

Approaching The Prophets

Definition

The Hebrew *nabi* / *nabi'im* confusingly covers not only the books of the named prophets but also the history books from Joshua to Kings, so that the common phrase for the Scripture, *Law and Prophets*, is far nearer to encompassing the Old Testament as a whole than we first think. Joshua's inheritance of the mantle of Moses seems to include him in borrowed plumage, and Samuel – regarded as the author of *Judges* – was certainly considered to be a prophet. In Jewish circles the history books were designated “former prophets” and the prophetic writings in the narrower sense designated “latter prophets”.

The primary meaning of *nabi* is *herald* or *proclaimer*. Those recognised with this title are also accorded others: *man of God* and *servant of God*. The related concepts of ministry and authority are coupled with a degree of holiness.

The Greek term *prophetes* from which our word is drawn implies a speaker who stands before others: the element of *interpretation* seems to lie behind this choice for translating *nabi*, and it has given rise in its turn to the unfortunate assumption that one who speaks before others is actually *foretelling the future*. So in common English parlance being a prophet means almost exclusively “having miraculous foresight”.

This robs the prophet of his vital function: to say what's happening *now*. That is the interpretative rôle which God asks the prophets to fulfil; and it is the *current* relevance of their message which brings them into conflict with people who are looking at the world differently, and whose interest may lie in silencing the proclamation of the divine truth and judgment. Prophets are present in the thick of human affairs, and they speak for the eternal God when they call on people to change, to see things from the divine, rather than the human angle.

Today's Themes

The Prophet as Individualist: the necessity of God in explaining prophecy.

Four necessary features of the prophetic experience:

- That the prophet should encounter and “know” God
- That the prophet should sense the people's distance from God
- That the prophet should proclaim the need for change
- That a situation of crisis should be precipitated.

1 **The Prophet's Encounter with God**

This encounter is God's initiative, and it robs the prophet of independence and of his former life. It is a demanding and often devastating rôle, involving the prophet in a selfless obedience which brings him into the holiness of God's presence. That the prophet's own inclination is of secondary importance is made perfectly clear. Nor are special gifts necessary. God is the driving force.

2 **The Prophet Knows Israel's Unholiness**

All prophets are aware that Israel is unworthy of God. This means that they are critical of their fellow-Jews and therefore open to attack and opposition. They suffer for their proclamation. They keep faith with God as their prime relationship; they also keep faith with the truth about Israel. Stretched between these two extremes, they are men who suffer the distance from God like a physical pain; but they are also bridge-builders, who in their own person offer hope for reconciliation between the Holy and the world.

3 **The Prophet Proclaims The Word From God**

In proclamation the prophets are exalted, and their writings, where extant, are powerful and often highly poetic. These men are speaking out of mystical experiences, and it would be hard to question the sincerity and authenticity of their words. But they are not confined to speaking. In their **prophetic deeds** they act out their message in ways which “incarnate” the word of God; further, many of them go on to become so personally involved with their message that **they come to be what they have to say**: Hosea, married to a whore, calls Israel a whore; Ezekiel announcing the Exile becomes the first exile himself. This mode of heralding God is “fulfilled” when the incarnate Christ becomes damned, cursed, in order to proclaim salvation.

4 **Prophecy Precipitates Judgment**

“The Word does not return empty to God, but carries out what it is sent to do.” (Is 55:11) In its proclamation the living word is released into the world of men, and it becomes the two-edged sword which divides and judges. This critical function will only be fulfilled at the universal judgment; but in the fate of the prophets we are given a taste of what it means. Falsehood is progressively unmasked, and “the word of our God endures forever” (Is 40:8). The prophet risks his relationships, sometimes his life, in speaking as he is commanded to speak. Those who hear are impelled to respond in some way; they can be moved to conversion, as David before Nathan is moved, 2Sam 12:13, and as the Ninevites before Jonah. Or they can be moved to test the veracity of the prophet, as in Wisdom 2:12-20. Then the prophet has to accept into his own flesh the violence with which the word of God is greeted.

When the New Testament begins, prophecy in Israel has been reputedly dead for three centuries. John the Baptist acts with consciously retro inspiration when he dresses as Elijah and takes on the mantle of denunciation and warning; from the desert he begins to speak with the urgent starkness of Deuteronomy. Jesus allies himself with this prophetic revival; and though he behaves rather differently from John (cf Mt 11:18ff) it is clear again and again that he sees himself as intimately connected with the prophetic movement and decisive for its understanding (“There is something greater than Jonah here”- Mt 12:41; “Many prophets...longed to hear what you hear, and never heard it” – Mt 13:17). His own death is the ultimate judgment of the world, Mt 26:64.