

the idolatrous worship sites. When the king was unfaithful, God sent prophets to rebuke and restore him.

Sometimes the king heeded the prophet's words and the nation was blessed (like Rehoboam who repented before the prophet Shemaiah in 2 Chr 12). Sometimes the king ignored the prophet (Ahab in 1 Kgs 22), imprisoned the prophet (Asa in 2 Chr 16), and even murdered the prophet (Jehoiakim in Jer 26). According to tradition, Manasseh had Isaiah sawn in two (cf. Heb 11:37). Some prophets were false prophets who spoke what the king and people wanted to hear and not what God commanded (Hananiah predicted return from exile within two years; Jeremiah responded that Hananiah would die that same year; Jer 28).

PROPHETIC OBJECT LESSONS

The Lord desperately wanted to get his people's attention so that they could avoid the horrors of exile. Sometimes he had the prophets write songs (Isa 5), prepare legal briefs (Micah 6), and inscribe prayers (Hab 3). Sometimes the prophets had to act out some strange scenarios, such as burying a loincloth (Jer 13), lying on one's side for a year (Ezek 4), and going around stripped and barefoot for three years (Isa 20). The commands could be quite personal: Jeremiah was forbidden to marry (Jer 16), Hosea was told to marry a harlot (Hos 1), and Ezekiel was forbidden to mourn when his wife died (Ezek 24). Through these unusual and sometimes extreme actions, God used the prophets to communicate to his people the range of his deep emotions.

GOING FURTHER

Given that the prophets are calling Israel back to the Mosaic covenant and we in the church are not Israel nor party to their covenant, how are the messages of the prophets relevant for us?

PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT STUDY

Read some of the oracles against foreign nations, such as Isa 13–23, Jer 46–51, Ezek 25–32, Nahum, and Obadiah. Think about who the audience is and what the purpose is. Why is this so important?

THE PROPHETS: RETURN TO THE (MOSAIC) COVENANT

PREPARATION FOR THIS STUDY

The chief message of the prophets God sent before the exile was a call to return to the covenant. Thus harsh words of judgment comprise the majority of Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah as well as large sections of Isaiah and Joel. Read Isa 1, Jer 1–3, Hos 1–3, Amos 3–4, and Micah 1–2 in light of the Mosaic Covenant.

WHAT IS A PROPHET?

A prophet is one who speaks for God (Deut 18:18). His ministry may include predicting the future, but prophecy is any words spoken for God, predictive or not. Prophets could be shepherds (like Amos), priests (like Jeremiah), or part of the royal family (like Zephaniah). Their ministry could be short (like Amos) or last 50 years (like Isaiah). They addressed Israel (before its fall in 722), Judah (before, during and after the exile in 586), and all of the other nations (because all people are accountable to their sovereign Creator).

DIFFERENT KINDS OF PROPHECY

1. Description of sin (e.g., Amos 5)
2. Prediction of judgment (e.g., Jer 4)
3. Call to repent (e.g., Joel 2:12–17)
4. Oracle against a foreign nation (e.g., Isa 13–23)
5. Prediction of future restoration (e.g., Ezek 33–48).

Messages of judgment predominate in advance of punishment. For example, the book of Amos has 9 chapters of doom and gloom and only the last 5 verses provide hope. On the other hand, those who were experiencing their punishment received larger doses of hope. For example, nearly half of Ezekiel (during the exile) predicts future glory; nearly all of Zechariah (after the exile) addresses the future kingdom.

PROPHETS COME IN CLUSTERS

We typically see a flurry of prophetic activity with a major apostasy or impending judgment. God sent (1) Ahijah and an unnamed prophet when Jeroboam set up the golden calves; (2) Elijah and Elisha when Israel turned to Baal; (3) Jonah, Hosea, and Amos to prepare the northern kingdom for its destruction; (4) Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah to prepare the southern kingdom for its destruction; (5) Ezekiel and Daniel to help the distraught exiles.

THE MERCY OF A HARSH WORD

Predictions of doom also implicitly provided hope if the nation would repent. Even if the judgment seemed certain, repentance would stay God's hand. One example: Jonah prophesied "forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned"; the Ninevites repented and were spared (3:10). In many cases, God knew the nation was too committed to its sin to repent and thus he could safely predict impending judgment. But it must be recognized that in sending prophets of judgment, the Lord was displaying mercy to his covenant people.

INDIVIDUAL OR CORPORATE?

The message of the prophets applied to the nation, not to individuals directly. The nation would be judged if the nation did not repent. Individuals might repent, but unless the nation as a whole repented, all would still be judged. There was always a righteous remnant, but these suffered along with the nation. For example, the prophet Obadiah suffered in the days of Ahab when Elijah commanded was a drought for three years; Ezekiel and Daniel were deported to Babylon along with others.

THE PROPHETS AND THE COVENANTS

The prophets make a lot more sense when read in light of God's covenants with his people. Because God made an unconditional promise to **Abraham** to give his descendants the land of Canaan and to bless the world through him, we can understand why the prophets predicted Israel's restoration. Because God promised

David that he would have a son to rule forever over Israel, we should not be surprised to hear predictions of a future righteous ruler. Prophecies related to the Abraham and Davidic covenants are positive in nature and will be studied at a later time.

The majority of the prophets' messages related to the **Mosaic covenant**. When God bound himself to the nation in this covenant, he promised blessings for obedience and curses for disloyalty (Deut 27-28). When the prophets speak of the nation's sin, they are calling the nation to obey the laws of the Mosaic covenant. When the prophets predict judgment and exile, they are declaring that God will be faithful to punish disobedience as he promised.

The prophets addressed national disobedience to the **two greatest commandments**: love for God and love for neighbor. One way to read the prophets would be to classify each violation according to the Ten Commandments. Israel worshiped other gods (#1), fashioned worthless idols (#2), profaned God's name among the nations (#3), refused to keep the Sabbath (#4), and perpetuated great evils against their own brothers (#5-10). Some prophets are more concerned with unfaithfulness to God (like Hosea) and others are more focused on social injustice (like Amos). But the two went together; if the nation was guilty in one, they were guilty in the other.

Though the Lord is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness," the nation refused his mercy and denied his kingship. Just as the Lord predicted, the nation would be deported from the land, but in the same breath God declared that (on the basis of his promises) they would be restored (Deut 29-30).

PROPHETS AND KINGS

The role of the king was to represent God to the people and the people to God. The king was specifically to lead the nation in obedience to the covenant. For that reason he was commanded to copy, carry, read, and obey the covenant (Deut 17). When the king was faithful, he led the nation to obey by (1) calling the nation to repentance; (2) modeling covenant obedience; and (3) destroying