

What Is a Prophet?

Definition

Prophets are the mouthpiece of God, conveying God's opinions, reactions, intentions, and very words. In short, God's agenda, or program, is announced through the words of the prophets.

Title for prophets in the Old Testament

Nabi (Hebrew)

- Somewhat controversial
- Appears to indicate that the prophets as "one who is called"

Seer

- Refers to the prophet's inclination to receive revelatory vision

The ministry of the biblical prophets tended to be clustered around times of crisis. God used the prophets to offer guidance to his people in troubled times.

Prophecy in the Ancient Near East

- Evidence of the existence of a prophetic institution has been found throughout the ancient near East.
- In these prophecies from the ancient Near East the king was the one addressed, rather than the people as a whole.
- A variety of deities was represented by these prophets in the extant literature

Prophecy in Israel

Function of the Prophets				
Period	Function	Audience	Message	Examples
Pre-monarchy	Mouthpiece-leader	People	National guidance Maintenance of justice Spiritual overseer	Moses Deborah
				Transition: Samuel
Pre-classical	Mouthpiece-adviser	King and court	Military advice Pronouncement of rebuke or blessing	Nathan Elijah Elisha Micaiah
				Transition: North--Jonah South--Isaiah
Classical	Mouthpiece-social/spiritual commentator	People	Rebuke concerning current condition of society; leads to warnings of captivity, destruction, exile, and promise of eventual restoration Call for justice and repentance	Writing prophets Best example: Jeremiah

Distinguishing Marks of Classical Prophecy

- Classical prophecy was distinguished by the content and range of the message.
- Classical prophecy had its basis in the covenant. God's choosing a people as a means of revealing himself and carrying out his plan in history caused prophecy in Israel to take a different shape than anywhere else.
- Classical prophecy was unique in the ancient world.
 - Eschatology should be understood as dealing with the final stage of the plan of God in history.
 - If classical prophecy had its premise in the idea that God had a long-range plan to proclaim, we can find nothing similar to it in the ancient Near East because no other deity had such a plan to execute in history.
- Elements that would position a section on the apocalyptic side of the continuum include rich symbolism (often mythological), visions, conversation with spiritual beings, and cosmic catastrophe leading to the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.
- In general, apocalyptic literature can be characterized as simply using a slightly different medium for conveying the prophetic word of God.
 - Many books offer incredible revelations of the symbolic meaning of this or that passage from the apocalyptic literature.
 - Much confusion is caused, however, by one's mistakenly treating the *vision* of a prophet as the *message* of a prophet. The vision was not the message, but the occasion for the message.
 - Understanding the message does not require an interpretation of everything in the vision, or even an understanding of the chronological placement of the events of the vision. The features of the vision are incidental; they are not the message.

Interpreting Prophetic Literature	
Message	Fulfillment
Authoritative word from God	Unfolding of God's plan
Understood by prophet, relevant to contemporary audience	May be vague or obscure or take unanticipated direction
Identified with author's intention as guiding criterion	Identified often only with aid of interpreter's hindsight
Uses objective evidence	Subjective perspective
One message	Possibly many fulfillments
Does not change	May shift directions
Aim of Old Testament interpreters	Elaborated by New Testament authors

The Message of the Prophet

- It is important to distinguish between the message of the prophecy and the fulfillment of the prophecy.
- The message is found in the proclamation of God's word to the contemporary audience (at least initially).

- The fulfillment comes in the unfolding of history.
- Each prophecy had a message as soon as it was proclaimed, independent of its eventual (and assured) fulfillment.
- Too often the prophetic books are studied merely by seeking out potential fulfillments while overlooking the inspired message of God's words.

Categories of Prophetic Oracle			
Oracular Categories	Description	Preexilic Emphasis	Postexilic Emphasis
Indictment	Statement of the offense	Focus primarily on idolatry, ritualism, and social justice	Focus on not giving proper honor to the Lord
Judgment	Punishment to be carried out	Primarily political and projected for near future	Interprets recent or current crises as punishment
Instruction	Expected response	Very little offered; generally return to God by ending wicked conduct	Slightly more offered; more specifically addressed to particular situation
Aftermath	Affirmation of future hope or deliverance	Presented and understood as coming after an intervening period of judgment	Presented and understood as a protracted time period Religious: Now Socioeconomic: Potential Political: Eventual

Prediction and Fulfillment

- "Prediction" and fulfillment" are two of the terms most often connected to prophetic literature, but both can lead to harmful misperceptions about the nature of prophecy.
- Prophets themselves were not predicting anything, but merely giving the word of the Lord. The prophecy was God's message, not the prophet's.
- Prophecy is more interested in causation than in prediction.
- It is true that biblical prophecy spoke of events before they happened, but the purpose was that God would be properly recognized as having caused those events as a part of his ongoing plan.
- God was declaring his intentions and decreeing his judgments.
- The prophet was aware what the message was, yet he did not necessarily know what shape the fulfillment of the prophecy might take. It was the message that was inspired, and it was the message that was the medium of God's revelation. The fulfillment was almost incidental, though it was certainly important that it take place.
- Fulfillment should be seen as indicating an appropriate correlation between the prophetic word and the event to which it is related. So when a New

Testament author suggests that some event “fulfilled” an Old Testament passage, he is not suggesting that the Old Testament author was speaking or thinking of this event, but rather that an appropriate correlation can be drawn between the Old Testament and the event.

- The Old Testament authors intended to communicate a message. Their writings have little interest in identifying the specific fulfillment of the message. In contrast, the New Testament authors specifically addressed fulfillment rather than trying to disclose the message of an Old Testament prophet.

Tips for Reading Prophetic Literature

1. Think of prophecy as syllabus explaining the outworking of God’s plan rather than as simple prediction.
2. Be careful to distinguish between the message of the prophecy and the fulfillment of the prophecy.
3. The first step in interpreting a prophetic oracle is to identify to which category it belongs.
4. A vision is not the message but the occasion of the message.
5. The prophet’s message is not hidden in uninterpreted symbols.