

He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
TWO

A PROPHET'S JOB



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INTRODUCTION

In my culture, when two people meet each other for the first time, the first thing they do is to exchange names. But very soon they usually ask this question: “What job do you do?” In many respects, that's what we're going to be asking about prophets in this lesson. We want to ask: “What kind of job did Old Testament prophets do?”

We have entitled this lesson “A Prophet's Job.” As we explore the job of a prophet, we will look at three items: first, the job titles of prophets; second, the job transitions — the changes that took place in prophecy — and then finally the job expectations of prophets — what God expected his prophets to do.

Let's begin this lesson by exploring the job titles of Old Testament prophets.

JOB TITLES

In everyday life we call people by many titles; in fact, we might call the very same person by many different titles. For example, we might call one man a pastor, an athlete, a musician. Why? Because people do all sorts of things in life. Well, in the Old Testament, the same kind of thing is true about Old Testament prophets. They're called by many different titles.

To explore the titles that the Old Testament uses for prophets we're going to look at two basic categories. First, we'll look at the primary term used for prophet in the Bible. And second, we'll take a look at an assortment of secondary terms which the Bible uses to designate this office. Let's look first at the primary term for prophets.

PRIMARY TERM

When most English-speaking Christians hear the word “prophet,” they tend to think that a prophet is someone who simply predicts the future, much like a fortune-teller or a psychic. It's true that prophets in the Old Testament foretold the future, but their role was much broader than this. In fact, we get a clue that even the English word “prophet” has the potential of meaning more than someone who simply predicts the future.

English speakers get their term "prophet" from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. We often don't realize it, but the Greek word *prophētēs* (προφήτης) from which we derive our English word “prophet” is a rather flexible term. This term combines two elements. The second element of the Greek word *prophētēs* is *phētēs* (φητης) and it denotes the concept of speaking. It suggests that prophets did a lot

of talking and writing. This is plain enough, but the first element of *prophētēs*, *pro* (pro), may point in two directions. On the one hand it may mean to “speak beforehand” or “predict,” and on the other hand, it may simply mean to “speak forth” or to “proclaim” something that is not even a prediction at all. A prophet then can be someone who predicts or simply someone who proclaims. In reality, Old Testament prophets did both. They spoke of the future, but they also spoke boldly about their own days. The basic title “prophet” points to the variety of jobs that these people performed.

When we look at the Hebrew Old Testament, we discover that the term “prophet” had an even broader meaning. The Greek word *prophētēs* (προφήτης) is the term used in the Septuagint to translate a particular Hebrew term, *nābī*’ (נָבִיא). From parallels to other languages of the ancient Near East, we know that the term *nābī*’ means a “called person.” It’s a very flexible term, simply indicating that a prophet was someone who was called by God. They were not ordinary people; God called them out for many special services.

In addition to the primary designation of a prophet as a *nābī*’, a number of secondary terms also come to be associated with the office of prophet in the Old Testament. We’ll take a look at several of these important secondary terms.

SECONDARY TERMS

In the first place, prophets were also frequently designated by the term *‘ebed* (עֶבֶד), or servant. Many different kinds of people were called servants in the Old Testament, and the term always indicates some kind of subservience and humility. But this title is important for prophets, because it often bore the connotations of an official or an officer, especially an officer of a royal court. Even Israel’s kings are called servants of God because they were the vassal kings who held official positions in God’s heavenly, royal courts.

Prophets play special roles in God’s royal court. They served as representatives of the heavenly throne. They were official servants who spoke in the name of the Great King. This is why Daniel confessed that it was Israel’s great sin to ignore the prophets. Listen to the way he spoke in Daniel 9:6:

We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name (Daniel 9:6).

The prophets were not ordinary people. They represented the throne of heaven as servants of the royal court of God.

Beyond this, two closely related Hebrew words point to another special role which prophets played. The Hebrew term *rō’eh* (רֹאֶה) means “seer” and is closely associated with the term *hōzeh* (חֹזֶה) which means a “seer” or an “observer.” According to 1 Samuel 9:9 prophets were first called seers before the rise of kingship in Israel. Formerly in Israel, the prophet of today used to be called a seer. In a similar way, 2 Samuel 24:11 tells us that Gad, who was a prophet of David's time, was also known as a *hōzeh*, or a seer —

The word of the Lord [came] to Gad the prophet, David's seer (2 Samuel 24:11).

What do these titles for a prophet suggest about their job? These designations pointed to a very important experience which prophets often had as they received God's word. The prophets are called seers because they were given the privilege of looking into the heavenly places. In the book of 2 Chronicles, the prophet Micaiah ben-Imla was challenged to explain his prophecy. In response, Micaiah described a vision of heaven that he had received. In 2 Chronicles 18:18-19, we read the prophet's description of what he saw in heaven:

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing on his right and on his left. And the Lord said, "Who will [lure] Ahab, King of Israel, into attacking...?" One suggested this, and another that (2 Chronicles 18:18-19).

This is a remarkable passage, showing why prophets were called seers. They looked into the heavenly realms. They heard God speak. They watched actions take place. They interacted with God in the heavenly places. And as we learn about the prophets, it's important to remember that these kinds of heavenly experiences were central to their ministries.

Another term occasionally used for prophets is the Hebrew word *tsōp̄heh* (תְּצַפֵּה), or a "watchman," "one who keeps guard." This metaphor compared prophets with the service of a normal watchman in ancient Israel. Cities in the ancient world had watchmen who scanned the horizon for expected and unexpected visitors. Prophets did the same by watching out for enemies and watching for the approach of God in blessing and in judgment. For example, in Ezekiel 3:17, God spoke to the prophet Ezekiel in this way:

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me (Ezekiel 3:17).

In biblical times, advanced warning of an enemy's approach or a friend's visit was important to the affairs of a city. God revealed that his prophets often watched for impending doom and approaching blessings so that the people could have opportunity to prepare themselves. Prophets looked out and saw what was coming in dreams and in visions, and then they turned to the people and announced what was on the horizon.

Prophets were also occasionally designated by the Hebrew word *mal'āk* (מַלְאָךְ) which means "messenger." In the ancient world of the Old Testament there were no telephones, no e-mail, no televisions. The only way to communicate over long distances was through human messengers, and messengers received a communiqué from one person, often a king or a military general, and would bear that message to its recipients. Very often messengers were used when it was urgent to communicate. The Old Testament designates prophets by this term because they received messages from God and bore those urgent communications to the people of God. For instance, when some Judahites returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile, they were tremendously

discouraged. So, the Lord called Haggai, the prophet, and sent him with a message. For this reason, Haggai 1:13 speaks of the prophet in this way:

Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: "I am with you," declares the Lord (Haggai 1:13).

The designation of "messenger" makes it clear that prophets did not bring their own ideas to the people of God. On the contrary, they served as Yahweh's envoys and spoke on the behalf of God.

Finally, we should mention that prophets were sometimes called *'ish 'ēlohim*, (אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים) a "man of God." The designation "man of God" may also be translated "man from God." This title pointed to the special sacred role which prophets had. They were selected and sent by God. As such, prophets had special protection from God, and they had special authorization. In 2 Kings 1:12 the prophet Elijah revealed the significance of this term. There we read:

"If I am a man of God ... may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men (2 Kings 1:12).

Elijah's divine authorization is demonstrated by a miraculous display of fire against those who opposed the prophet. Elijah was no ordinary man. He was sent from God. God was on his side.

So we have seen that Old Testament prophets had many designations and titles. Our survey has only touched on a handful of these various titles that are used in the Old Testament. But we can see one thing clearly — prophets were much more than what most people think. They were not mere psychics or fortune-tellers. They had a variety of titles because they had a variety of services. And if we want to understand Old Testament prophecy, we have to broaden our idea of what a prophet is.

JOB TRANSITIONS

So far we've looked at a variety of job titles that Old Testament prophets bore. Now we should turn to our second topic: what transitions took place in the prophet's job? I've had lots of jobs in my life, and there has been one thing that's been true about every single one of them — they've all changed. I've worked for a while and the next thing I know, the job is different than it was before. Well, something similar is true of Old Testament prophets. They had a job to do, but as the history of the Bible developed, their jobs went through transitions.

To understand how the job of Old Testament prophets went through transitions, it helps to think of prophecy in four historical stages: the pre-monarchical period — the time before kings arose in Israel; the monarchical period; the exilic period — the time of exile from the land; and the post-exilic period — when Israel returned from exile.

PRE-MONARCHY

Let's look first at prophets during the pre-monarchical period. When we explore the times before there was a king in Israel, it's easy to see several features of prophecy. First, there were relatively few prophets during this time. The term *nābî*' does not appear very often in the books of Genesis to Judges. There are less than twenty references in these books, and some of them concern future prophets to come. So there were very few prophets during the early times before there was a king.

Beyond this, during the pre-monarchical period, prophets exhibited a wide variety of relatively informal services. Much of their work seems to have been temporary, designed for particular situations and particular times. The term *nābî*' is used in the pre-monarchical period to signify a wide variety of people doing many different things.

MONARCHY

Leaving behind the early period of biblical history before there were kings in Israel, we come upon a dramatic shift in Old Testament prophecy. The monarchical period brought many changes to the nation of Israel, including changes in the role of prophets. In contrast to the pre-monarchical period, prophets appear in large numbers during this time. Time and again we read of this prophet and that prophet in books like Samuel and Kings and Chronicles. In fact, there are more prophets in the Bible during this period of time than any other.

Along with the increase in the number of prophets during the monarchical times, prophecy also became much more formal. With the rise of kingship, God gave prophets the job of focusing on the actions of kings and making sure that they were obedient to the Law of Moses. Although God wanted Israel to have a human king, he also knew that fallen human kings would present a serious danger to the nation. Human beings simply do not know how to handle lots of power. They usually become corrupt and abuse those who are under their authority.

In the case of Israel's history, when kings became corrupt, it was very dangerous because their actions often brought judgment from God on the whole nation. For this reason, Moses laid down a number of restrictions on the power of kings. In Deuteronomy 17:14-20 Moses sets forth a number of restrictions on the kings of Israel: Israel must only have a king whom the Lord chooses. The king must be from among your brothers — in other words, an Israelite. The king must not acquire great numbers of horses. He must not return to Egypt. The king must not take many wives — and by this Moses probably meant many foreign wives. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. The king must write for himself a copy of the Law of Moses. And the king must read the law all the days of his life. He must follow carefully all the words of the Law of Moses. And he must not consider himself better than his brothers.

Of course, as soon as we read the history of the kings of Israel, we discover that they did not observe the restrictions that Moses laid upon them. And so God sent prophets to witness against the disobedience of kings and the people who followed them. The prophets held a formal office to check the power of kings. We can see this close

association of prophets and kings on many pages of the Bible. Nathan the prophet stood before David. Oded prophesied to Ahaz. Elijah critiqued Ahab.

Now, needless to say, not every prophet actually served officially in the royal court. Many true prophets were rejected by kings of their day. But whether in the courts themselves or in the streets of the cities, prophets of the monarchical period held kings and other officials accountable to God's law. They served God at this time by pointing out when kings and officials violated the law of God.

So it is that during the monarchical period, we see a rise of many prophets, and we also see a more formal function for prophets as they served the Lord in the courts of kings.

EXILE

Now that we've seen some of the developments in prophecy from the pre-monarchical to the monarchical period, we should turn our attention to the period of the exile. What happened to prophecy during the exile? Well, in 722 BC, northern Israel's capital of Samaria fell to the Assyrians. And in 586 BC Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Vast numbers of God's people were taken from their land and exiled to other nations. During this time, two features characterized the prophets' ministries. First, there was a numerical decrease of prophets. There were not many prophets who were prominent enough to have their prophecies recorded in the Bible. Daniel and Ezekiel, for example, are the best known of the very few prophets during this time.

Of course, along with the exile was the demise of Israel's kingship, and for this reason prophets' service to God became much more diverse and informal again. For the most part, true prophets of God spent their time explaining the exile and instructing God's people about the possibility of return to the land. So we can see that during the exile there were fewer prophets, and they concerned themselves much less with the kings of Israel.

POST-EXILE

After the period of exile, we come to those few generations who saw prophetic activity in the post-exilic period. The early post-exilic leader, Zerubbabel, began to revive the nation. The potential for a re-instituted monarchy arose. As a result, two things happened to prophecy. The numbers of prophets remained relatively few, but there was some very important activity that took place among the prophets. Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi are the important prophets that we know from this period.

Prophets began to move slightly back toward a more formal role again. Zerubbabel became the governor of Judah, and hopes were put in him as the upcoming monarch. As a result, Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the officials of Israel to rebuild the temple. Malachi rebuked the officials and the people of the restored community for continuing to rebel against God. During the entire post-exilic period the prophets kept

watch on the leaders and the general population as well to encourage them to be faithful to God.

So it was that prophecy became more or less prominent and more or less formal as the institution of monarchy rose and fell. As we explore the words of particular prophets, we must always be mindful of whether we are in the pre-monarchical, the monarchical, exilic, or post-exilic periods. These transitions in the prophets' job will help provide us with an orientation toward understanding their words.

JOB EXPECTATIONS

So far, we have seen the various titles given to prophets, and the ways prophecy developed in the history of Israel. At this point, we'll take a look at the expectations of a prophet's job. What did God expect prophets to do? To explore this topic we'll take a look at two subjects: first, popular models of expectations which many interpreters of the Bible apply to prophets, and second, the covenant model which the Bible itself gives as the standard of a prophet's job expectation.

POPULAR MODELS

Let's look first at some assorted models that have been used to describe what God expected his prophets to do. Throughout the history of interpretation, Jews and Christians alike have understood the roles of prophets in different ways. Some of these models touch on aspects of the truth, but they still fall short of providing a comprehensive model for what God wanted his prophets to be.

Medium/Shaman

Many interpreters have compared Old Testament prophets with mediums of other cultures. Much like the Oracle of Delphi or mediums of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, prophets have been seen as men who gain access to God and deliver his responses to personal questions and prayers. Now, I think we have to admit that prophets did play this kind of role in the Bible from time to time, but as we will see this outlook is not adequate for a comprehensive model of what prophets were expected to do.

Fortune Teller

Another popular idea of what prophets did in the Old Testament is that they were fundamentally predictors of the future, or fortune-tellers. When someone wanted to know what would happen next, they would go to a prophet to find out. Again, there's some truth in this outlook because prophets did often predict what was going to happen in the

future. God gave them insights and they proclaimed these insights to the appropriate people. Yet we must be careful not to think of fortune-telling as the heart of Old Testament prophecy. Something much larger and more significant was expected of Old Testament prophets.

COVENANT MODEL

These popular models for prophecy can help us in some ways, but they also obscure the most fundamental expectation God had for his prophets. The most comprehensive model which the Old Testament uses to describe prophecy is a covenant model. As we begin to explore the covenant model for prophecy, we must remember that for centuries Jews and Christians have recognized that covenant is a central concept in the Bible. But our understanding of the biblical idea of covenant has improved through the years. So, we must begin by thinking about past understandings of covenant and then more contemporary understandings.

Past Understandings

Past understandings of covenant have functioned well, but with very little idea of the historical context out of which the Bible's concept of covenant grew. We have not known much about the Ancient Near Eastern contexts of Old Testament covenants until recently. So, theologians have had little choice other than to read their own ideas of covenant into the Bible. Usually, they read Old Testament covenants in terms of Roman law or contemporary legal arrangements. For instance, when we hear that a covenant is an agreement between two or more persons, as is often said, this formulation, or other similar formulations, are not entirely wrong, but is a bit too vague to help us much.

Contemporary Understandings

In the past, theologians understood covenant in this general way because they could do no better. But our contemporary understanding of covenant is much fuller than these past formulations. In recent decades many important archaeological discoveries have helped us make breakthroughs in our understanding of covenants in the Old Testament. These breakthroughs put us in a better position to understand how covenant established the job expectations of Old Testament prophets. Ancient Near Eastern discoveries have demonstrated that the Old Testament often describes God's relationship with Israel in ways that were very similar to the political treaties that existed in the ancient world. Throughout the ancient world of the Middle East, international treaties often existed between one nation and another. Although there was a variety in the way these treaties were formed, there was also consistency so that people throughout the region understood how these treaties worked. For this reason, the Lord related to Israel in covenants that paralleled these Ancient Near Eastern treaties in many ways.

In biblical times, treaties were often established between nations of equal status, and we call these treaties parity treaties. For example, a treaty between the Egyptian and Assyrian empires might have been between equals at certain periods in history. But more often, treaties in the ancient world were agreements between a great emperor and a lesser king of a city or a small nation. For instance, several times kings of Canaanite city-states made treaties with the great Egyptian empire. These kinds of treaties are known as suzerain-vassal treaties. The term “suzerain” simply means the “czar” or the “emperor,” and the vassal means, of course, the servants of that great emperor. The suzerains, or great emperors, established the rules of the relationship and provided protection and care. In return, the vassals or servant states showed loyalty to the suzerain by paying taxes and by supporting his war efforts.

One important feature of these suzerain-vassal treaties was the special role which the emperors gave to representatives, or emissaries. Suzerains often sent emissaries, or ambassadors, who reminded the vassal nations of the terms of their treaties. These emissaries would act as covenant treaty prosecutors. They tried to get the vassal states to comply with the terms of their arrangements, but often they would not. Now, emperors were very patient with their servant nations, but in the end, if a vassal nation refused to listen to the words of an emissary, the great emperor would come with his military forces to defeat those smaller nations.

The function of emissaries in the Ancient Near East provided a model for Old Testament prophets. Prophets served as God's covenant emissaries, or his covenant prosecutors. They received their messages from the throne room of the Divine Emperor, and the Divine Emperor spoke to his vassal nation through them. Prophets occasionally commended Israel for complying with their covenant, but they primarily warned that continuing violations would bring the attack of a wrathful of God.

It would be difficult to overemphasize this insight into Old Testament prophecy. The prophets were God's emissaries. They represented him as the great suzerain to his vassal nation, Israel. It's only as we remember this basic covenant model that we'll ever be able to understand the job that prophets did for God.

The well-known story of Isaiah 6 illustrates the importance of this emissarial model very clearly. Though covenant is not mentioned explicitly in this chapter, the idea that prophets are covenant prosecutors — emissaries on the behalf of the great King — guides the whole presentation of Isaiah 6. In the first five verses, Isaiah received a vision. In this vision, he observed God in his heavenly throne room. In Isaiah 6:1, the prophet reported that he saw God

... seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple (Isaiah 6:1).

When confronted by the sight, Isaiah exclaimed, in verse 5:

My eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty (Isaiah 6:5).

This passage makes explicit how the prophet understood his God. God was the king of his people, the suzerain or the emperor who was high and exalted as Lord over all. The prophet had the privilege of entering into the presence of this divine suzerain.

Even so, we have to ask why Isaiah was invited to see the glorious sight of God's throne room. He recognized why immediately. Isaiah looked at the throne of his suzerain and said this in 6:5:

Woe to me! ... I am ruined! I am man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5).

Isaiah had been summoned to the presence of the divine suzerain because serious, widespread sin had taken place in the vassal nation. This is the normal reason why prophets are called in the Old Testament. The people of God wander from being faithful to their covenant Lord, and so God calls on his prophets to prosecute the covenant.

In 6:6-7 a seraph approaches Isaiah and cleanses his lips with a burning coal. This cleansing makes it possible for Isaiah to serve God as his spokesman. Then in verses 8 through 13 Isaiah receives a commission to prosecute the covenant. In Isaiah 6:8 the Lord says:

Whom shall I send? ... who will go for us? (Isaiah 6:8).

The Lord wants someone to be his emissary to Israel, and Isaiah replies in those well-known words:

Here am I. Send me! (Isaiah 6:8).

Isaiah accepts his call as one who is sent from the great Suzerain to the vassal nation of Israel. The rest of the book of Isaiah illustrates how the prophet served in this function. He spoke to kings and other leaders and to the people. He condemned covenant violations and offered the hope of covenant blessings to the people of God. The pattern illustrated here in Isaiah 6 appears everywhere in Old Testament prophecy. Prophets were emissaries who bore messages from the great Suzerain on his heavenly throne, and they took those messages to his vassal nation, Israel.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored the prophets' experience by looking at their job. We've seen some of the many job titles that they've received, and we've also explored how the office of prophet developed and changed through Israel's history. Finally, we've looked into the basic expectations that governed the job of a prophet.

There's a lot of confusion out there about Old Testament prophets, and we can avoid a lot of that confusion if we will just remember their job titles, the transitions they went through, and the expectation that God had of prophets that they would represent his covenants. If we remember these things about prophets, we'll be able to apply their word to our world today.