

## Lesson 1

### Defining Prophecy

#### Contents

Section 1	Prophecy and Revelation
Section 2	The Seer and the Nevi'im
Section 3	Seer and Prophet
Section 4	Syncretism
Section 5	Prophecy and Social Conditions
Section 6	The Man of God
Section 7	Definition of the Prophet
Section 8	The Nature of Prophecy
Section 9	Assignment

When you have finished this lesson, therefore, you should be able to;

- 1 Explain the terms prophecy and revelation and their relationship.
2. Understand the ministries of the Seer and the Nevi'im.
3. Describe the relationship between the Seer and the Prophet.
4. Discuss the problems of syncretism and syncretic practices.
5. Illustrate the relationship between prophecy and social conditions.
6. Relate the social status of the prophet.
7. Give a clear definition of the expression 'Old Testament Prophecy'.

Now turn to the text for this lesson; *Prophecy Past and Present*, Chapter 1. Read it through carefully before you begin the lesson.

### Introduction

We begin our study by defining the word ‘Prophecy’ which is often used to mean quite different things. In popular parlance prophecy is foretelling the future. This, of course, is the most spectacular aspect of the work of the prophet but in the Bible foretelling the future forms only a small part, probably no more than about ten per cent, of the message of the prophets. Their major concern was with contemporary events and their outcome.

The prophetic task was always to call the nation back into a right relationship with God and into obedience to his word. It is therefore necessary to define prophecy biblically and to empty our minds of preconceived secular ideas so that we can begin to think Hebraically and understand what the Bible means by prophecy. We can then begin to study the life and work of the prophets of Israel and their significance for the working out of the purposes of God through Israel.

The text for this lesson is *Prophecy Past and Present*, Chapter 1, ‘Defining Prophecy’. Read this chapter again carefully and then read each section of the lesson looking up each Bible reference. Give short answers to the questions at the end of each section. Model answers are provided at the end of the lesson. Complete the assignment at the end of the lesson and send it to The Centre.

### Prophecy and Revelation

Throughout the Bible there is a clear link between prophecy and revelation, in fact the words are almost interchangeable because prophecy was not regarded as a *human* activity but the activity of God. The prophet was not necessarily a man of learning or great human wisdom but one to whom God spoke. Prophecy was the divine activity of *self-revelation*. Thus when the prophet made a pronouncement he was not offering the opinions of men but declaring the word that God had revealed to him. That word was intimately linked with truth because God could not lie. Therefore prophecy was divinely revealed truth.

### Question 1

What is the meaning of the statement ‘In those days the word of the Lord was rare’ (1 Samuel 3:1)?

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### The Seers and the Nevi'im

In the transitional period from the Judges through to the monarchy there were two types of prophet, the seers and the nevi'im. The contrast between the two is most clearly seen in 1 Samuel, chapters 9 and 10 where Saul was looking for some lost donkeys and went to consult the local seer ‘As they were going up the hill to the town they met some girls coming out to draw water and they asked them “Is the seer here?” (9:11) and in verse 19 Samuel acknowledges the title ‘seer’. In 10:5 we are introduced to ‘a procession of prophets’ all of them prophesying with accompanying musical instruments. Their activities appear to be largely ecstatic.

**Question 2**

In your own words describe the difference between the seer and the navi (plural nevi'im)?

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**Seer and Prophet**

In 1 Samuel 9:9 there is an interesting editorial comment which was inserted several centuries after the time of Samuel by an historian of the Deuteronomistic school who was working over the earlier account. The compiler of the original source material in 1 and 2 Samuel wrote his account during the reign of Solomon, which puts it only one generation after Samuel who anointed King David, Solomon's father.

1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings which form a single book in the Hebrew Bible show all the signs of being a contemporary biographical record. They refer the reader to other contemporary biographies for further details of events, e.g. 'The book of the annals of Solomon' (1 Kings 11:41). The editorial comment in 1 Samuel 9:9 states 'The prophet of today used to be called a seer.' This would indicate that in the time of the later monarchy or early post-exilic period, when this note was inserted, the Deuteronomistic historians regarded the seer as the true antecedent of the 8th to 5th century prophets from Amos to Jeremiah.

**Question 3**

Was Samuel a seer or a navi?

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**Syncretism**

The period of the settlement in Canaan which began with the crossing of the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua is also known as the period of the Judges. These were men or women, as in the case of Deborah, who exercised a mixture of social, political, military and spiritual leadership. They were inter-tribal leaders who were largely responsible for maintaining some form of national identity. They reminded the tribes of their common origin and often invoked their loyalty to face a common enemy.

A major problem facing the tribes in this period was the loosening of the ties which bound them to each other and to God through their common allegiance to Yahweh through what was known as the covenant relationship. In its simplest form the covenant was 'I will be your God and you will be my people' (Exodus 6:7). The covenant required absolute loyalty to God and rejection of other gods.

The Israelites were a nomadic people uninstructed in the skills of arable farming. When their harvests failed the Canaanites told them it was because they were not worshipping the local Baals. Until that time most gods were thought of as territorial so the Israelites saw nothing wrong in going up to the high places to pay their respects to the local god as well as still claiming loyalty to Yahweh, the God of their forefathers who had brought them up out of Egypt. The bands of prophets, or Nebi'im regularly used the high places which were centres of Canaanite Baal worship and thus syncretism crept into the religious life of Israel.

**Question 4**

Describe the term syncretism; particularly in relation to Israel in the time of the Judges.

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**Prophecy and Social Conditions**

In the Bible the major task of the prophets was to bring the contemporary word of the contemporary God to the contemporary scene. The prophets were students of current affairs making it their business to know what was happening in the nation, both among the people and among the rulers. They were continually calling people back into a right relationship with God, warning of the consequences of idolatry, unfaithfulness and a lack of trust in the Lord.

Prophecy was thus intimately related to social conditions and the moral and spiritual state of the nation. It was the contemporary situation to which the prophet responded in his call to ministry and in undertaking his responsibility to bring the word of God to the people.

**Question 5**

Discuss the statement ‘Prophets arise in times of crisis’.

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**The Man of God**

The prophet was recognised as a man of God and, as such, he was sacrosanct. In his person he was regarded as inviolable despite the outrage and hostility his message often provoked. This applied not only to the seer and the later prophets who exercised lone ministries but also to the nebi'im or ecstatic bands of prophets. They were considered to have a special relationship with God and therefore to harm them was to commit an offence against God. There are very few instances in the Bible of prophets being murdered. Even Jeremiah, whom the authorities hated, was often physically punished, was nevertheless not murdered.

This tradition of the inviolability of the prophets still exists in Israel today. On a recent visit to Jerusalem the writer was told of a psychiatric man who went up and down the streets shouting abuse at his neighbours and behaving in a strange trance-like manner. When the police were called they refused to arrest him or to take him to a psychiatric hospital because they said ‘He might be a prophet!’

**Question 6**

Why was the prophet’s person sacrosanct?

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**Definition of the Prophet**

In Exodus 4:1-17 is the account of Moses being called by God to be the agent of God’s deliverance of the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. Moses protested that he was not eloquent and the people would not take notice of him. He had been brought up in the court of Pharaoh and no doubt spoke fluent Egyptian but his Hebrew was not as good as that of Aaron his brother.

Moses may also have had some kind of speech impediment to which he refers in Exodus 6:30. For this reason God made an arrangement whereby Moses would listen to God, receive his word and communicate it to Aaron, who would then be the public spokesman both to the Israelites and to the Egyptians. God defined Aaron’s role as that of ‘Moses’ prophet’. In other words he was to be Moses’ mouthpiece. This provides us with a useful definition of the prophet.

**Question 7**

Use your own words to define the role of the prophet.

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**The Nature of Prophecy**

Throughout the Bible prophecy is consistently used in the context of God’s activity in revealing his word to men or women. The way in which he did this varies and this will be the subject of our next lesson but the dominant characteristic of prophecy was that it was not the product of human wisdom or rational or logical thought. Its origin was divine and therefore sacred.

Those who received the word of God had to be clean vessels and had to be utterly obedient to the directions given to them. Disobedience to God for the prophet was a very serious matter and could even result in the prophet’s death, as in the account of the unnamed prophet in 1 Kings 13.

**Question 8**

Use your own words to define ‘prophecy’.

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**Congratulations!** you have now reached the end of the first lesson. Review the work and undertake the first assignment. This should be about 600 words, a little shorter than future work. It will help to ease you into the practice. Take your time and write in an easy to follow style You may find the outline suggested below helpful but there is no need to follow it. The important thing when undertaking assignments is to enjoy the work in hand and to make sure that you answer the question. Do not worry if you have to read through the material more than once, the key to learning is understanding.

**Introductory paragraph.** Introduce the subject matter illustrating that you have understood the question.

**Paragraph of definitions.** What is the general understanding of the subject matter, what is the particular understanding of the subject matter for the purposes of this particular piece of work.

**Paragraph of analysis.** What you have discovered.

**Paragraph of synthesis.** How do your discoveries relate to the question.

**Conclusion.** This may contain your own opinion. If you are expressing an opinion try not to be too pedantic.

### **Assignment**

Use a concordance and look up all the Old Testament references to the word 'revealed'. There are about 25. Look particularly at those references which refer to God revealing himself or revealing his word to his servants.

Write a short essay of about 600 words on prophecy as divinely revealed truth.

## Answers for Lesson 1

1. There were very few men or women to whom the word of God was being revealed during the period of the Judges.
2. The seer was a lone figure whereas the navi apparently lived in community and worked in groups. The nevi'im were usually associated with ecstatic worship and prophesying whereas the seer was non-ecstatic.
3. Samuel was recognised both as a seer (1 Samuel 9:19) and as a leader of the Nevi'im (1 Samuel 19:20).
4. Syncretism is a mixture of religious beliefs and practices which incorporates elements from two or more religions. For Israel in the period of the Judges this meant incorporating Canaanite worship into their worship of God.
5. The prophets responded to the call of God and his desire to save the nation from the consequences of their own folly in turning away from him and breaking the covenant.
6. The life of the prophet was usually spared because he was thought to be the bearer of the word of God and thus linked with God himself. To harm him would probably bring judgment or even death upon the aggressor.
7. The prophet was the mouthpiece of God used by God to declare his word both to individuals and to the nation of Israel and other nations.
8. Prophecy is divinely revealed truth. It is the self-revelation of God, the word of God conveyed to men or women whom he has chosen to be his servants.