

Prophets and the Prophetic Call

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Twentieth century research into biblical prophecy has revealed that it is a complex phenomenon in ancient Israelite society that does not lend itself to simple generalisations. Observing the call and activity of the prophet Ezekiel, for example, can throw some light on the nature of Judean prophecy but it does not explain the call, motivation and ministry of, say, Isaiah of Jerusalem. Each prophet needs to be considered in his own time and in light of the historical and social events that shape his call and his message. That said, the prophetic books allow us to identify a number of elements that are common to the call and role of the Israelite prophets.

The Prophetic Call

Prophecy in the Bible can be described as the outward expression of the deep-seated impulse that compels a sensitive individual to revolutionary action. Almost universally this impulse derives from a heightened experience of the sacred or an ecstatic condition that amounts to an altered state of consciousness, out of which the prophet emerges to speak on behalf of God. All the true prophets of the Bible were totally convinced that they had been called by God and, typically, the call came unexpectedly and apart from any human accreditation. Exactly how the call experience and the visions took place will probably remain a mystery but we do know they were extraordinary events occurring with such charismatic impact as to fling the prophet out of the conventional into a transformed and turbulent way of life. When attacked by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, for his prophetic campaign against social injustice and the corruption of King Jeroboam, Amos declared his references by saying:

‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ (Amos 7:14-15 NRSV)

Amos attributes his message to divine inspiration in a way that almost absolves him from personal responsibility for his unpopular pronouncements. The prophets were motivated and strengthened by the all-consuming conviction that their activity was endorsed by God. In the books of the prophets we read variations of the signature statement of their calling and authentication: ‘the Lord spoke to X saying’ or ‘thus says the Lord.’ These are formulaic expressions that serve a literary function and were probably written not by the prophets themselves but by their disciples. However, they bear witness to an observable reality that the life of each prophet underwent a radical change as the result of an electrifying and compelling experience of God.

The whole of the Bible is about relationships. Every story, every episode, every poem, song and prophetic statement is aimed at cultivating a sound relationship with God, other human beings and the whole of creation. Sensitive to the preservation and nurturing of right relationships the prophets felt a passionate reaction to whatever was not right with their society and this predisposed them to receive the divine call. Amos (c. 750 B.C.E.) was appalled at the way the rich and powerful in northern Israel were fleecing the poorer classes and this laid the foundation for his dedicated response to the call to speak out against injustice. Haggai (c. 520 B.C.E.) warned the returned exiles that they would not experience normal life until the Temple was rebuilt. It had lain in ruins after its destruction by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. and Haggai was strongly moved to campaign for the restoration of the Temple and its life of prayer and worship.

What kind of person is a prophet?

The most common word for prophet in the Hebrew Bible is *navi*, which many scholars connect with the Akkadian verb to call, to speak aloud. This was rendered in Greek by the word *prophētes*, which has the same meaning: one who speaks out, proclaims. When we delve into any of the prophetic books we quickly realise that what the prophets proclaim is an agenda that has been given to them by some means of divine communication.

The prophets appeared as extraordinary public figures speaking out dramatically on aspects of their social world that were not in harmony with the reign of God; that were out of step with the principles and values that ensure right relationship with God, fellow human beings and the rest of creation. So while their public and strident action creates in good people an awareness of social and/or moral discord and at the same time generates a crisis in those who are the target of prophetic criticism, their ministry is more than just social action.

As crusaders for change the prophets are destabilising figures trying to shock their leaders into changing a system which is not working because of major breakdowns like corruption in high places, widespread hypocrisy in religious and political circles, infidelity to God through the worship of foreign deities, immoral practices that violated the terms of the covenant and gross injustice towards the poor and powerless. The biblical prophets with their white-hot summons and searing accusations tried to influence people to examine their social systems and behaviour with a view to taking the kind of action that would bring their world in line with God's values. Their message could be captured in cries like: God does not intend the covenant people to tolerate corruption or injustice, to foster the worship of other gods, such as foreign deities or power, prestige and wealth.

To publicly denounce infamous conduct and then endure ridicule and severe opposition required enormous courage. The biblical prophets showed that they were intuitive and daring individuals ready to face hostility in their calling. Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern by court officials and left to die because his message was unpopular. Luckily he was rescued by order of the king. (Jer 38:6-13). Elijah's life was threatened by King Ahab's queen, Jezebel, because of his opposition to her and the priests of Baal. (1 Kings 19:1-3).

Jesus refers to himself as a prophet who was not accepted by his own people and during his days as a wandering teacher he encountered opposition from those he criticised for hypocrisy and injustice. Both Jesus and John the Baptist are Second Testament prophets who showed outstanding courage as they were tested by their enemies and finally put to death for their prophetic words and deeds.

The biblical prophets of the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and the anonymous prophet, called Second Isaiah by scholars, offered a message of hope to the Jerusalemites in captivity. They saw no point in warning of punishment as the people were already suffering as captives. Rather, they promised rescue to their compatriots as long as they kept faith with their covenant promises and resolved to renew their relationship with God.

Did prophets foretell the future?

The prophets were not clairvoyants and foretelling future events was not central to their mission. When they railed against abuses and corruption they warned of future punishment as the inescapable outcome of unfaithfulness. They worked from the principle that God is supremely just and will surely punish evil one way or another. This is not the work of a 'mentalist' or psychic, it is simply telling how things are, not crystal ball gazing or predicting the future. Judgment was certain for those who ignored the inspired words of the prophet.

It is worth noting those prophetic predictions that did not come to pass: Jeremiah foretells the total devastation of Babylon accompanied by bloody carnage (Jer 50:3, 13). In fact, Cyrus and his Persian army took Babylon with very little fuss – no fight, no carnage, no destruction. Jeremiah got it wrong. Isaiah (17:1) predicted Damascus would become a heap of ruins; Second Isaiah (51:3) said that Zion's desert would bloom like a garden; neither of these things happened. And there are more. The very fact that these 'failed' predictions were preserved in the Bible tells us that those who wrote down the oracles of the prophets did not assign much importance to predictions. There was never any attempt to portray the prophets as clairvoyants. Their task was to point out what was wrong in society, strike at complacency and warn that punishment in the form of some misfortune would inevitably follow.

Moses once made the remark to Joshua, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would send his spirit on them!" The great man's wish was that God's spirit would inspire all his

people to listen to the voice of God, dedicate themselves to justice, and honour God by honouring the person standing before them. Some women of the Bible stand out as prophets. Moses' own sister, Miriam, was one such (Exod 15:20f.) and Deborah was a prophet and leader of her people (Judges 4:4). Leading men of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah sought advice and inspiration from the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). Luke mentions the prophetess Anna who proclaimed good news about Jesus when he was presented in the Temple as a baby by Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:36-38).

Modern prophets

In his letters Paul encouraged his communities to listen to the voice of God and prophesy, that is, to offer words of inspiration, encouragement in order to build up others in their efforts to live in the spirit of Christ. Later generations of Christians have given rise to charismatic prophets who stood out as shining lights campaigning for justice and genuine faithfulness to the message and values of Jesus Christ. Today God continues to inspire prophets to stand out and say the hard things that people don't want to hear. Pope Francis is heard urging the Church to get a grip and take stock of its self-understanding, to get back to living the values of Jesus Christ with courage and resolution. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson is a local prophet inspired by God and his own inner drive to remind Church leaders and ministers that their calling is not about power and control but rather about acting as pastors to their flock, nurturing a climate of love and respect for everyone in their care. Bishop Robinson, like so many other prophets, has been criticized for exposing the weeping wounds of sexual abuse in the Church – doing, in fact, what the biblical prophets did in their time.

Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, is well known internationally for his outspoken cries against poverty, injustice, assassinations and torture. He openly attacked the Revolutionary Government of San Salvador for its human rights abuses and for its persecution of those Church workers who sided with the poor. These community workers were subject to threats, arrests, tortures and murders. Romero paid for his prophetic action with his life when he was shot by military agents in March 1980 while celebrating Mass. This was a desperate move to silence the prophet whose voice caused unwelcome disquiet among the rich and influential.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta gave all her energy to caring for the destitute in India. She once said, 'I see God in every human being,' she affirmed, 'When I wash the leper's wounds, I feel I am nursing the Lord Himself. Is it not a beautiful experience?' Her whole life was a prophetic call to the world to rise up out of complacency and be mindful of the poor and rejected. Dorothy Day born in New York dedicated herself to social reform. She became a Catholic at age 30 and was a strong activist for civil rights and social justice. She lived a life of voluntary poverty in the slums of New York City and established shelters for the needy. Her acts of civil disobedience in publicly campaigning against war of any kind brought her opposition from government authorities. She once said, 'If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God.'

St Mary MacKillop is another prophetic voice awakening inspiration for a practical care for the poorest of the poor and disadvantaged in outback parts of Australia. By her words, her spirituality and her very life she lived out the Church's option for the poor, lifting up the lives of underprivileged children by giving them the opportunity of an education.

Genuine prophets share similar characteristics in that they are all driven by a burning passion to see the values of goodness and justice take pride of place in their world. They practise what they preach, living up to the moral and social values they espouse. Prophets are invariably tested as they courageously endure opposition and persecution for disturbing the comfort zones of the affluent and powerful. Finally, authentic prophets are propelled by divine inspiration that stems from their spirituality born of a close relationship with God.