

THE PROPHET ISAIAH

Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets consists of two sections, the former & latter prophets. The former prophets cover the books of Israel's first entry in to Canaan & the books of Kings (Joshua, Judges, Samuel & Kings). The latter prophets consist of all of what we know as the prophets in the OT, with the exception of Daniel, i.e. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah & the rest, known as the Twelve Minor Prophets, because they are shorter in length.

<i>Former Prophets</i>	<i>Latter Prophets</i>	
	<u>Major Prophets</u>	<u>Minor Prophets</u>
Joshua	Isaiah	Hosea
Judges	Jeremiah	Joel
1 Samuel	Ezekiel	Amos
2 Samuel		Obadiah
1 Kings		Jonah
2 Kings		Micah
		Nahum
		Habakkuk
		Zephaniah
		Haggai
		Zechariah
		Malachi

Prophecy in Jewish Tradition

In Jewish tradition, prophecy began with Moses, the great prophet (cf. Deut. 18:15, 18 & John 6:14). But the flowering of Israelite prophecy was from c. 750-550 BC, from the time of Amos to the writer of Isaiah 40-56. Amos is the first of the prophets, the last is probably Malachi, written perhaps c. 480 BC (Jonah is not really a prophecy, but a commentary on the prophetic calling & nature of Israel's faith, & Daniel is closer to wisdom literature, written c. 160 BC). The context is the end of the two kingdoms, Israel in 721 & Judah in 587, & then the exile & immediate post-exilic period.

The Hebrew word for prophet is *nabî'*, which is translated in the Greek version of the OT (the Septuagint, often abbreviated as LXX) by the word *prophêtês*, from which we get our word "prophet." The exact meaning of

the Hebrew word is unclear, but it would seem to be a loan-word, borrowed from one of the neighbouring peoples. This is not surprising, since prophecy was an integral part of many of the religious practices of the peoples who lived in the Ancient Near East (ANE). The job of the prophet was to interpret & proclaim the divine mind & will.

One suggested translation for *nabî* is “the one who is called.” Several of the prophets contain descriptions of the calling of the prophet (Amos 7:14-15; Isaiah 6:1-13; Jeremiah 1:4-19; Ezekiel 1-3) & it is clear that on the whole people did not choose to be prophets but were chosen. Their backgrounds vary. Some, though highly critical of the cultic authorities (priests especially) of their time, seem to have had links with the priesthood or Temple authorities themselves. This is certainly true of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:1), & Ezekiel & possibly Isaiah, Micah & others.

The Message of the Prophets

There is sometimes a tendency to make of the prophets preachers of a radical new message, but this is to misunderstand what they do. Central to Israel’s faith was the covenant, & the call of the prophets is to faithfulness to this covenant (even if, as in the case of Amos, they do not use the word itself). This is both a deeply traditional message, since they are calling Israel back to its origins, but also deeply radical, since tradition is not about the past so much as about the present. The radicality of their message lies in the absolute demands they place on Israel as the chosen of God, the elect. All forms of social & political exploitation & oppression are wrong because they run counter to the law of God & to the covenant established between God & his people. They are signs of a people which is following other gods & other paths.

The prophets express themselves in various ways. First of all, even a brief glance at the prophetic books in most translations will indicate that large parts are written in poetry. Hebrew poetry is stress-based rather than rhyming, so that each line, or alternate lines, will have the same number of stresses. The poetic nature of the prophetic writings indicates their oral background.

Although in the form we now have them they have been edited & reorganised (often somewhat haphazardly, or at best thematically or by association of ideas & words), the prophecies were meant to be spoken, or quite possibly chanted. Poetry is more easily memorable than prose, and achieves its effect often in its vocalisation. Often it is good to try to

read a translation of the prophets out loud, to try & get some impression of the force of the prophetic message.

There are two main ways in which the prophets proclaim their message, each of which can be further subdivided. Obviously the main one is through their words, but they also make use of symbolic actions.

<i>How the Prophets Deliver Their Message</i>	
Oracles	Symbolic Actions
e.g. “Thus says the Lord...” (Amos 6:1-7)	e.g. Isaiah 20:1-4 Jeremiah 18:1-11 Jeremiah 19:28 Jeremiah 32:6-25
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Oracles of Salvation</u> (Mainly post-exilic prophets) • <u>Oracles of Condemnation</u> (Mainly pre-exilic prophets) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - of the People of Israel - of individuals - of neighbouring peoples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reprimands ➤ Warnings • <u>The <i>rîb</i> literary form</u> Based on juridical system of ancient Israel 	

Prophetic Oracles

The principle form of prophetic discourse (i.e. the way in which they speak) is the oracle, which can be either of salvation or condemnation. In the pre-exilic prophets (those who write prior to 587 BC) it is the oracle of condemnation which predominates, whilst in the exilic & post-exilic periods it is the oracle of salvation which has pride of place.

The oracles of both sorts frequently begin or end with the words “oracle of Yahweh spoken to N...” or “Thus says Yahweh...” The oracles of condemnation will often begin “Woe to...” (cf. e.g. Amos 6:1-7). In ANE political & diplomatic culture the messenger represents & speaks as the sender of the message. He does not interpret the message, he is not a spin

doctor, but a faithful purveyor of it, a sort of walking, talking tape. That is why messengers of kings were killed – it was a way of letting the king know what fate his adversary wished for him & was akin to a declaration of war. In part this explains why the prophets, for all their unpopularity with the powers that be, by & large managed to escape being killed off.

The oracles of condemnation generally attack the people of Israel for their infidelity to the covenant, & suggest ways in which Yahweh will punish them for this lack of faithfulness. Some of these oracles are addressed to individuals & some to the neighbouring peoples. They do not intend so much to announce God's despair & desire to destroy, but are a call to conversion on the part of the people of Israel.

Related to the oracles of condemnation & often formally difficult to distinguish are the reprimands & warnings, in which the prophet verbally attacks the community or individuals because of their sins. These forms of prophetic discourse are often those which appear harshest to our ears, & which present options with a great deal of candour. If people neglect to do X, Y will surely happen, because X is a sign of their sinfulness & lack of fidelity to the covenant made with Yahweh (cf. e.g. Amos 2).

This breaking of the covenant, which is so central an impulse for the prophets, is also seen in a literary form based on the juridical system of ancient Israel, in Hebrew *rîb*. This was a meeting of the elders of the community outside the city gates. Here Yahweh stands not so much as judge but rather as accuser, serving notice on his people of their infidelity (cf. Hosea 4:1; Micah 6:2). This stresses the legal nature of the covenant, but it is not something dry & abstract. The law is about the right relationship, between people, but underlying that between God & humanity, so that any disregard for the Law is akin to a disregard for God.

Symbolic Actions

The second main area of prophetic activity is in the symbolic actions (e.g. Isaiah 20:1-4; Jeremiah 18:1-11; 19:28; 32:6-25). Some of the prophets used the naming of their children or their private lives as signs of God's action towards the community (e.g. Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 7:3; 8:1-4). Others engaged in specific acts which were meant to symbolise God's attitude towards his people, the threat facing them, or what they needed to do in order to return to covenant fidelity.

A final word should be said about the prophets & time. The prophets are primarily concerned with the present. In this present they see a people who have abandoned their fidelity to the God of their ancestors, & the prophets are called to help them regain that faithfulness. But they are keen observers of the contemporary scene, & they are aware of what will happen if things don't change. They attribute this to covenant infidelity, & in a sense the arrogance of a people who believe they no longer need help is precisely what causes the downfall of Israel. But the prophets are more interested in conversion & salvation than in foretelling the future.

The Prophets – Who and When?

Among the books of the OT, none show clearer signs of editing & collection than the prophets. This editing is itself very ancient – the text of the prophet Isaiah found among the Dead Sea Scrolls is one of the best preserved & is more or less entirely identical with the version handed down to us.

Nevertheless, the book of Isaiah is a good example of the difficulties inherent in talking about prophetic literature. Even in the section of the book held to be by Isaiah, the son of Amoz, who lived around the second half of the 8th century BC, there are passages which are generally considered to be later additions (e.g. 24-27 which have a marked apocalyptic strain, something which only developed much later in Israel's thinking). This must be borne in mind when we consider the historical settings of the prophets.

ISAIAH

Seems to have prophesied from c. 742 (the year King Uzziah died, cf. Isaiah 6:1) till c. 701. It is often suggested he may have been a highly-educated member of an aristocratic family, since he had a strong commitment to Jerusalem and contact with the wisdom tradition. His two sons, born of the prophetess (Is 8:3) were given symbolic names.

SECOND ISAIAH (or DEUTERO-ISAIAH)

The name given to the anonymous author of chs. 40-55 of what is now the book of Isaiah. This middle section of the book is sometimes also called the Book of Consolation, from its opening words. Second Isaiah prophesies from Babylon, in the last years of the exile and the first years of the return in 537. It may be that the Servant Songs refer to this

prophet's rejection by the religious authorities in favour of the school of Ezekiel.

THIRD ISAIAH (or TRITO-ISAIAH)

Author of chs. 56-66, seems to have been a prophet of the return, critical of the narrowness of many of the returnees.

ISAIAH (Chs 1-39)

The first part of the book of Isaiah can be divided into six parts, three of which seem to be additions to the actual words of the prophet. But also within the blocks which are generally reckoned to be from Isaiah himself, there are editorial interpolations.

1-12 contain prophecies about Judah & Jerusalem. 13-23 consist of oracles against the nations. 24-27 is the first major part not from Isaiah, probably written after the exile, & sometimes called the Great Apocalypse, from its subject matter. 28-33 contains promises & threats concerning Judah & Israel. The Little Apocalypse, also post-exilic, is found in 34-35, whilst the last three chapters contain an historical account of Isaiah's encounters with king Hezekiah.

There are various important themes in Isaiah. From the story of his call, when God is proclaimed as the three times holy one, we get an insight into why Isaiah so favoured the title "Holy One of Israel" for talking about God. Holiness is used to indicate the absolute otherness of God. It's not that Yahweh is like us only a bit better, but that there is a sense in which Yahweh is totally other, transcendent, but at the same time present in Israel's history, & so he is "of" Israel. Isaiah also proclaims the importance of faith, that the faithful person can have utter trust in God & in God will find salvation. Ethically, Isaiah sees that, for a society to be just, it must be oriented in all it does towards the project of Yahweh, expressed in the covenant. Also central to Isaiah's message is the theme of hope for Israel (the name of his son, Shear-Jashub – A Remnant Will Return), but beyond his hope for the people, there are indications of a messianic hope.

A final comment on one of the stranger comments, which Jesus will use in the gospels. Isaiah is sent to harden the people's hearts (6:10). In part this may be seen as preparing Isaiah for the isolation of the prophetic calling. Stating the obvious doesn't guarantee him friends. The people are misled by the authorities who are unwilling to pay attention to what he says.

SECOND (DEUTERO) ISAIAH (Chs 40-55)

The author of chs. 40-55 of the book of Isaiah is anonymous. Speaking during the later stages of the Babylonian exile, he may well have led a prophetic circle which tried to preach a message of hope & well-being for Israel in its time of suffering. From its opening words these chapters are sometimes known as the book of comfort or consolation.

The prophet refers frequently by name to Yahweh (more than 90x, along with 46 references to El or Elohim & 23 other names for God) – there is a pervading sense of Yahweh's presence. There is also a striking emphasis on the oneness of God. Although Israel had always worshipped Yahweh as the one God, often this had been more monolatry than monotheism (the worship of one God rather than the existence of one God).

But it is part of Second Isaiah's genius to see in the events of the exile not a denial of God's loving & creative power but rather their confirmation. E.g. this monotheism is seen in the emphasis on Yahweh as creator, the incomparable one who alone is responsible for creation. Linked to this is an emphasis on the universality of the call to worship Yahweh, & the consequent abomination of idols.

The other way in which Second Isaiah refers to God is as redeemer. The Hebrew word he uses – *go'el* – refers to the person whose task it was to rescue family members forced into slavery. In some passages this person was also responsible for seeking vengeance for the death of a member of the family, but here it seems to be used more in the sense of the one who redeems.

Among the best known passages of Second Isaiah are the four Servant Songs. Unsurprisingly scholars argue as to the exact verses, but they are found in 42:1-7 (others argue for vv1-4 or vv1-9), 49:1-7; 50:4-9 & 52:13-53:12. Another much discussed point is the nature of the servant. The three most common responses are to see him as a collective figure representing Israel, as an individual (perhaps the prophet himself) or as an eschatological figure, one whose coming will be linked to the restoration of Israel. It may be best to think that there are elements of all three in the text, & especially that the individual (as in Jeremiah & Ezekiel) acts as a sign for the whole people.

THIRD (TRITO) ISAIAH (Chs 56-66)

These prophecies are from the post-exilic period. Cyrus has been triumphant over Babylon, but the longed-for return home has not brought peace & joy which had been hoped for – the prophecies of Second Isaiah were not fulfilled. Even the rebuilding of the Temple had not been sufficient to prevent the abuses which were going on previously.

Third Isaiah reflects very much the times in which he lives. There is security of a sort, the possibility to practice the faith of their ancestors, & yet at the same time there is widespread injustice & discontent, & conflict between those who had stayed & the returnees. But the book ends with one of the great cries of hope. There will be a new & glorious creation in which all nations will come before Yahweh in worship & honour. Zion will truly be the centre of the world. This is an almost ahistoric vision, giving signs of the apocalyptic style which is starting to develop.