



Session Ten

THE PROPHETS

God's Human Messengers

*Dear Lord,
Your prophet Hosea described you to us.
He said you would be like a dew to your people
and that we would blossom like the lily.
Help us spread out our shoots and be fragrant,
Help us live again in your shadow where we will flourish like a garden,
Where we will thrive like a vine and our souls be as sweet-smelling as
The sweetest flower, the headiest wine.
Amen.*

Based on Hosea 14:5-7

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What Is a Prophet?

The word *prophetes* in Greek means someone who speaks for another. The Hebrew word for prophet, *nabi*, means one who pours forth the divine will. Putting these two together, we can say the prophets were people who spoke for God to the people, and told them His will.

We have already met two prophets in the earlier history of the Hebrew people. First there was Samuel, who chose kings for Israel according to God's will. The other was Elijah, who stood up to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel with their worship of the pagan god Baal. Elijah also had a disciple, Elisha, who did miracles and carried on Elijah's work. These men are sometimes called the "early prophets."

But now we come to a group of men called the "classical prophets." They lived and preached from the 8th down to the 2nd centuries B.C. Not writers, but preachers, they emerged in the period when the Hebrew empire was declining. Their work continued through the empire's fall to foreign invaders, the exile to Babylonia, and the return of the faithful "remnant" to Palestine when the conquering Persian king allowed them to go.

In all of these events, the prophets were God's messengers. They had received instruction from Him about what to tell the people, and they gave the message even when it was so unpopular that they literally risked their lives delivering it. Sometimes their messages were warnings that God was displeased with the Hebrews' faithlessness, and wanted them to change their ways. The prophets warned that God would punish them for their disobedience, not out of tyranny but out of love, knowing as He did that only by faithfulness to Him could they be happy and have peace.

In fact, many of the prophets gave messages of God's abiding love and care for His people at the same time they were giving these dire warnings. God would not force His people to do His will, but He wanted them to for their own good. Sadly, very often the people thought they knew better, and did not listen.

There are 18 books of prophecy in the Armenian Bible. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel are often called the "major prophets" not because their books are more important than others, but simply because they are longer. In addition to those four, we have the books of Lamentations, Baruch, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. We can now take a closer look at some of them.

Word Watch

Prophet: a person who speaks by divine inspiration, who expresses the will of God; a person of profound moral insight.



Remnant: An important concept in the story of God's people, the "faithful" remnant meant the spiritual kernel of the nation that would survive God's judgment and become the germ of the new people of God.

Isaiah

Born into a noble family, Isaiah was a married man and father of two sons who lived most of his life in Jerusalem. He was called by God to be a prophet with a special vision. Read about it in *Isaiah 6:1-8*. His preaching (prophecy) stretches over fifty years in Judah, from about 740 to 687 B.C. There are two main parts to the Book of Isaiah, and probably the second part was written in the sixth century by a disciple of the prophet.

You remember that the time of the divided Hebrew kingdom, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south, was a period of corruption and confusion for the people. Isaiah received a vision in which God told him to warn Judah that He would allow it to fall to foreign conquerors if the people didn't change their evil ways. Again, God had no desire to punish, except as a way of bringing His people to their senses. In fact, the Book of Isaiah contains many warnings of destruction for those who fought against God's chosen people. (Look at *Isaiah 145:24-31*.) In spite of the Hebrews' disobedience, they were His beloved people forever.

The fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. should have alerted Judah to listen to Isaiah's words. But Judah had a series of weak, sometimes corrupt, kings. They tried to rely on the military might of neighbors to save them. (See *Isaiah 31:1-3*.) They threatened and sometimes killed those who brought an unwelcome message. (Isaiah probably died at the hands of a truly bad king of Judah named Manasseh.) They did almost anything rather than listen to Isaiah.

Finally, Judah's own destruction came at the hands of the Babylonians. As you recall, the people of Judah were exiled to Babylonia. The second part of Isaiah contains words of hope and encouragement for the people who were so far from home, and looks forward to God's deliverance.

Isaiah always believed that through any kind of punishment, exile, destruction and loss, God would keep His promise that the throne of David "shall be established forever" (*2 Samuel 7:16*). But as he looked around at the mediocre leaders of Israel and Judah, he knew that they and others like them could never fulfill such a promise. Isaiah began to see a new meaning to God's promise. He told of a Messiah, a king who would fulfill it, and described this king in ways that startle us today—because they are descriptions of Jesus Christ, who would come to the world several centuries later!

The Armenian Angle

The beautiful and famous Chapter 6 of Isaiah describes



how God called the prophet into His service. In the vision of God that Isaiah sees, angels are in attendance at God's throne, singing "holy, holy, holy!" This is the inspiration for the haunting Armenian sharan "Soorp, soorp" heard at every Divine Liturgy.

Read these passages, and write here how they “match” with what we know about Jesus Christ:

Isaiah 7:14

Isaiah 11:1

Isaiah 50:6

Isaiah 53:7

Despite all the terrible things he had seen happen to the Hebrew people, Isaiah always believed that a “remnant” would stay faithful and return to the homeland. These would be the people who would rejoice in the coming of the Messiah.

Group Think Tank

1. The Armenian liturgical hymn “Soorp, soorp” (Holy, holy) is a quotation from Isaiah 6:3. Why do you think it’s used in the liturgy?
2. Compare the person described in Isaiah 9:6-7 and Isaiah 53: 3-7. These are understood to refer to Jesus. Which of these images fit into your personal picture of God? Which do not? Why?

Amos

Though born in Judah, a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos was called by God to prophesy to the people of the northern kingdom, Israel. He made himself popular there by saying that Israel’s enemies, such as Moab, would suffer God’s wrath. He got himself thrown out of Israel, though, when he said the same thing would happen to the Hebrews there!

Amos was determined to show people the folly of worshipping nature gods, or the forces of nature, as many of Israel’s neighbors did. He wanted people to see that God is the one creator and of all things. Amos wrote:

“He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the surface of the earth, the Lord [Yahweh] is His name” (*Amos 5:8*).

Amos also made it clear that while the proper worship of God is very necessary, it should not replace good works and compassion toward others. Read *Amos 5:21-24*. Is Amos saying we should do away with worship? If not, what is he saying here?

Hosea and Micah

These two contemporaries of Isaiah also denounced Israel's faithlessness to God. Hosea compared Israel to an adulterous wife whose husband (God) is willing to forgive her if she repents sincerely and lastingly. Micah says both the northern and southern kingdoms are doomed, but predicts that there will be ultimate salvation for humanity through a Messiah. Read *Micah 5:2-4*. Once again, keep in mind that these words were written centuries before the coming of Christ. Copy verse 2 here:

Zephaniah and Nahum

These prophets lived in Judah and wrote sometime around 625 B.C. This is before the defeat of Assyria (Israel's conqueror) in 612, yet Zephaniah prophesies the Babylonian exile, and Nahum makes an amazing prophecy concerning Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh. Read it in *Nahum 2:1* to *3:7*. (A special note: Nineveh was one of the great cities of the ancient world, but it is a wasteland today.)

Habbakuk

Like the other prophets, Habbakkuk saw sad and terrible things happen to his people. His message is one of trusting in God no matter what the circumstances. Read his words in *Habbakuk 3:17-19*.

This prophet also reflects the idea of the "righteous sufferer" that we encountered in the Book of Job. Habbakuk describes someone who suffers even though he is innocent, and who trusts that the Lord will make him triumphant in the end. Read these rather mysterious words in *Habbakuk 2:1-4*.

Prophets During the Era of the Babylonian Exile

The prophets we've talked about so far preached before or at the beginning of the exile in Babylonia. That period of exile or captivity lasted from 586 to 538 B.C. Close to and during that time, three important prophets did their work. One was Jeremiah.

Jeremiah

If there was ever a prophet who would rather have done something else than be a prophet, it's Jeremiah. He was the son of a priest, born during the reign of the evil King Manasseh. His ministry lasted from about 627 to 580 B.C. Read about how it began in *Jeremiah 1:4-10*. Discuss these questions as a class:

1. What words tell us that God's plan for His people has been in place for a very long time?
2. What does Jeremiah do that Moses also did, when called by God?
(See *Genesis 4:10-16*.)
3. What words suggest that Jeremiah is going to have a tough job?

Looking In

Every prophet lived in a certain time and place and yet they expressed the dream of God for the world that would be true at any time and any place. If you were a full-time modern prophet, what would your message be to your community (any community – your parish, your city, the world) today?

Jeremiah saw destruction coming to Judah, and warned against it. While this didn't make him popular, he said something else that made a lot of people actually want to kill him. He told the people that the Temple, the physical building, was not enough to save them. Up to this time, the people believed that as long as they honored the Temple, which God Himself had ordered Solomon to build, they would be safe. But Jeremiah told them they should honor and trust only God. Nothing on this earth, not even the Temple, could save them if they failed to trust God.

Jeremiah was a very passionate prophet. Read his agonized words in *Jeremiah 4:14-22*. He loved Jerusalem and its people. It was no joy to him to accuse them, and to see them punished by foreign conquest. And he had an even more unpleasant task to accomplish for the Lord. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they didn't take all the people away at one time. Some were left in Jerusalem, and among these people there came false prophets who predicted the downfall of the Babylonian enemy and the imminent return of the exiles. Of course, these were words that the devastated people in Jerusalem were only too glad to hear and believe. Jeremiah warned the people not to listen. He wrote letters to the exiles, telling them to prepare to be in Babylonia for a long, long time. We can imagine how much frustration and hatred he earned in Jerusalem for these actions!

Of course, Jeremiah was right. The Babylonians returned to Jerusalem and destroyed it, taking all the rest of the people off to slavery. The end of Jeremiah's life was bitter and sad, yet he is honored as a great prophet because nothing would stop him from telling the truth and giving God's message to the people.

Two books of prophecy are entitled Lamentations and Baruch. The first is a series of mourning poems over fallen Jerusalem. It is attributed to Jeremiah, but was written later than his time. Baruch was Jeremiah's secretary, and wrote down much of the prophet's preaching.

A Passage to Learn: O Lord, be gracious to us; we wait for You. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble. (*Isaiah 33:2*)

Did You Know?

In the 6th century B.C., the prophet Jeremiah wore a wooden yoke around his neck as a symbol that Jerusalem and Judah would wear the yoke of Babylon. In the 18th century A.D., the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, Gregory of Shirvan, wore a huge chain around his neck as a symbol of his commitment to stopping the corruption and debt that had engulfed the Armenian Patriarchate. He vowed not to remove the chain until the disgrace had been resolved.

Quick Quiz #10

① to ⑥ **Matching** – put the correct letter in the space provided

1. ___ compared Israel to an adulterous wife
2. ___ "Soorp, Soorp"
3. ___ the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem
4. ___ chosen by God before he was born
5. ___ spoke of a divine king and a man of suffering
6. ___ he said God hated Israel's feasts and burnt offerings

- | |
|---|
| <p>a. Isaiah b. Jeremiah c. Amos d. Hosea</p> |
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⑦ to ⑧ **Define the following words:**

7. prophet
8. remnant

⑨ to ⑩ **True or False?**

The Old Testament books of the prophets prepare us for the coming of Jesus Christ as our Savior.

T F

The Hebrews always obeyed their prophets.

T F

