

**GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH**  
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

**Adult Education**

**THE OLD TESTAMENT IN CHRISTIAN BELIEF**

12 April—17 May 2015

Session 2

Last week we began our study of the Old Testament in Christian belief by considering the following:

- The self-revelation of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law.
- The formation of the Old Testament canon.
- The origins and authorial/editorial strands for the Five Books of Moses (the Law).
- The central theological themes of the Law.

This week we continue our study with a survey of the prophets and prophetic literature.

### **Meet the Prophets**

Both Jewish and Christian traditions divide the Old Testament into the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. We have looked already at the Law, and now shift to the Prophets, bearing in mind that this tripartite division includes with the prophetic literature the history narratives (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings). For purposes of our discussion, we will treat the historical narratives as reflecting the central themes of the Law discussed last week.

The Prophets proper then may be divided into the “Major Prophets” and the “Minor Prophets” (*see the listing at the end of this section*). This ignores that prophetic figures appear elsewhere (*e.g.*, Samuel and Daniel), but as a corpus the Major and Minor Prophets include all of the themes of prophetic literature.

- 1) *Terminology*: “Prophet” can represent the Hebrew titles of *hōzeh* (“seer”), *rō’eh* (“diviner”), *ēsh ha’elohim* (“man of God”) or *nabí* (“prophet”).
  - a) The titles are not really interchangeable. Where Amos or Daniel might be described as a seer (one who sees and reports visions), and Samuel as a diviner (one who interprets signs), the “prophet” and “man of God” is more the individual who speaks for God, a holy man who may personify the deity as the one who bears the burdens of the people (*e.g.*, Isaiah).
- 2) *Timing*: With the signal exception of Moses, prophets do not appear early in Israel. Prophetic roles and character are at times assumed (*e.g.*, by Abraham at Gen. 20.7; by Miriam at Exod. 15.20; and by Deborah at Judg. 4.4), but these are not the dominant roles of these figures.
  - a) Prophets *per se* do not really appear prior to the formation of the full Israelite state, about 1000 B.C., under David.
    - i) Moreover, within about 75 years of the destruction of Judah as an independent state, the prophets disappear.

- b) The timing of classical prophecy relates very much to the existence of the monarchic state of Israel, a time when the king spoke and acted for Israel, for good or for ill.
- 3) *Literary Form*: Prophetic testimony contains common literary elements, including:
- a) Symbolic action reports: A description of prophetic behavior that is designed to convey a message (*e.g.*, Isa. 20.1-6: Isaiah walks naked for three years “as a sign and portent against Egypt and Ethiopia”).
    - i) Action rather than work or speech provides the key element.
  - b) Commissioning reports: Sometimes referred to as “call narratives.” Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1.4-10 are the most famous examples.
  - c) Vision reports: The prophet experiences that which is happening or is about to happen. For example, four such reports appear in Ezekiel (in chs. 1, 8, 37 & 40).
  - d) Legend: The actions of Elijah and Elisha in 1 & 2 Kings are narrative stories, but stories with a didactic point, that in the re-telling have become legends of the people.
  - e) Historiography: The re-telling of actual historical events, such as when Isaiah (in chs. 36-39) tells of the attack on Jerusalem by Sennacherib. Such stories attest to the role of the prophet in national affairs.
  - f) Biography: The life of the prophet may be related in detail, as in Jeremiah.
  - g) Divinatory chronicle: The prophet may function as a diviner (as in Ezekiel), or may respond to specific questions for God (Zech. 7-8).
  - h) Poetic speech: Structured speech is the predominant form of prophetic speech. Often the prophets speak in the form of indictment and judgment, *e.g.* in the language of a divine court.
- 4) *Religious and Ethical Issues*: Three themes are prominent in prophetic literature:
- a) Covenant and Imperium: The prophets often remind the people of what they have already agreed to in the covenant with the Lord. For example, much of the language in Hosea 4 echoes the Ten Commandments.
    - i) When the prophets speak in terms of indictment and judgment, they speak for God, and thus recite a lawsuit under the terms of the covenant (*see* Mic. 6.1-8), and may in fact utter curses (*e.g.*, Isa. 34.11-17, which echoes Deut. 28).
      - (1) The prophets often also speak to other nations (Isa. 13.1-23.18; Jer. 46.1-51.58; Ezek. 25.1-32.32), although Jeremiah is the only one referred to as “a prophet to the nations”. When the prophets speak to the nations, they set forth God’s plan for Israel, and by extension for the world.
  - b) Ethical norms: Much of the critique spoken by the prophets relates to ethical norms. Amos (1-2) indicts the nations for behavior that all humans would ordinarily find heinous. Isaiah (14) speaks of behavior against Israel’s God which is prideful.
    - i) When the prophets speak of Israel *per se* they speak of ethical behavior in the sense of obeying the Law. The principle of righteousness involves beneficence.
  - c) Hope: Despite the propensity of prophetic literature to identify the many ways in which humans have fallen short of both universal and Israelite ethical and religious norms—along with the ensuing results—the prophets most often strike a hopeful note. In other words, the prophets focus much on the destruction and restoration of Israel (and Judah), but with an emphasis on the latter, on restoration into a state as intended by the Lord.

5) *Who are the prophets?*

- a) The Former Prophets: Samuel, Elijah, Elisha.
- b) The Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel.
- c) The Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

**Prophecy in the Present Tense: “Forth-telling” or “Foretelling”?**

As discussed above, the titles used for prophet are not really interchangeable, and there is an important difference between what a prophet is described as doing and how a prophet is conceived of in the minds of most believers. In contemporary usage, a prophet is thought of as foretelling of the future. This conception of prophecy is at odds with the rôle assumed by the classical prophets (*e.g.*, as one who speaks for God). The issue presented in prophecy is not, therefore, whether a future event is being foretold, but what God is telling His people *now*, and this issue is further complicated by the concept of time as embodied in classical Hebrew.

Strictly speaking, biblical Hebrew does not have a future tense in verb construction. In grammar, the future tense is a verb form that marks the event described as not having happened yet, but as expected to happen in the future (in an absolute tense system), or to happen subsequent to some other event, whether that is past, present, or future (in a relative tense system). Hebrew has an entirely different tense system from those understood in the Indo-European language family. There is no future tense as such. Instead, verbs express completed action or uncompleted action. *The future* (as a “qal imperfect” construction) *is an uncompleted action*. Greatly over-simplified, biblical Hebrew has two inflected verb tenses, the perfect for past actions and the imperfect for actions continuing into the present or future. This may be modified by the so-called “waw-consecutive,” in which the waw-consecutive perfect has future reference, and the waw-consecutive imperfect is a narrative past tense. Thus, whether a sentence is translated as “David will give thanks to God” or “David gave thanks to God” will depend on context.

The grammatical issue of what is “future” has an important impact upon the concept of time and upon the concept of the action of God (who is eternal) in time.

- Is a prophet speaking of what *will* be or of what *is* (for those who serve the Lord)?
- To take a simple example, if every time in the Psalter (in English) we read the future as present, how does this change how we perceive God acting?
- Is what the prophet is saying something like: “This is reality as seen by God. When you are in right relationship with God you will see reality this way, and live accordingly. When you fail to see reality in this way, and fail to walk in the ways of God, you are not in right relationship with Him, and there are consequences!”

The focus in studying the prophets relates to how prophecy has been received as speaking to God’s people *now*. What is being described (of God’s action and intention) now? How did the people of Israel, and how has the Church received prophecy, as an “if/then” proposition or as one describing what we are called to do now because of what happens now?

- If the prophet speaks for God, and thus sees for God, is the prophet describing a present calamity (for example) that those who do not believe do not see?
- Is the “future” event described by a prophet more an “unveiling,” an apocalypse with apocalyptic time?