The Prophets

What Is a Prophet?

You might think the answer to this question is simple: a prophet is someone who predicts the future. But this is not the biblical understanding of what a prophet is. The Bible defines a prophet as a spokesperson for God. The prophet reports to the community what God speaks to him or her.

Usually the prophets’ messages warn the people when they are sinning and tell them how God will punish them if they continue to sin. Sometimes the reports from the prophets describe how God will save the people from present oppression and outline how they should respond to God. It can appear that prophets are predicting the future, because what they warn often comes to pass. But we must always remember that the words of the prophet are God’s speech.

We call prophets’ speeches oracles. An oracle is a message from God delivered to the people by a prophet. Prophets can deliver these oracles in many different ways. They can speak them, sing them, or even act them out. We will look at these various ways in more detail later.

Prophets were not necessarily passive mouthpieces. Some prophets argued with God; the Bible says that a few even changed God’s mind. Prophets also delivered God’s message in ways their community would best understand. We see prophets adding to their oracles to make God’s message clear.

Facing Our Own Problems with the Prophets

It is hard for us today to imagine prophets of old, because we live in a world where prophets are viewed with suspicion. Some might picture them as people who were always ranting and raving, as if they were a little “nuts.”Part of the problem is that we live in a society where people tend to put down those who claim to be prophets.

Even if you personally believe there are prophets among us today, we live in a culture where those who feel that way are in the minority. When we read stories about the prophets, we bring our current attitudes with us. We read biblical texts as twenty-first-century Americans, not as sixth century BC Israelites, which makes it hard to take the prophets seriously.

Israel’s View of Prophets

In contrast to our culture, the Israelites were very accepting of prophets. They believed that God communicated to the people through the words of a prophet. This attitude toward the prophets was especially strong during the monarchy, when Israelite and Judean kings had prophets as part of their royal administration. What do we know about the Israelite prophets?

**Prophetic activity was a social phenomenon.** Today when we think about the prophets, we tend to imagine solitary, holy individuals, similar to saints and hermits. We might conclude that what is important for making someone a prophet is their piety. But prophets are not prophets unless they deliver God’s message to the people. Having an individual experience of God does not make someone a prophet.

Conversely, prophets are not prophets unless some group recognizes them as prophets. The Israelites knew that people could think that they were hearing God’s voice but could be mistaken or delusional. They had a couple of ways to explain this phenomenon. First, they might say a god other than Yahweh could be talking to the prophet (remember they did not yet believe that Yahweh was the only God). Second, they might say someone was possessed by a demon or a “lying spirit.” So it was not enough for persons to claim that they had talked to God. The community played a role in determining whether such a claim was true.

**Israel had hundreds of prophets.** People often think the only prophets who were around in ancient Israel were the ones named in the Bible. We might imagine a famous prophet, such as Elijah, as a solitary prophet in his day. That is far from the truth. The Bible tells us there were hundreds of other prophets when Elijah lived, just in the small area around the city of Samaria. So why didn’t the people listen to the prophet? They probably did. It just may have been the wrong prophet.

**There were many different kinds of prophets.** We tend to think all prophets were alike: they heard God’s voice, and they spoke it back to the people. Again, the Bible tells us something quite different. There were different types of prophets. Some worked for the king. Some worked in groups. Some worked at temples. Others were solitary, roaming the country and living off donations. Some were prophets their whole lives, while others were prophets for only a while. Some heard a voice. Others had visions, while still others were “possessed” by a spirit sent from God.

**Prophets did more than speak.** Because the most common place to hear these oracles today is in church or synagogue services, we tend to think prophets gave speeches. The Bible, however, describes prophets going into a “frenzy.” The texts do not describe this frenzy because they assume everyone knows what it is. Prophets also acted out oracles in strange and sometimes shocking ways. For example, Ezekiel lies on his side for 430 days to act out the siege of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4:5–6), while Isaiah walks around the city naked to demonstrate the coming defeat of Egypt and Ethiopia (Isaiah 20:1–6). At least some of the oracles were sung.

**Other cultures also had prophets.** To think that only Israel had prophets is far from the truth. All ancient near-eastern countries had prophets. Often these prophets acted in much the same way as Israelite prophets. Prophets are a common part of many cultures even today. For instance, Southeast Asian communities often have a prophetic figure called a shaman. We see the same figure among tribal groups in Africa and among some Native American groups. When we consider the prophetic figures in these cultures, we find that Israel’s prophets shared many things in common (their role in society, group approval, problems determining who is a true prophet) with other cultures even today.

**There were both male and female prophets.** Although the collections of prophetic oracles were all from men, other biblical texts talk about female prophets, such as Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah.

**Some prophets performed miracles.**  This is especially true for Elijah and Elisha. We see this same thing in the prophets of other countries as well. In fact, one biblical scholar renames these miracles, “prophetic acts of power.” These miracles pop up especially in times of crisis, when a prophet is being ignored. The miracle demonstrates to the community that the person is a true prophet, with a reliable connection to the divine realm.

Prophets Spoke to a Nation

The prophets spoke to their own community about issues facing them in their own day. To be sure, sometimes these oracles had elements that looked to the future, often to a happier future, but, even then, the first audience for these oracles was ancient Israel.

Prophecy flourished during the monarchy. These men and women were the ones most able to critique kings and other powerful members of Israelite society. They sometimes were the voice of the poor and oppressed. They could tell a king when he sinned, or they could advise him that his public policies were not in accord with God’s will.

Doubtless there were prophets who delivered oracles to common people about common things, such as their crops, their children, their business, and so on. But the oracles that have been preserved are those dealing with issues facing the nation as a whole. Why? Because these were the oracles delivered to people who knew how to write and who had the means to pass on written collections of oracles. These oracles also had a wider significance.

Overwhelmingly, then, the audience of the biblical prophets were the kings, priests, and other elites within Israel and Judah. Their topics dealt with such things as national security, economic policies, government stability, military decisions, and so on. Reading the prophets can be more like reading the editorial page of a major newspaper than reading the meditations of the saints.

Because these prophets were some of the most important, learned, and respected people of their day, their words were valued. Some of their oracles were understood as having a lasting meaning: that is, while they addressed events in their own day, they also hinted at events in days far beyond their own. We see this in a book such as Isaiah: the first part has oracles from Isaiah, but the second part has oracles from a much later time, written as if Isaiah were still alive.

The oracles that most often were understood as having a lasting meaning were the oracles of hope. We will see that the prophets described a glorious future for Israel. We also know this future never came to pass. Instead, they were preserved as visions of a blessed future God held out for the people.

(This article is adapted from “Defining the Prophets,” in *Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament,* by Corrine L. Carvalho, PhD, [Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2006], pages 243–248.)