

## 4. The Prophets

### I. The Office of Prophet

#### A. Covenant Offices

Leadership in Israel was divided between three covenant offices, mediating between God and his people:

1. **priest:** officiated on behalf of the people in the religious ceremonies in the sanctuary (the cultus; their service עֲבֹדָה), taught the Law (Torah) so that the people would keep (שָׁמַר) the commandments. Vice-gerents serving and keeping God's sanctuary (cf. Gen 2). Hereditary office: the sons of Aaron of the tribe of Levi. Assisted by the Levites (the non-Aaronic descendants of Levi).
2. **king:** earthly ruler of God's kingdom on earth, ruling on behalf of God (his vice-regent, cf. Gen 1:26, 28). Established by covenant as a hereditary office to David and his sons (2 Sam 7), of the tribe of Judah.
3. **prophet:** God's spokesman to his people. Non-hereditary.

#### B. The Role of the Prophet

Now the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the Chronicles of Samuel the seer (רֹאֵה), and in the Chronicles of Nathan the prophet (נָבִיא), and in the Chronicles of Gad the seer (חֹזֶה). (1 Chr 29:29)

Three Hebrew words are used to describe the prophets:

1. Seer (רֹאֵה, חֹזֶה): one who sees (רָאָה), often in a vision (חֹזֶה).
2. Prophet (נָבִיא): "an appointed regular speaker for a divine superior, whose speech carries the authority of the latter."<sup>1</sup> Cf. the relationship of Moses and Aaron before Moses (Exod 4:16; 7:1).

These names cover the two elements of a prophet's job: he received a message from God, then proclaimed that message (the word of the Lord) to the intended audience. The prophets were therefore men who walked particularly closely with the Lord, sometimes being called "man of God."

### II. Evolution of the Prophetic Office

The Hebrew Bible, divided into Torah, Prophets and Writings, distinguishes between the Former and Latter Prophets:

1. Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings. The second part of Israel's Primary History (Genesis–Kings).
2. Latter Prophets: the major and minor prophets of the English canon, minus Lamentations, Daniel.

We can distinguish three periods of prophetic ministry:

1. Pre-monarchical Prophets: Abraham (Gen 20:7), Moses, the greatest OT prophet (Num 12:6-8; Deut 34:10-12).
2. The Former Prophets
  - a. Samuel: "The prophets were God's spokespersons in crisis."<sup>2</sup> Israel faced a crisis of leadership: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 17:6; 21:25; cf 18:1; 19:1). As prophet, Samuel was the kingmaker, anointing (מָשַׁח) both Saul and David (1 Sam 8-9, 16).
  - b. Court Prophets: acted as God's counselors to the kings of Israel and Judah; the king's conscience, independent of his control, viewing his actions from God's perspective. Nathan, Gad, Ahijah, Jehu, Elijah, Micaiah, Elisha, Jonah. Good kings, e.g. David, were responsive; bad kings rejected God's word, imprisoning or even killing the prophets.

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1. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 192.

2. Willem VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 28.

- c. Elijah: Israel was again in deep crisis: King Ahab had gone beyond even the sins of Jereboam (1 Kgs 16:31), marrying Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon, and worshiping Baal. Elijah took the role of covenant prosecutor, accusing God's people of breach of covenant. The prophet's message was no longer confined to the king but was addressed to all Israel.
- d. The Prophetic History: The Former Prophets (Joshua–Kings) records Israel's history in the Land, evaluating it from a divine perspective. This perspective is that of Deuteronomy, hence this is often called the Deuteronomistic History. It was the prophet's role to evaluate history this way.
3. The Latter Prophets: the most obvious change is that starting c. 750 BC the prophetic oracles were committed to writing. As God's covenant prosecutors, these prophets used that language and imagery of a law suit (רִיב) to confront Israel and Judah with their sin. So bad was this sin that judgment was no longer a remote possibility but an approaching reality. But these prophets also looked beyond the judgment and saw a coming day of salvation, peace and renewed prosperity and glory. They saw ahead in ways the former prophets did not. Their messages were written down for future generations.

### III. The Classical Prophets

Can be divided into three groups, according to whether they spoke before, during or after the Exile, which was the great act of judgment.

#### A. Pre-Exilic

##### 1. Israel

1. Amos (755): a resident of Tekoa in Judah, Amos was sent to Bethel to pronounce judgment on Israel and the surrounding nations. Although Israel was enjoying great prosperity under Jereboam II, Amos saw the greed, oppression and injustice of the rich against the poor. After warning of judgment on seven of Israel's neighbors (Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Judah), Amos turned to Israel herself, indicting her for her sin and warning of certain judgment on the "Day of the Lord." Amos ends on a positive note, foretelling restoration of "David's fallen tent" (9:11-15).
2. Hosea (755-710): God's messenger to the last generation of Israel, Hosea contrasted Israel's adultery to God's loyal love, with his own marriage as a vivid illustration. With the grief and tenderness of a jilted partner, Hosea warned of judgment, but foresaw hope of restoration because of God's enduring loyal love (חֶסֶד).

##### 2. Judah

1. Isaiah (740-690): condemns Judah and the surrounding nations, warning of impending judgment (chaps. 1-35), but switches to extensive promises of hope and restoration the other side of judgment (chaps. 40-66), in which the suffering servant plays a key role.
2. Micah (735-701): like Amos in the north, Micah attacked the corruption and injustice of society, exposing corrupt rulers, false prophets and ungodly priests. Judah is found guilty in court. In three cycles (1-2, 3-5, 6-8) Micah moves from judgment to salvation and restoration, which ultimately depends upon God's readiness to forgive sin and his commitment to his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
3. Zephaniah (c. 630): warned of judgment coming on the Day of the Lord, but also saw beyond to restoration of blessing.
4. Jeremiah (627-580): Challenging the people's false hopes in the temple (ch 7), he urged them to submit to God's inevitable judgment. Based partly on Micah, he saw the future return of a remnant and the making of a new covenant. His message was rejected. After witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem he was taken to Egypt by his own people.
5. Habakkuk (605): complained that God allowed open wickedness in Judah to go unpunished. God's answer that he would bring Babylon as his instrument of judgment left him even more perplexed. God's further answer that Babylon would in turn be judged evoked praise and confidence.

##### 3. Other nations

1. Jonah (760): from Gath-hepher, Israel. Sent to Nineveh with a message of judgment. Nineveh repented and God

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relented, making Jonah very angry.

2. Nahum (c. 660): pronounced judgment on Assyria for her cruelty and wickedness and the fall of her capital Nineveh.
3. Obadiah (587): shortly after Jerusalem had been plundered, Obadiah proclaimed judgment on Edom for gloating over Jerusalem's misfortunes.

#### B. Exilic

1. Daniel (605-535): taken captive to Babylon in 605, where he lived till at least the third year of Cyrus (536). The Hebrew Bible places this in the Writings, not the Prophets. The narratives (1-6) and apocalyptic visions (7-12) contrast earthly kingdoms, which seem all-powerful, with God's kingdom which ultimately prevails.
2. Ezekiel (593-570): taken captive to Babylon in 597, he had a similar ministry to Jeremiah in Jerusalem, challenging the false hopes of the exiles, stating that God's judgment on Jerusalem was imminent and certain. From Babylon he saw the departure of God's glory from the temple (ch 10), but also a new temple and a new city called Yahweh Shammah, "The LORD is there" (40-48).

#### Post-Exilic

1. Haggai (520): called on the people to reorder their priorities and rebuild God's temple.
2. Zechariah (520): like Haggai, called the people to devote themselves to rebuilding the temple, but also looks ahead and sees God's future deliverance under a Messianic figure. Two parts: prophetic visions (1-8), apocalyptic visions (9-14).
3. Malachi (c. 430): the religious and moral life of the people was in disarray. Urged the people to return to the Lord and to realize their poor condition was due to their sin not God's lack of care.

### IV. The Prophetic Message

Two major strands: condemnation and judgment; consolation and salvation.

#### A. Condemnation and Judgment

##### 1. Condemnation for sin

1. Religious sin: breach of covenant through spiritual adultery: the idolatrous worshiping of the false gods of the surrounding nations.
2. Social sin: injustice. The rich and powerful, usually the political and religious establishment, oppressed the poor, depriving them of justice. Amos (Israel) and Micah (Judah), especially, condemned such sin.
3. Political sin: called to be a nation dependent on God, Israel more often turned to other nations for help.

##### 2. Warning of judgment

The earlier prophets had called on the kings to repent and thus avert judgment, but by the days of the classical prophets it was too late. Judgment was a reality; it was only a matter of *when* not *whether*.

The prophets saw a coming Day of the Lord when God would execute judgment.

Judgment came for both Israel and Judah in the form of exile or captivity (גלות):

1. Israel: Samaria besieged and captured by Assyria in 722; people exiled to different parts of Assyrian empire.
2. Judah: Jerusalem besieged and captured by Babylon in 587. Temple, palace, city destroyed; king and people exiled to Babylon.

## B. Consolation and Salvation

The salvation oracles encompass many strands: remnant, restoration, a messiah figure, inclusion of the Gentiles.

### 1. Remnant

God would preserve a remnant (שְׁאֵרִית) in their captivity, and would bring them home.

2. Restoration: a new age of peace, prosperity and glory that would be even better than the golden age of David and Solomon. A new city and a new temple in which God dwelt and to which glory would be restored.

3. Messiah: an anointed (מָשִׁיחַ *mashiach*) king who would be greater even than David.

1. Servant: God had called Israel to be his servant (Isa 41:8-9) but she had failed her commission. He would raise up a new servant (the Servant Songs, Isa 42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12).
2. Davidic King: a shoot/branch (נֶצֶר *netzer*) from Jesse's stump/roots (שְׁרֵשׁ *shoresh*) (Isa 11:1). To be born in the Bethlehem (Mic 5:1).
3. Son of Man: Daniel saw one like a son of man to whom the Eternal of Days would grant an eternal kingdom (Dan 7).