

## PROPHECY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

The Old Testament preserves writings from only sixteen of Israel's prophets. Other prophets, such as Elijah (see 2 Chronicles 21.12), actively engaged in literary pursuits, but none of their writings exist. *Nabhi'* is the most common word used for prophet in the Bible. It is not always used to denote a messenger from God (e.g., "false" prophet). Best translated "speaker," *nabhi'* indicates the function of the prophet. In an active sense, it means one who speaks for another (see Exodus 4.16; 7.1). In a passive sense, it means one who is called to speak. *Ro'eh* and *chozeh* mean "seer," that is, one who is able to perceive spiritual things that are hidden or veiled to others (see 1 Samuel 9.9; Isaiah 30.9-10; Amos 7.12). These words emphasize the prophet's manner of receiving his message rather than the prophet's office. The prophet was "a man of God" (1 Kings 12.22) on whom "the Spirit of the Lord came" (Numbers 24.2; Isaiah 11.2; 2 Chronicles 20.14; cf. Numbers 11.24-29), thereby enabling him to speak the divine message, "the word of the Lord" (1 Kings 18.1; 2 Kings 9.26). So the prophet was one who spoke for God.

To seek the prophetic message was "to inquire of the Lord" (1 Kings 22.5; 2 Kings 1.2; 22.11). Inquiring of deity was a common practice in the ancient Near East. In Israel, however, the ways by which God communicated with man were limited. It was not by divination nor occult practices. Instead, it was through the prophetic office (see Deuteronomy 18.9-21). The Lord revealed his secrets to "his servants the prophets" (Amos 3.7). For this reason, the prophet

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could say, “Thus says the Lord” (1 Samuel 2.27; 2 Samuel 12.7, 11; 24.12). Because of this limitation on approved channels of divine communication, a time of infrequent prophetic vision signified rarity of revelation (1 Samuel 3.1). Rulers lacking in faith and anxious for divine guidance sought other channels (e.g., Saul in 1 Samuel 28.8-19; Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1.2-8). For Saul, though, the word of the Lord came not by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets (1 Samuel 28.6). But for David, the word of the Lord came through the ephod of the priest Abiathar (1 Samuel 30.7-9).

The prophets often spoke directly and literally. They also used parables (2 Samuel 12.10-14), symbolic actions (1 Samuel 15.28; 1 Kings 10.30-31; 20.35-42; 22.1; 2 Kings 2.20-21; 13.14-19), distinctive clothing (2 Kings 1.8; Isaiah 20.2; Zechariah 13.4), flesh markings (1 Kings 20.38), miracles in relation to religious functions (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 1.9; 4.38-41), miracles apart from religious acts (1 Kings 17.22; 2 Kings 2.19-22, 42; 4.1-7, 32-37; 5.1-14, 20-27; 13.20-21), lessons from history, allegory, illustrations from everyday life, proverbs, sarcasm and irony, word plays, puns, symbolic names, and so forth. There were bands of prophets (1 Samuel 10.10). Samuel was the leader or in charge of one group (1 Samuel 19.20). They were called “sons of the prophets” (2 Kings 2.3; 4.1; 6.1). These groups of prophets often were poor (2 Kings 4.1; 5.22; 6.5); they shared a common life (2 Kings 4.38-41; 6.1); and celibacy was not required (2 Kings 4.1). Ecstasy or frenzy, that is, “a state of being beside oneself, beyond all reason and self-control,” does not seem to be a primary characteristic of these prophets. But prophetic ecstasy was evident among the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18.26-29), Eldad and Medad (Numbers 11.24-26), Balaam (Numbers 22.4–24.25), Saul (1 Samuel 10.5-7, 11; 18.10; 19.23-24), Elisha (2 Kings 3.15; cf. 1 Samuel 16.23), and a certain “mad fellow” (2 Kings 9.11; cf. Jeremiah 29.26). Groups of prophets often were located near religious centers of worship, such

as Gibeah (1 Samuel 10.5-10), Ramah (1 Samuel 9.6), Gilgal (1 Samuel 10.8), and Shiloh (1 Kings 14.1). They also sacrificed at these religious centers, for example, Gilgal (1 Samuel 10.8) and Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18.36).

Frequently the prophet acted as adviser to the king concerning the will of God (1 Samuel 22.5; 2 Chronicles 15.1-8; 20.14-20; 25.7). However, if the prophet failed to go to the king, the king often went to the prophet to “inquire of the Lord” (1 Kings 22.5; 2 Kings 3.11). Since his presence might be needed quickly, the prophet was on ready call (2 Chronicles 9.29; 12.15; 13.22). No doubt, prophets were politically influential (see 1 Kings, chapter 1), although some, presumably “false” ones, appear to be no more than court flatterers (1 Kings 22.6). But true prophets were considered dangerous and were persecuted by the kings. For this reason, they might fear for their very lives (1 Kings 19.10; 22.13-28), and oftentimes they exhibited great courage (1 Kings 21.17-29; 2 Samuel 12.7).

The tests of true prophecy included the fulfillment of predictions (Deuteronomy 18.21-22), loyalty to the Lord (Deuteronomy 13.1-5), and the prophet’s message and personal moral conduct (Micah 3.5-8; Ezekiel 13.1-23; Jeremiah 23.11-14; 28.8). False prophets were condemned (Deuteronomy 18.20; Jeremiah 29.31-32; Hosea 9.7). Sometimes a seer would receive payment for personal messages (1 Samuel 9.7-8; 1 Kings 14.3), but false prophets worked primarily for money (Micah 3.5; Amos 7.12), not out of a sense of obligation and duty. True prophets recognized all sin as against God (2 Chronicles 28.9-10) and that God is in control of history (1 Kings 20.13-30; 2 Chronicles 20.37; 25.7). The prophets considered their authority to be beyond the boundaries of Israel (1 Kings 18; 2 Kings 1.2-4; 8.7-15). The prophets were not creators of Israel’s faith, but heirs of an existing tradition (Deuteronomy 34.10; 2 Kings 17.7-23).

Prophetic predictions differ in scope, duration of time before fulfillment, exactness, and in the language used to convey the message. The prophets spoke a message from the past, for the present, with hope and/or gloom for the future. Prophets spoke primarily to their contemporaries, but they also predicted or foresaw future events. Six major predictive themes of the prophetic books include: the fall of Samaria (722 BC), the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC), the Babylonian exile, the return from exile, the coming of the Messiah, and the establishment of the kingdom of the Messiah.