

# The Story (14) – The Prophets

By Ashby Camp

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## I. Introduction

A. Prophecy is a revelation of God delivered in written or spoken words by a human being acting under the inspiration or control of the Holy Spirit.

1. This definition is implied in the statement by Micaiah son of Imla when he responded to the suggestion of the king's messenger to agree with the unanimously favorable answer of the king's prophets: "As sure as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me" (1 Kgs 22:14; cf. 2 Chron 18:13).

2. As Peter says in 2 Pet. 1:20-21: <sup>20</sup>*knowing this first [of all] that no prophecy of scripture is [a matter] of one's own interpretation. <sup>21</sup>For no prophecy ever was brought by [the] will of man; rather, men being moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

B. This is not to deny that God sometimes delivered a message through the symbolic actions of his prophets. In Ezekiel 12, for example, Ezekiel acts out the exile that was coming upon the people of Judah. It is only to point out that prophecy in its strictest sense involved verbal communication.

C. Moses is called a prophet because God spoke through him (see, e.g., Num. 12:1-8). In Deut. 18:14-20, God, speaking through Moses, makes clear that a prophet is his spokesman. He says in vv. 18-19: *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. <sup>19</sup> If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.*

D. The Spirit's role in prophetic inspiration is apparent in both the O.T. and N.T.

1. O.T. – In Num. 11:25 the seventy elders prophesied when the Spirit of God rested on them. In 2 Chron. 15:1, 20:14, and 24:20 it is said that the Spirit came upon the prophets at the time they prophesied. Ezekiel reported in Ezek. 2:2 that the Spirit entered him when God spoke to him. Micah declared to Israel its rebellious acts because he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord (Micah 3:8). Zechariah condemned the people for rejecting the word that the Lord had revealed to them through the former prophets by his Spirit (Zech. 7:12). In 1 Sam. 10:10, Saul prophesies when the Spirit of the Lord comes on him in power. In 2 Sam. 23:2, David declared that the Spirit of the Lord spoke through him. In Hos. 9:7 the prophet is called the man of the Spirit. And I cited 2 Peter 1:21 above.

2. N.T. -- Prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:8-10). In Acts 11:28 the prophet Agabus predicted "through the Spirit" that a severe famine would spread over the

Roman world, and in Acts 21:10 the Holy Spirit spoke through him in predicting Paul's upcoming treatment.

## II. Some Titles of the Hebrew Prophets

A. Being spokesmen for God, it is not surprising that prophets are said to be God's servants (1 Ki. 14:18; 2 Ki. 9:7, 17:13, 17:23, 21:10, 24:2; Jer. 7:25, 29:19, Zec. 1:6) and sometimes are given the title "man of God" (e.g., 2 Chron. 30:16 [Moses]; Ezra 3:2 [Moses]; 1 Sam. 2:27 [unidentified], 9:6-10 [Samuel]; 1 Ki. 12:22 [Shemaiah]; 1 Ki. 13:1-3 [unidentified]; 1 Ki. 17:18, 24 [Elijah]; 2 Ki. 5:8, 7:17-18 [Elisha]; 2 Chron. 25:7-9 [unidentified]).

B. Prophets also are called "seers" (e.g., 1 Sam. 9:11 [Samuel]; 2 Sam. 24:11 [Gad]; 2 Chron. 33:18 [unidentified]; Amos 7:12). This was especially true early in Israel's history (1 Sam. 9:9). They are "seers" in the sense they were given by God insight into past, present, or future events.

C. The main term used in the O.T. to refer to a prophet is the Hebrew word *nabi'*, which is translated "prophet." The origin of this word is much debated, but the essential idea in it appears to be that of authorized spokesman. (*Theological Wordbook of the O.T.*, 2:544) It was translated *prophētēs* in Greek, which has the basic meaning of one who speaks forth in behalf of another. That Greek word, of course, is the source of our English word prophet.

## III. Prophets Before the Prophetic Books of Scripture

A. God was speaking to mankind through certain persons, prophets, long before the prophetic books that are part of the Old Testament. The earliest of those books probably goes back only to the eighth century B.C., whereas Abraham, who lived some 1300 years earlier, is called a prophet in Gen. 20:7.

B. Many other people, men and women, prophesied prior to the eighth century B.C., some of whom are not named. Moses and his sister, the prophetess Miriam, lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Deborah, another prophetess (and Judge), lived during the period of the Judges which predates Saul's anointing as king around 1051 B.C. And the prophet Samuel lived on both sides of Saul's anointing, centuries before the eighth century. Nathan, Gad, and Ahijah prophesied in the tenth century B.C. And there were others.

C. The rise of the monarchy with the anointing of King Saul brought a new dimension to the prophetic role. Prophets often delivered God's word to the king as a way of keeping him accountable to God. One thinks of David and Nathan, Ahab and Elijah, and Hezekiah and Isaiah. The prophets stood outside the theological and moral corruption of the society, a corruption often fueled by the king's evil influence, and proclaimed God's word to all guilty parties – the king, the priesthood, the false prophets, and the people.

D. Other than Moses, the two most significant prophets before the eighth century B.C. were Elijah and his protégé and successor, Elisha. They prophesied in the ninth century B.C. and set the pattern that some of the later writing prophets followed: "a confrontation with the king

and other ruling powers, a call to repent and return to faithful obedience to Yahweh, and warnings of judgment on those who fail to heed the voice of Yahweh" (Hays, *The Message of the Prophets*, 24).

#### IV. Prophetic Books of the Old Testament

A. In English Bibles, the collection of the writings of the prophets begins after the Song of Solomon with the four large books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The small book of Lamentations, which is associated with Jeremiah, appears between Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Despite the fact Daniel is sometimes classified as "apocalyptic" rather than "prophetic," and despite the inclusion of Lamentations merely by association with Jeremiah, these five books commonly are known as the "Major Prophets."

B. They are followed by twelve smaller books commonly known as the "Minor Prophets." These books are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. The designations "Major" and "Minor" has to do with the length of the books not their importance.

C. The Hebrew Bible is arranged differently. Its three basic structural units are Law, Prophets, and Writings. The Law consists of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible (Genesis through Deuteronomy). The Prophets is divided into the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve). All the other books, including Daniel and Lamentations, make up the Writings.

#### V. Time Periods of the Prophetic Books

A. The prophetic books of the Old Testament cover a span of about 300 years, from about 760 B.C. to 450 B.C. During those years, the ancient Near East was dominated by three world empires: The Assyrians (745-612), The Babylonians (612-539), and the Persians (539-336).

B. Though some of the Minor Prophets are especially difficult to date, this chart from J. Daniel Hays's book *The Message of the Prophets* sets them in their historical contexts in terms of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires.

1. Unfortunately, it omits Obadiah, which I assume was intended to be under Babylonian Dominance with a question mark instead of Joel being there (given that it is already under Assyrian Dominance with a question mark).

2. The Assyrian city of Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C. which is why that date was chosen as the shift from Assyrian to Babylonian dominance. Notice that Daniel spans both the Babylonian and Persian periods, his book running from his exile in 605 B.C. down past the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 B.C. Jeremiah's ministry began in 626 B.C., so he also spans two eras.

C. The fact a book is named for a particular prophet need not mean that he personally wrote the book or that he wrote the book in its final biblical form. Jonah, for example, is written

*about* Jonah; he is spoken of in the third person. The fact God inspired men to put the message he delivered to the prophets into its final form for later generations, the form he intended for incorporation into his holy Scriptures, does not in the least threaten the conviction that the writings were inspired and thus inerrant. Luke investigated matters before he wrote his Gospel, but that input was, by the work of the Spirit, shaped into precisely the words that God wanted written. It is no different in the case of later inspired men who organized and edited the message of the prophets.

## VI. The Basic Prophetic Message (Hays, 63-74)

### A. Standard Pre-Exilic Prophets

1. These are prophets who lived *before or during* the time of the exile, which was from 587/586 until 539 B.C. They include all but the four prophets listed under "Persian Dominance," which prophets are known as *Post-Exilic* Prophets. Daniel, as I said, spans both periods.

2. There is much variation in the details and circumstances of the Pre-exilic Prophets, but most of them share some central themes. J. Daniel Hays summarizes those themes in *The Message of the Prophets* as:

1. You (Israel/Judah) have broken the covenant; you had better repent!
2. No repentance? Then judgment! Judgment will also come on the nations.
3. Yet there is hope beyond the judgment for a glorious future restoration both for Israel/Judah and for the nations.

3. The sins or "covenant violations" that commonly were charged against the Israel and Judah fall into three major categories: idolatry, social injustice, and reliance on religious ritualism. After exposing their sin, the prophets call the people to repentance, often pleading with them to return to God before it was too late.

4. The prophets reminded God's people that safety and blessedness were conditioned upon their faithful adherence to the covenant and that this adherence involved not only doctrinal conviction but also a sincere submission of their will to obey God with their whole heart and to lead a godly life. Apart from such submission, no amount of sacrifice or ritualistic worship could satisfy the Lord. As Gleason Archer says (*A Survey of O.T. Introduction*, 331-332):

This is perhaps the foremost emphasis in the prophets: "Bring no more vain oblations . . . your hands are full of blood . . . Cease to do evil; learn to do well . . . Come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:13-18). It is not that the prophets regarded moral living as the essence of religion, but rather they understood a godly walk to be the unflinching product of a genuine saving faith. They recognized that all men were guilty before God and utterly without hope apart from his redeeming grace (cf. 1 Kings 8:46; Ps. 14:2-3; 130:3; Prov. 20:9; Isa. 53:6; 59:4, 12-16; 64:6; Mic. 7:2); no one could be saved by his own virtue or goodness. But

on the other hand, Israel needed to be reminded (as does the professing church in modern times) that God would accept no substitute for a sincere faith which expresses itself by a law-honoring life.

5. When Israel and Judah ignore the pleas of the prophets, they tell them repeatedly that the consequences of their arrogance and rebellion will be a devastating judgment. For example, in Jer. 19:3 God instructs Jeremiah: *You shall say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.*

6. But the prophetic message often carries the hope of future restoration.

a. The prophets encouraged Israel in respect to the future. In the face of the divine wrath coming on Israel because of its stubborn disobedience, the question arose whether those judgments would mean the end of Israel as a holy nation set apart to witness to the heathen of the one true God. The prophets assured them that, after the devastation of the exile, a believing remnant would be restored to the land. This nation would fulfill its destiny as a testimony to the Gentiles under the leadership of the coming Messiah. This encouraged sincere believers to keep trusting in the Lord.

b. An image is painted in culturally-relevant symbolism of a future state brought about by God that will be breathtakingly grand, a state of peace, joy, and glory that *transcends* a fulfillment within history, within life as we have always known it. This fulfillment will involve a degree of discontinuity with the way things always have been. These are pointers to the coming kingdom of God, the healing of the broken creation in which the faithful of God will share. This is what the Jews in the first century were longing for when our Lord entered the world, though he had to correct some of their misunderstandings about it.

## B. Nonstandard Pre-Exilic Prophets

1. Obadiah, Nahum, and Jonah do not contain the standard message delivered by the other pre-exilic prophets. Obadiah and Nahum preach only against foreign nations (Edom and Nineveh, respectively) and bring a message of God's judgment.

2. Jonah also involves Nineveh, but it indirectly carries a rebuke and an invitation to Israel and Judah to repent. If pagan Nineveh repents at the preaching of Jonah then why do God's covenant people not repent? And if Nineveh receives the blessings of God's mercy upon repentance, why would his covenant people not seek it?

## C. Post-Exilic Prophets

1. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi addressed the discouraged and disillusioned community that was in Jerusalem after the return from Babylonian exile. What they had hoped would be the "great restoration" pointed to in Scripture, was clearly turning out not to be that.

These prophets urged the people to faithfulness in their circumstance while suggesting that the ultimate restoration was still in the future.

2. Since Daniel will be addressed on August 3, I will leave that for the person filling in for me that day. (Lord willing, I will be in Roanoke trying to surprise our oldest brother on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.)

VII. Additional General Themes of the Hebrew Prophets (from Archer, *A Survey of O.T. Introduction*, 331-332)

A. The prophets encouraged God's people to trust in Yahweh's mercy and redemptive power, rather than in their own merits or strength or in the might of their human allies. For example, Isa. 31:1 states: *"Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD."*

B. The prophets brought glory to God and confirmed the authoritativeness of his message by making predictions whose fulfillment would be objectively verified. These predictions bear witness to God's wisdom and knowledge of the future. As the Lord declared in Isa. 48:3-5: *I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. 4 For I knew how stubborn you were; the sinews of your neck were iron, your forehead was bronze. 5 Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.'*