

How to start reading the Bible

St Bartholomew's Church, Sydenham, 11 November 2008

Session 3: Some thoughts on the Prophets

Prophecy (and prophets) are a very important part of the OT. Prophets spoke 'from God' and were regarded as holy men. They were not so much foretellers as 'forthtellers' and were those who continually tried to bring the nations of Israel and Judah back to God and His righteousness. Abraham, Moses and Samuel may be said to speak with a prophetic voice as they spoke words from God and led the Israelites in right ways of worship and living. However, the prophets of the OT are generally thought of as being active during the time of the kings, the exile and post-exile (approx. 900-400BC).

There were schools of prophets where young men were trained and were looked to for ecstatic utterances (1 Sam. 10. 9-12), and probably both Elijah and Elisha came from this background, and there may well have been a school under Isaiah.

Other prophets were called by God from no such background, e.g. Amos (Amos 7. 14-15). The prophets frequently clashed with the kings of the day, but also encouraged the exiles to look forward to their return under God to their own land. It is therefore useful to see them against their back ground. However, the message of the prophets was concerned with worshipping God from the heart and not just with outward show, and against immorality and decadence. Their message is therefore as relevant today (e.g. Is. 1. 14-17; Am. 2. 6-9)

Note 1: In the following, those usually called the major prophets are shown in capitals, e.g. **ISAIAH**, the minor prophets in lower case, e.g. **Hosea**, and those who do not have a specific book of the bible named after them in italic, e.g. *Elijah*

Note 2. Nothing is going to be specifically said in this session about Messianic prophecies; this needs to be dealt with separately.

1.1 9th century prophets

Elijah and *Elisha* were Northern prophets in the time of the kings of Israel from Omri to Jehu. Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, had already introduced two new shrines to God at Dan and Bethel, and set up golden calves there. (Later kings are often referred to as "walking in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat", e.g. 1 Kings 16. 31.) Omri was a strong leader, he built the

Northern capital of Samaria (after which the area was eventually named) and made an alliance with the Phoenicians by marrying his son Ahab to the king's daughter Jezebel. Israel under Ahab was very strong, but the introduction of Baal worship produced not only a religious clash but also a moral one.

Elijah stood up to Ahab on many occasions, and for this was much hated by Jezebel who hunted him wherever he was (1 Kings 19. 1-2). His story is told in narrative form in 1 Kings 17-19 and 2 Kings 1 and 2, and there are no oracles or books of prophecies. *Elijah* was fed by a widow, whose barrel of oil and jar of flour was never used up, and whose son he brought back to life; he condemned Ahab for killing Naboth and taking his vineyard and challenged the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18. 16-46). He did not die but was translated to heaven in a fiery chariot and horses, seen by *Elisha* who inherited his cloak and a double portion of his spirit.

Elisha continued with miracles similar to those of *Elijah* - bringing to life a widow's son and healing Naaman of leprosy. He headed a school of prophets and commanded the anointing of Jehu as king in order that he may avenge the wrong done by the house of Ahab to the prophets (Ahab's sons Ahaziah and Joram continued in much the same way).

Micaiah is one of the few named prophets who appear in a single incident. He was disliked by Ahab because, unlike the false prophets, he never said what the king wanted to hear. He correctly prophesied the death of Ahab in battle, saying that it was the LORD's will that he should be encouraged to his death by his sycophantic prophets.

1.2 The great 8th century prophets

Under the reigns of Jeroboam II (782-753BC) in Israel and Uzziah in Judah (767-740BC) came a peaceful period for both countries. However a lack of faith in Judah and a life of luxury and soft living aroused the wrath of the prophets. The surrounding countries had been kept at bay during these reigns, but after Uzziah died forces of Babylon and the surrounding countries came upon them both. The rule of law in Israel went steadily downhill, the last six kings of the Northern kingdom being: Zachariah who after six months was assassinated by Shallum who after one month was assassinated by Menahem; he reigned for 10 years but was an exceedingly cruel monarch. He paid off the king of Assyria with 'danegeld'; Pekahiah, his successor, tried to do the same but in less than two years was assassinated by Pekah, probably in league with the Gileadites; after five years Pekah was assassinated by Hoshea, possibly at

the instigation of the Assyrians. However Hoshea stopped paying tribute in the hope that Egypt would come to his aid, but in the end was besieged by Assyria and the whole country of Israel split up and deported under their rule.

Amos (c. 760–750BC) came from Tekoa in Judah, not from any school of prophets but called by God from being a shepherd (Am. 7. 14–16). Although prophesying in the peaceful reign of Uzziah (Azariah), he attacks the formality of religion, the non-existence of justice and the sharp practice of commerce. The book mainly comprises the gathered oracles of the prophet against the surrounding countries but also against Israel and Judah.

Hosea (c. 750–725BC) prophesied against the background of the turbulent situation in the Northern kingdom. The book is mainly concerned with the way his tragic domestic situation mirrors that of God and his covenant people. His wife is a prostitute and he sees in her ambivalent toing and froing between her true husband (who provides her with the means of living) and her lovers who come and go the similarity with the nation of Israel “whoring after strange gods” and God’s desire to bring them back to true faith in Him who provides them with all the harvests they gather (*see* particularly chap. 2). There are some lovely passages showing God’s great love for his children. e.g. Hos. 11. 1–4.

ISAIAH is the great prophet of the 8th century. It is a difficult book to deal with briefly as it covers the periods from about 742 to 701 or possibly 642BC and 538–515BC. It is therefore unlikely to be the work, or sayings, of one man. Chapters 1–39 are reckoned to be of one piece and are related to the call of **ISAIAH** in the year that king Uzziah died (Is. 6) and the subsequent half century. Chapters 40–45 also possibly belong with them. **ISAIAH** speaks against reliance on the might of Egypt or Philistia and preaches trust in God of whom he paints a magnificent picture as Sovereign in creation and history, righteous in his judgments, hating hypocrisy but wonderfully gentle with his wayward people. He also speaks of God’s salvation being extended to all people. He dreams of the coming of an anointed one who will restore the kingdom of David and bring truth justice and loyalty to God (Is. 40. 1–5).

Micah lived in the city of Moresheth-gath in the southern kingdom of Judah during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (about 742–687BC). Assyria was continually invading Judah at this time, and the foraging soldiers stole the farmers’ crops. The farmers then went to money lenders to buy new seed and

equipment, but these seem to have been loan sharks, seizing property and dispossessing the farmers; **Micah** therefore called for justice and fair dealing, and a walk with God coupled with social uprightness. It is possible that his prophecies influenced Hezekiah (Jer. **26**. 17-19).

1.3 Prophets of the last years of Judah and the exile

During the years 640-587BC Judah was continually fighting off surrounding invaders, with greater or lesser success. After Josiah's death (609BC) his son Jehoahaz was deposed by the Pharaoh of Egypt, and his brother Jehoiakim became a vassal of Egypt. When Babylon overran Egypt Jehoiachin and then Zedekiah were placed briefly on the throne, but by 587BC the second deportation of Judeans had occurred and the exile began. Much of the time there was idolatry, immorality and luxurious living on the part of the rich, but in 630BC Josiah had completed reform of the temple worship and called people back to the book of the law (Deuteronomy) found in the temple. The reform, however, was mainly external and never really affected the hearts of the people.

The first great prophet of this time is **JEREMIAH**. He came from a priestly family in Anathoth in Judah and his prophesy starts about 626BC in the reign of Josiah. He continued in Judah until the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC, and for a time ministered to a remnant of Jews who had fled to Egypt. Much influenced by Hosea, he spoke of Israel's infidelity to God in terms a man and his bride, and her breaking of the marriage contract. He tried to stop pilgrimages and sacrifices to ancient shrines and in this way alienated the people resulting in his excommunication from the temple and lynching by a mob when he prophesied the coming destruction of the temple. He therefore became a prophet of personal religion, and wrote letters of encouragement to the exiles in Babylon (chap **29**). He also looked to a time when God would 'write his law in men's heart' and all know the LORD.

(Jer. **31**. 27-34)

Zephaniah probably began his ministry before the great reforms of Josiah. His prophecies concern the Day of the LORD but also shows that God's love towards Judah will bring them back to Himself.

Nahum's prophecy comes between 661 and 612BC. It is entirely concerned with the wrongs of Ninevah and its coming downfall.

1.4 Prophets of the exile and post-exile

The people of Judah in exile mainly lived together in the plains of Babylon (Babylon overran a large part of Assyria in 612BC). Because of this they kept what they felt was a purer religion than the scattered Israelites of the Northern kingdom. After Persia conquered Babylon, some exiles were allowed to return in 539BC and gradually others joined them.

EZEKIEL was taken into captivity in 597BC and in the fifth year "the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God" (Ez. 1. 1) He was a man of strange visions and given to expounding his message by very dramatic demonstrations (*see e.g.* chaps 1 and 4 & 5). He seems very aware of what is going on in Jerusalem and prophesied the departure of the glory from the temple in very visionary terms (chap. 10). Chaps 24-32 are oracles concerning other nations, and then the later chapters are more concerned with comfort and the bringing of encouragement to the exiles. Chaps 40 onwards are a picture of the rebuilt temple where purified worship will be offered. **EZEKIEL** is probably the most dramatic and eccentric of the OT prophets, but he offered pastoral care and hope to the disconsolate Judeans.

Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah and prophesied at the time of the Babylonian oppression of Judah (c. 605-590BC). He could not understand how God could use an evil nation to punish his own people, but he was determined to stay at his place of duty and keep faith in God whatever happened. (Hab. 2. 1 and 3. 16-18)

Obadiah's prophesy is mainly a condemnation of Edom who after the fall of Jerusalem in 587BC came in to attack those who were left.

After the return of many Jews from exile, they started rebuilding the temple and re-establishing true worship. But by the time of **Haggai** (c. 520BC) apathy had set in because of opposition from the neighbouring areas and crop failure.

Haggai and his younger contemporary **Zechariah** rebuked and encouraged the people. Although much concerned with the building of the temple, they saw this as a vital element in the survival of the Jewish faith. **Zechariah's** prophecies concerning the LORD are very similar to **EZEKIEL's** dramatic visions.

Malachi continued this theme, with a high view of God and his ethical requirements, particularly denouncing hypocrisy and calling for repentance. He may have come either about 465BC, before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah or about 400-380BC when slackness again was setting in.

Joel probably prophesied about 400BC, although this is not certain. A great plague of locusts leads him to call for repentance (Joel 2. 12-17), and if that is truly genuine God will pour out His spirit in days to come (Joel 2. 28-32). Although he saw the plague as evidence of coming judgment, he believed that justice, truth and goodness will ultimately win because God is the LORD of history. Parts of **Joel**, and some of **Ezekiel**, **Zephaniah** and **Zechariah** verge on apocalyptic literature.

Jonah is a book that is hard to date. Some consider it was written during the reign of Jeroboam II (about 780BC), but it is more likely post-exile (c. 400BC) when racial and religious pride had got to a point where it was considered that all other nations were disregarded by God. The book is in narrative form, and concerns Jonah's disobedience to God when he is told to go to preach repentance to the wicked city of Nineveh. He does not want to do this in case his preaching is effective and they are taken into God's favour! (Jon. 4. 1-3) He mourns over a vine that grows and dies, but will not mourn over a city of 120,000 people (Jon. 4. 10-11)