

MEETING JESUS IN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES

The aim of this session is to understand the literary features of Old Testament prophecies and to identify and apply the key principles for interpreting Old Testament prophecies.

INTRODUCTION

- The Old Testament prophets had at least three roles: (1) prosecution; (2) persuasion; and (3) prediction.

Comment:

The prophets wrote a large proportion of the Old Testament literature. (They are usually divided into Major i.e. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, and Minor Prophets - a term which has nothing to do with importance rather it is a reference to their length.) Together they take up as much space in the Bible as the entire New Testament.

These writings are an important part of God's message to us. But they are also among the hardest to understand today. Why? We don't have anything in English literature that is comparable to it.

For example, we are comfortable with New Testament letters, Old Testament narratives and poetry, because we read something like that all the time. They are genres that are familiar to us. Little in our culture or literature bears a resemblance to the prophets.

Many tend to think of prophets today as fortune-tellers. Their main function is to predict the future. But the facts point in the opposite direction. According to Fee and Stuart (1993:166), 'less than 2% of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5% specifically describes the New Covenant age. Less than 1% concerns events yet to come.'

If so, what then was the prophets' main role? The prophets had at least three roles. First, they are God's covenant enforcers or prosecuting attorneys. The people of Israel, God's covenant partners, had not kept their end of God's covenant. So God sent his prophets to charge the nation of their disobedience. The prophets were sent to enforce the covenant - positively by highlighting the promises and negatively by warning about the judgment and curses.

Second, they are sent to persuade the people to change their ways. The prophets often wept for the people they spoke to. In most cases, the guilty verdict has already been established. But God the judge offered his covenant people the opportunity to repent. If the prophets could persuade the people to change their ways, God might relent and stay his judgment and replace it with blessings (e.g. Jonah 3:6-10).

Third, the prophets foretold or predicted the future. This is what most people are interested in today. But in the context of the prophets, the prophet's revelation of the future served to reinforce their prosecution and persuasion roles. What they announced was mostly about Israel/Judah's future and its fulfilment served to prove their credentials that they truly spoke for God (e.g. Deut. 18:18-22).

A. LITERARY FEATURES OF THE PROPHETS

- The prophetic books are largely written in poetic form. Poetry is a compressed language with vivid imagery and metaphors.
- The prophetic books are often anthologies i.e. collection of oral messages given during their lifetimes

Comment:

The first major feature of the prophetic books is that ***it is largely written in poetic form***. This point is very important to grasp if we are to interpret the prophets correctly. Poetry should not be read in the same way as prose. (Three of the Major Prophets are made up of a combination of poetry and prose, while much Minor Prophets are entirely in poetry.)

The prophets didn't write essays. They paint word pictures. Word pictures are easy to remember. Word pictures are vivid. It connects with the heart as well as the head. It makes us sit up and pay attention e.g. Hosea said (4:5) 'you stumble day and night, and the prophets stumble with you. So I will destroy your mother.'

Biblical poetry is filled with metaphors and emotions. So a strictly literal reading of the prophets is often unhelpful. *Poetry is a compressed language i.e. meant to say a lot in a few words.*

Consider two examples below.

Metaphor - 'Don't rock the boat'

Meaning beneath the surface - Don't stir up trouble

Metaphor - 'You have lived as a prostitute with many lovers' (Jer. 3:1)

Meaning beneath the surface - You are full of idolatry

This doesn't mean there is no literal reality behind the metaphors e.g. a text only has a 'spiritual' meaning. What it does mean is that figurative language by its nature, unlike mathematical equations, is imprecise. (See Exercise 1 on the prophecy concerning King Jeroboam.)

Chris Wright (1992:71) illustrates this with the promise of a father to his young son that he will give him a horse on the son's 21st birthday. (This promise was made in a time before cars were common.) Meanwhile in the interim years, the car was invented. So on his son's 21st birthday, the father presents his son with a car in fulfilment of his word. Did the father break his promise? Should the son insist on his horse?

The lesson here is the promise (or prophecy) was made in terms understood at the time. But it might be fulfilled in light of new historical events. Figures of speech abound in prophecy due to its poetic nature.

One important implication of this is that not everything said might be literally fulfilled. The details are not necessary exact. One writer called this the translucent rather than transparent quality of the language.

With the exception of the Messianic promises (e.g. Isa. 53; Mic. 5:2; Zech. 11:12, 13:7; Mal. 4:5), many prophecies in the Old Testament are not fulfilled in such a transparent manner. So it is accurate in what it intended to reveal but not

always in terms of its detail. Many prophecies might not be so easily understood until after its fulfilment. This is due to the nature of its language.

Second, ***the prophetic books are often anthologies*** i.e. a collection of oral messages proclaimed by the prophets during their ministry. This is made explicit in Jeremiah. For example, Jeremiah tells us in 25:3 that up to that day he had preached continuously for 23 years.

For twenty-three years – from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day – the word of the LORD has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened.

The 'this very day' was identified in the text as 'the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon' (cf. Jer. 25:1). Later in chapter 36 (vv. 1-2, 4) we find out that this was also the year that God told Jeremiah to write down all his previous oral messages.

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 'Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now' ... So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll.

So the written version of Jeremiah's prophecy is not a book per se but a collection of 23 years worth of oral messages. This in part explains why it is so difficult to establish a chronological order to the book or why repetitions are common and big shifts in topics take place. This also means the practice of outlining a book might not yield as much result for a prophetic book.

B. COMMON THEMES IN THE PROPHETS

Although the prophets spoke at different times to different circumstances, most of the prophets have at least three themes in common.

1. Repent because you have broken the covenant.
2. If you don't repent, you will be judged.
3. Beyond God's judgment is hope of a glorious restoration (e.g. Isa. 65:17-25)

Comment:

To fully understand the prophets we have to understand the importance of God's covenant with the nation of Israel as spelled out by the Law. The Law is firmly embedded into the story of Israel's theological history from Joshua to 2 Kings 25.

The case that the prophets built up against OT Israel clusters around three main areas: (1) idolatry, (2) social injustice and (3) religious ritualism.

B1(i). The case against Israel: Idolatry

Idolatry is the worship of anything else other than the LORD. It strikes at the heart of their relationship with God.

The central covenant formula is: 'I will be your God; you will be my people; I will dwell in your midst.' Idolatry rejects this relationship. Some prophets portray idolatrous Israel as an adulterous wife or prostitute. So it is not unusual to find scathing passages against idols in the prophets.

Again and again, despite the numerous warnings Israel flirt and prostitute themselves to idols. This situation reaches a climax in Ezekiel 8. God gives Ezekiel a tour of the Jerusalem Temple and shows him the rampant idolatry found all over that sacred place. By Ezekiel 10, the LORD declares he will leave this sanctuary. The Mosaic covenant defined in Deuteronomy comes to an end in Ezekiel 10.

B1(ii). The case against Israel: Social injustice

For Israel to worship God aright also includes a right relationship with other people. The Law is more than a set of religious rituals centred on sacrifices and festivals. God is concerned with social justice. God is concerned for the 'aliens, widows, and the fatherless' i.e. individuals who were particularly vulnerable in ancient Israelite society.

For example, the holiness code in Leviticus 19 has instructions about respecting parents (19:3), feeding the poor (19:10), paying workers on time (19:13), upholding justice in the courts (19:15), not slandering others (19:16), respecting the elderly (19:32), and honesty in business dealings (19:35). God is concerned with how we treat others. Again and again, the prophets exposed their failings.

B1(iii). The case against Israel: Religious ritualism

Religious ritualism is another major covenant failing for the Israelite nation. This refers to their dependence on formalized worship rituals, usually centred on Temple sacrifice, as a substitute for a genuine relationship with God. Some even think that such offerings and sacrifices can cover over other covenant violations e.g. social injustice and/or idolatry.

For example, listen to what the prophet Jeremiah (7:3-10) says to the people of Judah at the gates of the Jerusalem Temple. (For other examples, see Isaiah 58:1-14 or Micah 6:1-8.)

2. If you don't repent, you will be judged

The purpose of the strong condemnations by the prophets was to lead them to repentance. If they would turn back from their ways their relationship with God could still be restored. If not, they would face his wrath.

Many of the vivid descriptions in the prophets are related to God's coming judgment e.g. savage invasions from the Assyrian and Babylonian armies and expulsion from the Promised Land. God had warned them about this in Deuteronomy 28. Now that time has finally come.

3. Beyond God's judgment is hope of a glorious restoration

Yet judgment was not the last word. Beyond God's judgment there is still hope for a glorious restoration. A large section of this theme is made up of messianic promises and predictions about the future. All of the prophecies about Christ fall into this category.

This future will not simply be a return to the status quo e.g. Land, king and Law. It was a promise of something qualitatively different – something far better than what they (almost) received the first time round e.g. a new exodus, a new covenant, a new presence of God's Spirit. Relationship will replace ritual. We get a taste of this glorious future from the prophet Isaiah (65:17-25).

Exceptions to the general pattern

Most of the prophets have these basic themes in their messages. The prophets that don't follow this pattern at all are Obadiah and Nahum. The reason for that is simple. Their prophecies weren't directed at the northern kingdom of Israel or the southern kingdom of Judah. Their audience was Edom and Nineveh.

Jonah too preached against Nineveh at an earlier period. Unlike Nahum, however, Jonah's message served as a rebuke against Israel and Judah. Why? The repentance of these foreigners stands in stark contrast to the stubborn refusal of the Israelites. What happened many years earlier in Nineveh should have also happened in Israel and Judah. But they didn't learn that lesson.

The three postexilic prophets – Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi – also break the general pattern because they spoke to communities who returned from the Exile. But the basic message can still be seen in their writings albeit in a modified form.

C. SOME GUIDELINES TO HELP INTERPRET THE PROPHETS

- Listen to it not just with the head but with the heart as well.

The prophets spoke vividly to get the attention of his listeners. Just as we increase the font size to help people with difficulty seeing, the prophets turned up the imagery volume for a people who were spiritually insensitive.

- Look for evidence in narrative sections in the prophets and the historical books for the condition of the people at the time.

Prophets spoke into a particular time of history. So to interpret it rightly, we need to hear it in its proper historical context.

- Explore the full range of meanings of the prophetic images. Beware of reading the prophets literally and superficially.

Be careful not to read the prophets too literally. Dictionary meanings of words alone might lead to misunderstanding the prophets. Take into account metaphors, biblical symbolism and allusions, stereotypical language within its cultural context.

The prophets are also not always clear in the time horizons of events. They sometimes slide back and forth between near and far events. One might get the

impression that all the events described follow each other immediately, but like a person who looks at a series of mountain ranges, we see only the peaks but don't see the large valleys that separate them.

- Look for overarching themes.

Sometimes we need to step back and take a look at the big picture rather than over-analyze every tiny detail. Remember poetry is a compressed and imprecise language.

- Focus on what we agree on. Be humble when considering other possibilities on how prophecy might be fulfilled.

The imprecise nature of prophecy makes it difficult to always come up with an interpretation that everybody agrees with. We see through a glass darkly. Some interpretation might be better than others but there are some 'secret things that belong to God' (Deut. 29:29). Be humble and considerate of other possibilities.

EXERCISE

1. Read 1 Kings 14:10-16, a prophecy concerning King Jeroboam.

- Identify the main elements of the judgment. How do you think it is fulfilled?
- Read 1 Kings 14:17-20 and 1 Kings 15:25-30. How was it actually fulfilled? What does this example teach us about bible prophecy?

Jeroboam was a bad king (cf. 1Ki. 10:8-9.) In 1 Kings 14:10-11, the text says:

I will cut off from Jeroboam every last male in Israel – slave or free. I will burn up the house of Jeroboam as one burns dung, until it is all gone. Dogs will eat those belonging to Jeroboam who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country.

How are we meant to interpret this? Will God burn up his home? How will Jeroboam be separated from the men of Israel? Will Jeroboam's descendants be fed to the dogs? For example, Jezebel the wife of King Ahab was indeed eaten by dogs (cf. 2Ki. 9:30-37).

Yet Jeroboam continued to reign (cf. 1Ki. 14:20). Scripture itself says this prophecy was fulfilled when one of his sons died (1Ki. 14:17-18). Nadab, another son succeeded Jeroboam on the throne but was assassinated after two years (cf. 1Ki. 15:25-28). And soon after that, Baasha who usurped Nadab's throne killed Jeroboam's whole family (1Ki. 15:29). All these deaths were attributed to the fulfillment of God's word.

But not everything was literally fulfilled. This is an example of the translucent rather than transparent nature of prophetic language. The details are not necessary exact. The phrase 'dogs will eat those belonging to the house' of such-and-such might be fulfilled literally but might also be a stereotypical way of speaking about God's judgment (cf. cf. 1Ki. 14:11, 16:4, 21:24.)

2. Read Micah 3:1-4:5. How are we to understand this text?

- What is its historical context? Read Micah 1:1. For Micah's role see for example 6:1-2.
- Does this passage include one or more of the three main themes found in many prophetic passages? For example, read 3:1-3, 5:9-11.
- Read 3:1-3. Should this be understood literally? What is Micah's point?
- Read 4:1-5. Identify the imageries used here to describe the future hope of restoration. How should this be understood? What is Micah's point here?

Micah 1:1 sets his prophecy in a concrete historical context. He prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah in the southern kingdom of Judah (cf. 2Ki 15-20). This means he worked at the same time as another prophet, Isaiah. This prophecy was most likely delivered before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel (722/721 BC) since Samaria, the capital city still exists.

Micah's role as covenant enforcer or God's prosecuting attorney is clearly seen in 6:1-2. This is a court room scene where the Lord is accusing the people of Israel, his covenant partners, for their wrongdoing and the mountains are the jury.

Of the three common indictments of idolatry, social injustice and religious ritualism, the first two are more prominent here. The leaders were corrupt and oppressed the poor. The religious leaders instead of leading people to worship God led them astray. The false prophets were more interested in food in their mouths (3:5) and money in their pockets (3:11).

The cannibal metaphor (3:1-3) is a vivid one. It underlines Micah's point of how wrong everything has become. It was meant to shock and awaken them from their moral slumber.

What Micah is saying to them is that their actions were so degenerate it was as if they tore the skin off people and ripped flesh from their bones in order to eat them. In other words, this is not how civilised people behave. And it's certainly not something that befits a leader.

This is what savage predators do in the wild – animals with no conscience but only with a desire to satisfy their hunger. In 3:3 Micah changes the picture and likens them to cooks preparing for a meal. Or to put it another way, the corrupt leaders were feeding on the lifeblood and sinews of the nation. This is a vivid example of the figurative nature of prophetic language.

Another feature of the prophetic literature is the hope of restoration beyond God's imminent judgment. This is seen in 4:1-5. It will be the opposite of what they have experienced. Although Israel's present leaders are corrupt, one day God will raise up another ruler (cf. 5:2, 4-5).

Where the false prophets have led one nation astray with their teachings (3:5), God himself will now teach his ways to people from many nations who will stream into this renewed Jerusalem (4:2). Where many could not find justice under her corrupt leaders and found instead bloodshed and violence (3:2-3, 10), God himself will be the judge and he will settle disputes from far and wide (4:3).

Although judgment is coming there is also hope. A day will come when people will experience God's presence in a totally new way. God will somehow enter into our space and time and give the type of leadership that man has always longed for but could not achieve.

What will this future look like? It will be a time when people will be free from war (4:3), free from want (4:4a), and free from fear (4:4b). To the ancient Jews, the phrase 'everyone will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree' is a picture of man living with a freedom from want. He can now enjoy the fruits of his labour - his land and livelihood restored. And he will be free from fear (4:4b). He doesn't need to flee anymore at the sound of bombs or guns.

We don't fully appreciate this when we hear the prophet's words. Perhaps it would resonate more with Christians in say Iraq, Palestine, or Afghanistan where there is a lot of poverty, bloodshed and fear in daily life.

The phrase 'in the last days' (4:1) is an example of how the prophet views time. Although chapter 4 follows immediately from chapter 3, the time horizon is not the immediate. The 'last days' is a signal that points to the present time when Jesus comes to earth to reclaim and renew his creation.

How do all these prophecies relate to us? We are now God's new covenant people. He remains a God of justice. Just because we have a special relationship with God it doesn't mean that we are free to live any way we like. As God's covenant people, we are to live in accordance to the new covenant i.e. Christ-likeness. Today that great hope is partially fulfilled in Jesus' first coming and its full consummation - a life free from war, want and fear - will be fulfilled at his second coming.