

THE PROPHETS

Prophet – a spokesman, esp. for a god; not a religious “fortune teller”

“Professional” Prophets – “career” prophets – being a prophet was their livelihood; appeared both in Israel and among “the nations”:

- Ecstatic – roving bands; used music and/or frenzied ritual to induce prophecies
- Cultic – staff priests, prophets at cultic centers, esp. Bethel and Jerusalem

“Classical” Prophets – received a charism from God to speak His word to the people; some may have originally been cultic prophets before God called them.

“Former Prophets” – mentioned in the Bible’s “historical” books, but not the subjects of the Bible’s “prophetic” books – for example: Nathan, Samuel, Micaiah, Elijah, Elisha

The prophets served as a national conscience, calling the community to change their ways and be faithful to the covenant. The messages were affected by their relationship to the Babylonian Exile (1st deportation in 597 BC; final deportation in 586 BC)

- Pre-Exilic prophets (c. 750–586 BC) warned of God’s impending judgment for the community’s infidelity to the Covenant; indicated that only a remnant would repent and find favor with God. The “Day of the Lord” would be a Day of Doom for the unfaithful nation.
[Amos, Hosea (746-720), Isaiah (742-701), Micah (714-701), Zephaniah (c. 630), Nahum (c. 612), Habakkuk (c. 605), and Jeremiah (c. 626-586)]
- The two Exilic prophets (c. 597–538 BC) changed the tone of their repentance message to one of consolation and hope for the people in exile; God will intervene and restore His people for the sake of His Name, that all may know that salvation is from the Lord.
[Ezekiel (c. 593-571) and 2nd Isaiah (chs. 40-55)]
- Post-Exilic prophets generally addressed the Remnant, presenting the Day of the Lord as a Day of Judgment against the Nations and a Day of Salvation for God’s People.
[“3rd Isaiah” (chs. 56-66), Haggai (520), Zechariah (520-518), Malachi (c. 450), Obadiah (475-450), and Joel (400-350)]

The prophets were unique in judging established institutions. They rebuked ritual practices and outward observances of the Law when the internal commitment to the Law was missing.

Recurring Themes in Prophetic Literature

Although the extent of development and repetition varies among them, and not every theme is present in every prophetic book, these ideas are generally found. The prophets didn't follow them as some sort of standard outline, but might present them in any order, mingling them in the process. The referenced biblical passages illustrate each theme.

Authority – the message is God's word, not just that of the prophet. [Amos 3:1,13]
Some also describe their call by God. [Amos 7:14-16]

Covenant Relationship – contrast between the Lord's actions and the community's, establishing culpability; the people know what's right because of God's covenant with them. [Amos 2:9-11; 3:2]

Specific Sins – concrete instances of infidelity to the Covenant; some present one or two examples, others describe a variety of transgressions. [Amos 2:6-8]

Judgment – God's punishment for the people's sins. Pre-Exilic prophets almost always direct this at the Chosen People. Some post-Exilic prophets direct punishment at the nations that have ravaged Jerusalem. [Amos 2:13-16; 5:16-20]

Call to Repentance – the heart of the process: once the conscience is aware of the existing guilt, repentance should follow. This call may be briefly stated, but it is explicitly present. [Amos 5:4-6]

Remnant – the Lord is the savior of the repentant, if not the whole community; a message of hope amid threats of doom. For post-Exilic prophets, the remnant was often the whole group the prophet addressed, for they were the few who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. [Amos 9:8-15]

Day of the Lord = Salvation – a post-Exilic theme. Instead of a Day of Doom, the Day of the Lord was the symbol of ultimate victory, when doom would befall the nations of the world and the people of Israel would be granted salvation. The "Day of the Lord" acquired a messianic, even apocalyptic, character. [Joel 4:15-21] The imagery of this theme reached its fullest prophetic development in chapters 8-14 of Zechariah.

Each prophet presents the Lord as speaking to His People, showing His awareness of their situation and their needs, and calling them to respond to His gifts of love and the life of His Spirit.

This message reached its perfect expression in the person of Jesus Christ.

We share in His prophetic ministry today when we do likewise.