult (worship and sacrifice). When people are unfaithful or disobedient, it is fair for God's to call them to repentance and, if necessary, to correct or punish them.

God is redemptive. Though God does chasten, correct, and punish, these actions are always intended to redeem. By definition, being chastened by the sovereign God is justified; but more than that, it is intended to bring about repentance, obedience, and, ultimately, redemption.

Humans should live in obedience and faithfulness to God. Everything in the prophetic understanding of God calls for a certain response from human beings. Humans should be obedient and faithful. In Israel, obedience focused itself in obeying the Law and honoring the covenant. Because humans are sinful, they are, at best, inconsistent in their obedience and faithfulness. In response to their sins and shortcomings, they should repent—indeed much of what the prophets say amounts to calling people to repentance. When people repent, God forgives. Finally, there is a divine purpose to relationships among human beings: we should be just, or fair, in our dealings with each other; we should be attentive and kind to the marginalized, including the poor, the oppressed, the disenfranchised (especially widows and orphans), and foreigners. In short, we should love our neighbors as ourselves.

Because it is the dominant theological view in the Hebrew Bible, a special word should be offered about *Reward and Retribution theology (R & R)*. In sum, this view suggests that when humans are obedient and faithful, God pours out rewards upon them; and if they are disobedient and unfaithful, God pours out punishment on them. While this view will be categorically set aside by Jesus, it is assumed, endorsed, and taught in the prophetic books. For the most part, R & R shapes the prophetic commentary on the most important event during the prophetic era, *the exile*. The exile is generally interpreted as God's just punishment of the people's disobedience. The pre-exilic prophets routinely warn that a failure to repent will lead to punishment; similarly, the exilic prophets say that the exile is no more than the people deserved. At the same time, the prophets show a readiness—at times a determination—to adapt their message to the needs of the people. So just as the pre-exilic prophets relentlessly call the people to repentance (and warn of the consequences if the people do not repent), the exilic and post-exilic prophets offer the people comfort and hope, insisting that God has not abandoned them and is eager to restore them.

Appendix: Categorizing the Prophets (by canon, history, and geography)

The Prophets in Canonical Context

Persons named as prophets in the Pentateuch

- ☐ Abraham (Gen 20:7)
- ☐ Aaron (Ex 7:1)
- ☐ Miriam (Ex 15:20)
- ☐ Moses (Dt 18:20; 34:10)
- ☐ 70 elders ("prophesied," Num 11:25)

Prophets in the Former Prophets (Judges – 2 Kings)

- ☐ Gad – prophet to David before and after enthronement
- ☐ Nathan – court prophet to David; parable after Bathsheba and Uriah; with Bathsheba, influences David to pass the throne to Solomon
- ☐ Micaiah – identified by Jehosephat as a true prophet of YHWH (when most of the prophets were simply telling Ahab what he wanted to hear)
- ☐ Elijah – the "father" of Hebrew prophecy; 3 year drought (1 Ki 17); widow of Zarephath (1 Ki 17; see Lk 4); YHWH's spokesperson against Jezebel, the advocate of Baal; showdown at Mt. Carmel (1 Ki 18)
- ☐ Elisha – successor to Elijah (2 Ki 2); raises son of Shunammite widow (2 Ki 4); Naaman's leprosy (2 Ki 5); two she bears and 42 boys (2 Ki 2); sometimes travels with army; chooses Jehu to revolt against dynasty of Ahab (2 Ki 9-10)

Latter Prophets (books written by the prophets, except Jonah)

Major prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel

Minor prophets: Book of the Twelve

- ☐ Hosea
- ☐ Joel
- ☐ Amos
- ☐ Obadiah
- ☐ Jonah*
- ☐ Micah
- ☐ Nahum
- ☐ Habakkuk
- ☐ Zephaniah
- ☐ Haggai
- ☐ Zechariah
- ☐ Malachi

(Note that while Daniel is a prophet, the book of Daniel is in the Writings, the third division of the Hebrew Bible.)

The Prophets in Historical Context

Former Prophets

- ☐ United Monarchy (1020-922 BCE)
 - ☐ Gad
 - ☐ Nathan
- ☐ Divided Monarchy (922 BCE -)
 - ☐ Micaiah
 - ☐ Elijah
 - ☐ Elisha

Latter Prophets

- ☐ Preexilic prophets (8th century-587 BCE)
 - ☐ Amos
 - ☐ Hosea
 - ☐ Isaiah
 - ☐ Micah
 - ☐ Zephaniah
 - ☐ Nahum
 - ☐ Habakkuk
 - ☐ Jeremiah (continues into exile)
- ☐ Exilic prophets (587-539)
 - ☐ Jeremiah (begins before exile)
 - ☐ Ezekiel
 - ☐ Deutero-Isaiah
- ☐ Postexilic Prophets (late 6th-early 5th century)
 - ☐ Haggai
 - ☐ Zechariah
 - ☐ Malachi
 - ☐ Obadiah
 - ☐ Joel

The Prophets in Geographical Context

Israel (Northern Kingdom)

- ☐ Gad
- ☐ Nathan
- ☐ Elijah
- ☐ Micaiah
- ☐ Elisha
- ☐ Amos
- ☐ Hosea

Judah (Southern Kingdom)

- ☐ Isaiah
- ☐ Micah
- ☐ Zephaniah
- ☐ Jeremiah
- ☐ Nahum
- ☐ Habakkuk
- ☐ Ezekiel
- ☐ Haggai
- ☐ Zechariah
- ☐ Obadiah
- ☐ Malachi
- ☐ Joel

The Hebrew Bible (Its Division and Books)

The Law (also known as the Torah or the Pentateuch)

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

The Prophets (Nevi'im)

(The Former Prophets)

- Joshua
- Judges
- Samuel
- Kings

(The Latter Prophets)

- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- The Book of the Twelve

The Writings (Ketuvim)

- Psalms
- Proverbs
- Job
- Song of Songs
- Ruth
- Lamentations
- Ecclesiastes
- Esther
- Daniel
- Ezra-Nehemiah
- Chronicles