

INTERPRETING THE WORD OF GOD

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Old Testament Prophets in Today's World

by S. J. Schultz

THE LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY of the Old Testament prophets is basically the same as the Hebrew currently spoken in Israel. Should the prophet Isaiah speak in his native Hebrew to twentieth century Israelis, he would be understood more readily than Shakespeare speaking in seventeenth century English to a London audience today.

What about the message of the prophets? Would Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or any other prophets preach the same, basic content to a modern audience? To what extent would they modify their approach to current social, political, economic, and religious problems?

The concept of the prophets and their messages comes to the modern scholar from the literature known as the Old Testament, primarily the Pentateuch, the historical accounts, and the books bearing the names of the prophets. Due to the wide difference of opinion among modern scholars as to when this literature was written, the prophets and their messages are interpreted from contrasting viewpoints.

The basic thesis that the Pentateuch was composed centuries later than Moses—usually dated c. 950-450 B.C.—is still widely assumed as the framework, or the most plausible theory, for interpreting the Old Testament. Representative of this position is G. Larue who asserts, "Because the documentary hypothesis is the most widely accepted of all theories of Pentateuchal analysis, this book will utilize in principle, the conclusions reached by this meth-

od of research."¹ J. Lindblom consequently asserts that we know nothing of the beginning of prophecy in Israel and that the first appearance of ecstatic prophets "in the reliable records of Israel" is in the time of Saul.² In evaluating the narrative about the early prophets of Israel as given in the accounts of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, Lindblom observes that these are "so filled with legendary material that it is very difficult to reconstruct with certainty the historical facts." Consequently, concerning any prophets "we can say nothing or very little with any certainty."³

As to the classical prophets beginning with Amos, the ideas of these men have been preserved in the books bearing their names. While some modern scholars insist that the prophets wrote down their words, others believe that the disciples of the prophets were largely responsible for writing down the messages of the prophets, supplementing them as the changing times required in subsequent generations.

Exemplary of this general viewpoint is the analysis of the book of Amos by H. Keith Beebe. He considers the book of Amos to be a homogeneous literary unit. Among the later supposed editorial additions are 1:1-2; 2:4-5; 3:3-8; 4:13; 5:8-9, 14-15; 7:10-17; 9:5-6; 11-15. Consequently, when the books bearing the names of the prophets are evaluated with critical care of modern scholarship, relatively little in these books can be claimed with assurance to be the words of the prophets in the literature bearing their names.

The book of Isaiah is considered to be an anthology composed during a period of about four centuries. The prophet Isaiah is recognized as a preacher and poet who proclaimed his oracles as messages of God. As the disciples or schools of disciples remembered these oracles, they would arrange them in writing and would "add to them biographical material, editorial glosses, and perhaps new prophecies of their own."⁴

Whatever may be attributed to the prophet Isaiah is limited to chapters 1-39. Chapters 40-55 are ascribed to a writer or an inspired follower of Isaiah during the Babylonian exile, and "still later, the prophet's spirit was reborn in the oracles with which the collection concludes, chapters 56-66," according to J. K. West.⁵ Whereas West credits Isaiah with most of chapters 1-23 and 28-32,

other scholars like Robert Pfeiffer would ascribe to Isaiah less than six chapters, primarily recorded in chapters 1-12.⁶

In contrast, there are scholars who take the literature of the Old Testament seriously. Moses is recognized as the great prophet through whom came the divine revelation as recorded in the Pentateuch. The historical and prophetic books are regarded as reliable and trustworthy accounts that provide the basis for considering the messages of the prophets. Representative of this viewpoint is R. K. Harrison who writes, "Prophetism as such among the Hebrews can legitimately be said to have begun with the historical Moses, who later became a standard of comparison for all subsequent personages (Deut. 18:15ff.; 34:10)."⁷

It was through Moses that the religion of Israel was revealed at Mount Sinai after the Israelis were delivered out of Egypt and established as an independent nation.⁸ It was through Moses that God and Israel entered into a treaty relationship which was renewed on the plains of Moab before Moses died.⁹ It was through Moses that the Old Testament canon was born after the Exodus victory and the renewal of this covenant as given in Deuteronomy.¹⁰ As a written document the Pentateuch constitutes one-fourth of the entire Old Testament and more than three times the volume of literature attributed to any other contributor to the Old Testament canon.¹¹

Prophetism in Israel is first and foremost associated with Moses, who was the mediator and recipient of revelation when Israel's spiritual vassal-union with God the great King was established. It was under Moses as prophet-priest that Israel's faith assumed its characteristic form, so that each prophet in subsequent times was to be recognized as a true prophet only if his message was in basic agreement with the Mosaic revelation, Deuteronomy 13:1-6.

Each prophet, however, had a direct and vital relationship with God in the immediacy of his experience and was inescapably constrained to proclaim what was divinely revealed to him in addition to the written message beginning with Moses. It was more than a subjective conviction. Speaking in the name of the Ruler of history, a prophet discerned the life of people in the light of divine revelation, challenging his hearers to respond to God's message.

Consequently, a prophet was a vehicle of divine revelation—not merely a news analyst with keen intellectual insight nor an ecstatic, dervish-kind of instrument possessed by a higher power.

Proclamations by the prophets often were expositions of the Pentateuch and, in the language of the common people, expressed reproof, correction, judgment, admonition, comfort, or encouragement; and often included eschatological, or predictive, elements. Predictions concerning the future usually were secondary to the historical and contemporary elements. Prophets normally made a practical appeal speaking to the problems of individuals as well as the nation, warning the wicked about future judgment, and encouraging the God-fearing people by assuring them of restoration.

THE ESSENCE OF PROPHETIC PREACHING

What constituted the core of prophetic preaching in Old Testament times? What was common to all the prophets throughout the centuries before Jesus Christ, the greatest Prophet, appeared? Are the basic ideas they proclaimed to their audiences relevant to our twentieth-century religious and political life?

Extensive and vast is the modern bibliography discussing the messages of the prophets. Much has been written to focus upon the political and social concerns of the prophets and how they apply to our current situations.

Among the Jews there was an abundance of literature interpreting and expounding the Mosaic revelation and the subsequent prophetic writings. In the wake of the prophetic era, talmuds and tractates have preserved for generations the interpretations of rabbis and other learned men since the beginnings of Judaism.

The simplest and most profound analysis of the messages of the prophets is provided for us in the conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders, the Pharisees and lawyers (Mt 22:35-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-28). The undisputed conclusion was that the entire body of literature—"law and prophets," which constitute the entire Old Testament—can be reduced to two simple statements: (1) love God wholeheartedly, and (2) love your neighbor as yourself. These two commandments express the essence of the Old Testament. Obedience to them is more important than sacrifice

or any other ritualistic observance. All other considerations are secondary to the love relationship between man and God and the love relationship between man and his neighbor. These two statements summarize most briefly all that is written in the Law and the prophets concerning man's basic duty and responsibility Godward and manward. All other laws, requirements, and instructions are secondary to these two.¹²

THE BASIC CONCERN

The foundation stone in the ministry and message of each true prophet in Israel was the man-God relationship. Love for God or the lack of it was the starting point as a prophet began to address himself to his fellowmen. This was of primary importance and essential in making the proper adjustments to the total pattern of living. At the heart of all problems—social, political, religious, and national—was the individual's attitude toward and relationship with God. This was fundamental to everything else the prophets had to say to the people to whom they ministered.

Samuel, next to Moses, the most influential prophet in Israel, was called to prophetic ministry when the religion of Israel had declined into a state of apostasy under Eli. The people, under the leadership of Eli's sons, believed that the ark representing the presence of God would bring them victory if brought to the field of battle; but they found that they could not force God to serve them. They were defeated, and the ark was captured by the Philistines. Religion had become a matter of ritualism and external performance of rites and ceremonies. Idols interfered with devotion to God.

Recognizing that the national problem was Philistine oppression, Samuel publicly confronted his people with the challenging words, "If you return to the LORD" (1 Sa 7:3). When they brought God into focus, the Israelites experienced victory over the enemy.

Nathan had the crucial responsibility of making King David conscious of his relationship with God (2 Sa 12). Being in the foremost position as king of Israel, David acknowledged that he had tried to live excluding God from consideration in his daily life (Ps 32). The abundance of sacrifices and offerings he could

supply in religious rituals (Ps 51:16) did not relieve the terrible conviction that gripped him. Only in an attitude of repentance (Ps 32:5) and contrition (51:17) was David enabled to restore his personal relationship to God. The natural sequence to this wholesome attitude toward God was the offering of sacrifices and service to his fellowmen.

Solomon began his reign by wholeheartedly seeking God in an attitude of humility and dependence. But in the course of time, Solomon permitted polygamy and idolatry to affect his Godward relationship, and the great kingdom of Israel was divided as a result of his apostasy (1 Ki 11). Prophet after prophet came to warn the kings in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms from the time of Solomon's death to the destruction of Samaria in 722 B.C. and the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Kingship in Israel represented a trust, or endowment, of power in which the king was accountable to God as he ruled over God's chosen people (1 Sa 10:1). Toleration and promotion of idolatry was an offense of prime importance, and prophets, as messengers of God, did not hesitate to warn the kings that judgment awaited them unless they turned back to God. Consider how men like Ahijah, Shemaiah, Azariah, Hanani, Jehu, Elijah, Elisha, Oded, and other prophets boldly confronted the kings, as recorded in the books of Kings and Chronicles.¹³

Amos, who emerged on the scene when the Northern Kingdom was enjoying unprecedented economic and political prosperity, appropriately reminded his hearers that it was God who had redeemed the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage and had given them possession of the land of Canaan (2:9-10). God had sent them prophets, whom they had silenced (2:11-12). Because Israel was God's people and God's family, therefore she was to prepare to meet God lest the judgment of God's wrath overtake them (4:12). This meeting with God would be a day of darkness and gloom, because they had not maintained a wholesome relationship with God.

Hosea incisively charged Israel with breaking their love relationship with God. He spoke of it in marital terms. In an outstanding use of metaphor, he asserted, "The land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the LORD" (1:2, NASB). More than any other

prophet, Hosea portrayed in his opening chapters the intimate personal relationship between God and Israel. Even as Gomer abandoned Hosea, so Israel had forsaken their God.

Isaiah explicitly accused his people that they had "revolted against Me" (1:2, NASB), "abandoned the LORD . . . despised the Holy One of Israel . . . turned away from Him" (1:4, NASB). The basic relationship with God had been broken, and the evils manifested in their pattern of living were the result of this absence of acknowledging God. Repeatedly throughout his book Isaiah charged his people with apostasy.

The core of Israel's problem, asserted Jeremiah, was cultic apostasy—they had forsaken God (2:13). Again and again Jeremiah confronted his people with the charge that they had broken their relationship with God as he warned them of impending doom. G. von Rad observes that Jeremiah gave much less space to "reproof for breaking legal enactments than to complaints against Israel's cultic apostasy."¹¹ Idolatry had been substituted for worship of God in the total pattern of living. The priests in their rituals, the prophets in their proclamations, and the rulers by their example, lacked reverence and respect for God by participating in and promoting idolatry. Fearlessly the prophet charged his people with harlotry and fornication in their relationship with God. Although they professed to be God's people, worshiped in the Temple, prided themselves in being custodians of the Law, and felt secure in being God's covenant people, Jeremiah pointedly faced them with the fact that they did not have a vital, meaningful relationship with God. Their religion was merely an outward profession.

Ezekiel, who spoke to the Israelites in the environs of Babylon, provides the most vivid portrayal of the broken relationship between God and Israel. Being exiled with thousands of Israelites in 597 B.C., Ezekiel was keenly conscious of their prevailing hope to return to Jerusalem in the near future. They did not believe Jeremiah's warning that Jerusalem was doomed to destruction by the Babylonians and that the captivity would last seventy years (Jer 27-29). In the year 593 B.C. Ezekiel responded to a divine call to be a watchman to the Israelites (1-3). After his incisive analysis

of their apostasy (4-7) Ezekiel, through a vision, was given a message that realistically conveyed God's abandonment of Jerusalem to destruction (8-11). The leaders of Israel were guilty of religious practice that reflected their lack of exclusive devotion to God. Assembled in the Temple, the elders tolerated, approved of, and participated in idolatry. The women were publicly weeping for Tammuz in the gate of the Lord's house. Twenty-five men were worshipping the sun with their backs to the Temple. Consequently God's presence was being withdrawn from the Temple eastward to the Mount of Olives. Jerusalem was being abandoned to destruction because Israel had forsaken God.

Should the prophets address the religious people of the twentieth century, their messages would express in similar terms concern about prevailing conditions. People profess to be in a vital relationship with God, but in their pattern of living exhibit devotion primarily to materialistic gain. Participation in worship services and rituals, devotion to their church organizations, and bibliolatry often obscure a genuine love for God.

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

Next to love for God, the prophets emphasized the responsibility man has toward his fellowman. Said Moses, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev 19:18, 34); "Love ye therefore the stranger" (Deu 10:19). The Israelites were to manifest toward the strangers among them the love that God had demonstrated in delivering them out of Egyptian bondage. Out of this experience of being loved came the ability, or capacity, to love their neighbors. In this sense the Israelites were to represent God to their fellowmen.

In the context of this command in Leviticus are the instructions for justice and equity in human relations. Consider Moses' teaching in Deuteronomy as he epitomized that which was important for their pattern of living.¹⁵ In chapters 5-11 he focused attention upon a wholehearted commitment to and love for God. Chapters 12-26 provided instructions for the Israelites to live as individuals and as a nation so that justice and righteousness would permeate their total culture. This is the way they were to live as God's chosen

and liberated people. These elaborate instructions provided guidance for them to exemplify love for neighbor in daily life.

It was the failure to exemplify these standards of justice and equity as outlined by Moses that came in for examination as the prophets assessed the problems prevailing in their times. Social injustice could easily be observed in daily practice, whereas the question of a vital, personal relationship with God was often obscured by religious rites and ceremonies. Consequently when the prophets attacked the social evils of their fellow citizens they could be much more specific and direct.

Consider the injustice when Ahab and Jezebel acquired the Jezreelite vineyard through the murder of its owner, Naboth. In denunciation of this use of royal power Elijah spoke out boldly, confronting Ahab with a sobering message of impending judgment (1 Ki 21).

Amos delineated the mistreatment of fellowmen on both a national and an individual basis. Surrounding nations were charged with deeds of oppression, slavery, cruel warfare, and invasion (1: 3—2:5). For these acts of injustice toward others, divine judgment awaited these nations.

The Israelites were in for greater punishment. God had delivered them from Egyptian oppression (Amos 2:10; 3:1-2) and had given them the land of Canaan as their possession (2:9-10). Repeatedly God warned them through prophets, crop failure, plagues, and warfare (2:11-12; 4:6-11). To these acts of mercy divinely intended to cause them to repent and return to God, the Israelites had reacted negatively.

Lacking a love for and a wholehearted devotion to God, the Israelites had become engrossed in idolatry and social evils that offered clear evidence that they failed to show love for their neighbors. The standard of righteousness and equity prescribed by God (Lev 19:35-36; Deu 1:16-17; 10:17-19; 16:18-20; 29:14-21) was ignored by them in daily life. On the basis of their own standards, they considered it permissible for those in power to accept bribes and sell a widow's son into slavery to collect the money for a pair of shoes (Amos 2:6-7; 4:1; 8:4-6). Injustice and evil abounded

(5:10-12), and cheating was considered an acceptable business practice (8:5).

Besides these inequities the Israelites hated honest judges (5:10), silenced the prophets, and enticed the Nazirites to break their vows by drinking wine (2:12). Even Amos himself was rebuked by a priest from Bethel and reported to the king (7:10-17).

The Israelites failed to realize that man was an extension of God, created in His image. To hurt man was to stab God's integrity. God loves all men everywhere. Consequently judgment awaits the man who mistreats his fellowmen, whom God loves.

Hosea, a contemporary of Amos, indicted the people for similar inequities. As he looked at prevailing practices he observed lying, stealing, perjury, murder, debauchery, and bloodshed as accepted ways of life (4:1-2; 6:8; 7:1, 5-7; 10:4; 12:7-8). He pointed his finger at the priests and rulers, holding them responsible for ensnaring and deluding the people in the ways of idolatry (5:1). Throughout his messages he reminded them that they had failed to manifest God's love to their fellowmen. Because of this, judgment awaited them.

Micah asserted that justice had decayed. The poor were exploited, judges in the courts abused their power, and bribery was a common practice. Greediness and lust for money permeated culture so that prophets and priests browbeat the poor and favored the rich. Because of this, the hill of Zion, which was the seat of power and government, would be plowed as a field.

As God's messenger, Micah reminded the people that these were sins against God. God, who had extended His love and mercy to Israel by redeeming them, expected them to practice love, mercy, and justice toward their fellowmen (6:1-10).

Isaiah saw evidence all about him that the Israelites failed to show love to their neighbors. The poor, the widows, and the orphans were neglected and mistreated. As long as these maladjustments prevailed, God would not look with favor upon their offerings and ritualistic observances or even hear their prayers (1:1-28). Social and business relations were permeated with greed, self-indulgence, intemperance, cynical materialism, false standards of moral-

ity, intellectual pride, and a lack of integrity (5:8-23). As Isaiah analyzed their pattern of living, in which they oppressed the poor, lacked a compassion for the righteous who were oppressed, and even participated in idolatry and idolatrous rites, he concluded that they lacked respect and reverence for God (56:9-57:21). Fasting, a religious ritual, could not substitute for the inequity and injustice that prevailed in the people's daily relationships (58:1-14). Social evils manifested toward each other had separated the people from God and made their prayers ineffective (59:1-8). Religious rites and ceremonies were futile and useless Godward when justice and equity were lacking manward.

Jeremiah, living in the final decades of Israel's first commonwealth, was divinely informed that Jerusalem and the Temple would be reduced to ruins in his lifetime (chap. 6). Incisively he analyzed the sins of the people, pointing out that they lacked neighborly love (9:2-6). Observing their daily conversation, Jeremiah was aware of their crafty cunning, deceitfulness, lying, and slander. Through cheating and trickery they took advantage of one another. Oppression was common. Injustice, greediness, immorality, murder, and theft were so common that offenders felt no sense of shame (chaps. 2-6).

At the same time Jeremiah was aware of the attitude of the people. They thought that through their religious rites and ceremonies they would avert the day of judgment. Priests and prophets, claiming to prophesy in God's name (14:13-16), misinterpreted the Law (8:8-12) and assured the people of peace (6:13-14). The people believed that God would not let the Temple be destroyed since it was His dwelling place (see 1 Ki 6:7; 2 Ch 7-8). Since they were custodians of the Law, or Mosaic revelation, nothing would happen to them. They thought that since they were God's covenant people, they were indispensable to the long-range plan of God. Jeremiah warned them that this was false security.

Jeremiah himself was deeply concerned and prayed for his people. His soul was crushed by the realization that God's judgment was about to be released upon his fellow Israelites (9:1). As Jeremiah interceded for his people, God informed him three times that

his prayer was futile (7:16; 11:14; 14:11). The destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem and the termination of the kingdom was near.

Ezekiel, who spoke to the Jerusalem exiles in Babylon, portrayed the impending destruction of Jerusalem repeatedly and vividly to his fellow Israelites. His emphasis was upon the gross idolatry prevailing throughout the city of Jerusalem as well as in the Temple area. This idolatry was evidence that they had broken their relationship with God. Rites, ceremonies, worship in the Temple were but outward acts of piety. Love and reverence for God were lacking. It was because of this idolatry, and not primarily because of the social evils, that God was abandoning the Temple and Jerusalem to destruction.

In this manner each generation throughout the First Commonwealth of Israel (c. 1050-586 B.C.) was warned about their relationship Godward and then about their relationship manward. Although the former always had priority in the prophets' preaching, the latter often received the most extended analysis and denunciation.

CONCLUSION

Were these prophets to speak in our times, would they proclaim essentially the same message? Do their concerns, as expressed in Old Testament times, have any bearing on our individual and national problems? As modern scholars summarize the conditions prevailing in the days of the prophets, the similarity to twentieth-century situations seems quite apparent.

Consider how John Bright describes the situation in Israel.¹⁶ The monarchy created a change in social structure producing a society of class distinction; few were privileged, and many were poor. As tribal identity and structure disappeared, the controversies once subject to covenant law became a concern for biased judges. The rich had lost even nominal respect for the Law. Vivid examples are given in Hosea and Amos.

F. F. Bruce analyzes the problems in a similar manner.¹⁷ The greed of the wealthy drove them to use unfair business practices to

extract money from the poor. When the poor could not meet their mortgage payments because of crop failures foreclosures enriched the greedy and made the poor more destitute. While the peasant lost his tribal inheritance and became a serf, the rich enjoyed more luxury.

Speaking about the times in which Isaiah and Hezekiah lived, Jacques Ellul describes the situation as reflected in Micah:

At this very time Micah was vigorously denouncing injustice, hoarding, and the exploitation of the poor. Women were being driven out of their homes, the poor were being stripped of their very skin, and the princes of the house of Israel were perverting the law. They were building Jerusalem with wrong, while the prophets were prophesying for money (Micah 3-4). Thus moral collapse and social injustice characterized Jerusalem and the chosen people.¹⁵

Currently corruption and iniquity are erupting at all levels of society and government. The public and private breakdown of morals is apparent all about us. The new morality condones some law breaking in the name of love or compassion. Man is a law unto himself; he has no consciousness of God in his daily life. Without God in focus, there is no absolute moral law to govern the behavior of man in government or society.

The messages of the prophets are as appropriate for modern times as they were when originally given. The basic need for man to acknowledge God is as great as ever. Very timely is the charge of the prophets, "You have forsaken God." It is only as man acknowledges God that he will become genuinely conscious of the need to love his neighbor and treat him justly; a genuine love for God will ultimately be expressed toward one's neighbor.

The prophets' priorities need to be emphasized as their message is applied to modern times. It is not a question of evangelism or social action. Both must be considered important, but the order is significant. Man's Godward relationship must come first. Only in relationship to God can man gain a proper relationship with his fellowman.

In our concern to make the message of the prophets relevant to

our modern situations, may we heed the appropriate words of Charles H. Troutman: "A gospel that rightly insists on the priority of man's relation to God may run the risk of implying that man's relationship to his fellowmen as individuals and society is unimportant . . . we must show the courage of former generations of evangelicals but refuse to follow their strategy. Too much was lost."¹⁹