

Trito-Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Joel all offered hope and reassurance in different ways. In particular, Trito-Isaiah pictured a new Jerusalem, emphasised the need for righteousness and penance and, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, declared the creation of a new and eternal covenant by God (ch.55, 59 and 61). Joel's story of a locust plague makes the analogy of how prosperity *can* follow punishment.

Do These Periods of Jewish History Parallel Human Life?

With apologies to those who are exceptions to this imperfect analogy

The period prior to the division of the kingdom may be seen as a person's growing years. It is a relatively idyllic time. There are no real worries and, apart from occasional and almost compulsory teenage rebellion, respect and obedience is given to parents.

The division of the kingdom corresponds to leaving home. The young person follows their own self-centred path oblivious to parental opinions. Then, some tragedy or significant difficulty occurs for the first time, perhaps the death of a friend or a loved grandparent.

Now, like the kingdom of Judah, they reflect for a while on their loss and lifestyle. They recognise the benefits of the standards taught them by their parents and decide to pass them on to their own children. However, personally, they remain more concerned with their own career and lifestyle, and God remains a poor second.

Later, the truth dawns. Mortality seems closer, perhaps the loss of a parent or a serious illness, paralleling the exile. A deeper reflection follows with a fuller reappraisal of values. Finally, realisation comes, '**Seek first the kingdom of God**' (Matthew ch.6).

The final stage of life, like the post-exilic period, becomes one of hope and contentment with one's lot. Life is now God-centred. Only love matters. The cycle is complete.

The Ultimate Prophet and Prophecy in the New Testament

John the Baptist was a prophet, foretelling the coming of the ultimate prophet, Jesus Christ (Matthew ch.3). Jesus Himself was called a prophet (e.g. Matthew ch.21) and although we now know he was more than a prophet, his direct relationship to the Father and his message of salvation certainly also qualified him for the classical title.

The NT often refers to events fulfilling OT prophecies. But this is not contrary to what has already been stated about the nature of prophecy. Rather, such comments are meant to link OT prophecy with the salvation of Christ in the context of the fulfilment of earlier promises and hopes, not primarily the actualisation of specific predictions.

In the early Church it is clear that several people were called prophets (e.g. Agabus in Acts ch.11; several named as prophets in Acts ch.13). St Paul recognised prophecy as the best of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians ch.14) but it is equally clear that the word 'prophet' now has a different meaning. It seems to be applied to those who are seen as holy leaders of the community (e.g. Romans ch.12; 1 Timothy ch.1) and/or those individuals recognised as being wise in religious matters and able to give sound advice when needed (1 Corinthians ch.12).

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

8. What Do Prophets Do?

The prophetic role in the Bible



Questions for Reflection

1. Are biblical prophets different from those of other ancient cultures?
2. Are the OT prophetic messages still valid for us today?
3. Who was the greatest prophet in the OT and why?
4. Has the gift of prophecy ended?

What is Prophecy?

Nowadays, people incorrectly associate the word prophecy with foretelling the future. People who claim to be able to do this today are not called prophets, but mediums or fortune-tellers. In ancient times they would have the title seers or oracles. When prophecy began in Israel is unknown but its origins are generally fixed to the time of the settlement of Canaan. Those personalities called prophets before this period were probably so described on a retrospective basis by the biblical writers, because of their direct relationship to God e.g. Abraham, Moses.

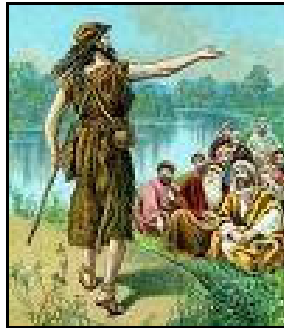


In the Bible, the term prophet is applied to many individuals and groups, apart from those who have books bearing their names. These include 'false' prophets, court prophets and cultic prophets. It seems there were many calling themselves prophets whom the biblical writers did not recognise as such. In general, the criteria for accepting someone as a genuine prophet seem to be direct contact with God and the fact that the prophecies were, in hindsight, recognised as being correct. Yet, there are several who the biblical writers just call prophets without actually demonstrating a prophetic role. However, despite all these reservations, the key to understanding the type of prophecy we are concerned with is its religious and moral nature. A prophet is, in essence, an intermediary between God and humankind, and the OT prophets were messengers to the chosen people of the Covenant.

These messages always included some moral or ethical content, either declaring the standards of behaviour to be followed or admonishing for a breach of such standards. Because these standards of conduct formed part of the Covenant and were associated with the Law, any breach was, therefore, seen as a failure to comply with its promises and sanctions could follow. The Prophets, then, really acted as the moral conscience of the people and King. The notion of a prophet as someone foretelling the future probably came about because their warnings also carried threats of future disaster for a failure to repent.

Prophets in the Bible

Five women are named as prophets: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Noadiah in the OT and Anna in the NT, although it is not clear how these fulfil the criteria. Aaron is described as a prophet, but in reality he is a voice-piece for Moses, and although Abraham and Joshua are called prophets they do not meet the criteria precisely. Those who readily meet the definition of prophet include, among others, Moses, Samuel, Gad and Nathan in the court of David, and the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. In the NT, John the Baptist and Jesus are obvious examples.



However, when biblical prophecy is discussed, the central names are associated with the Prophetic books, those known as the classical prophets: the so-called Major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the 12 'Minor' prophets. Catholics also classify the Books of Baruch, Lamentations and Daniel as prophetic books, although Daniel is not a prophetic book in the true sense but an apocalyptic/visionary book like Revelations. These prophetic books contain a combination of the actual words of the named prophet, narratives written as if by the prophet, and narratives written in the third person by disciples or the later redactor(s) who brought the particular book together in its final form.

When and Why the Prophets Spoke

To have a better understanding of the classical prophets, a basic history of Israel is provided below, divided into four periods.



A. From the Division of the First Kingdom to the Destruction of Israel

On Solomon's death (mid 10th cent. BC) the Kingdom split into two :A major northern kingdom called Israel with 10 of the tribes, and a minor southern one called Judah based around Jerusalem.

This was a period of prosperity, but it was accompanied by gross social injustice and idolatry, clear breaches of the Covenant. Amos and Hosea preached for repentance. Hosea uses a beautiful allegory of a man's love of his prostitute wife to parallel God's love of Israel. A little later, the first Isaiah prophesied from Jerusalem against moral corruption, promised God's protection to King Ahaz, and pleaded to King Hezekiah to trust in God. Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, spoke against social and moral evils, but his book also contains exilic material about the destruction of Israel and Judah and offers hope in the form of a future King to be born in Bethlehem (ch. 5).

B. From the Destruction of Israel to the Destruction of Judah in 586BC

The larger Northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721BC and its people dispersed (the 'lost' 10 tribes). Only the relatively minor kingdom of Judah was allowed to continue, but then only as a vassal state.

This was the period of the prophets Nahum, Zephaniah, Habbakkuk and Jeremiah. But it is Jeremiah who is the major voice of God, crying out against idolatry and injustice, asking for repentance, and threatening Judah's destruction. He witnessed the fall of Jerusalem. It is in the book of Jeremiah that a new category of covenant is inaugurated, no longer an external Law but the inner calling of the heart (Jeremiah ch.31).

C. The Period of the Exile and Captivity in Babylon 586 – 536BC

This was a traumatic period for the Jews, a time of souls searching to understand why God had apparently neglected His Covenant promises and abandoned them.

This was the time of the prophets Baruch, Ezekiel and the second (Deutero) Isaiah. The latter offered hope with a return to Judah. His prophecies are unique in that they also extend to all nations and address the ambiguous figure of the **Suffering Servant** in four passages. The book of Ezekiel is written as if he was present in Jerusalem before its fall and in Babylon as an exile. As such, he offers both criticisms and threats against Judah and comfort in the form of setting out a future political and religious ideal for the new Judah. Crucially, Ezekiel also writes about a new everlasting relationship (ch.36) based on the spirit entering Israel's heart.

D. The Period after the Exile 536 BC onward

The Babylonian Kingdom was destroyed by the Persians under Cyrus who freed the Jews and allowed them to return to Judah, now a Persian province.

The post-exilic prophets were third (Trito) Isaiah and the rest of the Minor prophets.