

Lesson 4

The Method of the Prophets

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At the end of this lesson, therefore, you should be able to:

1. Understand the importance of a personal experience of God for the prophetic ministry.
2. Explain how the prophets used the history of Israel in their prophetic ministries.
3. Show how the prophets studied contemporary world events.
4. Illustrate the way in which the prophets entered the presence of God, or stood in his council.
5. Show how the prophets set about their task of proclaiming the word of God.

Outline

It is important to understand how the prophets set about their task of receiving the word of God under different circumstances and how they fulfilled their ministry by being the mouthpiece of the Lord to the nation. We have already studied the nature of prophecy as the self revelation of God and we have looked at the ways in which the prophets received that word, primarily through hearing or seeing. Nevertheless, although prophecy was undoubtedly the activity of God in revealing his word to those whom he had chosen to call as his servants the prophets, the prophets were not idle. They did not lie around waiting for some blinding flash of revelation. They were not hermits shut away from the rest of the population. They were called to live and work among the people and to be active in the life of the nation. It was through that activity that God spoke to them. By studying the lives and activities as well as the words of the prophets we can learn something of the method by which they received the word of God and delivered it. This is an important study for giving us a basic understanding of prophecy and guarding us against deception or the serious error of saying that God has said something which is simply the product of our own lively imagination.

This lesson is largely based upon the prophet Amos. Read Amos through. Try to set aside a whole hour so that you can read it through in one sitting. Then read chapter four in the textbook, *Prophecy Past and Present*. This is the chapter on the 'Method of the Prophet'. When you have done that work through the following seven exercises.

Personal Experience

The foundation for the prophetic ministry in the lives of each of the prophets was a personal experience of God. Each of them had a personal encounter with the living God - an awesome experience such as that described in detail by Isaiah (chapter 6). For Isaiah, the sense of God's holiness never left him and had a marked influence upon his ministry which can be traced through the way in which he expresses the word of God which he is bidden to declare. Isaiah often uses the phrase 'The Holy One of Israel' (eg 10: 20). Another favourite phrase is 'The Lord Almighty' which occurs many times. It is worth looking up these two phrases in a concordance and looking at the context in which they occur in Isaiah's ministry. They reveal something of the prophet's strong sense of awe in declaring the word of the Lord. He was responsible to God and not to men for the ministry to which he was called.

The word 'Holy' *qadosh* (Hebrew) or *hagios* (Greek) always carries the meaning of separation. It is not a moral attribute in the sense in which it has come down to us in modern western society, which is largely due, first to Hellenistic thought that continued under Roman influence. The Hebraic understanding of *qadosh* is always linked with separation from the world, being set apart for a particular purpose as were the vessels in the temple. They were exclusively for ritualistic use and were therefore set apart for ever from utensils used for common everyday things. In the same sense God was entirely separate from all things to do with the world, or material objects, or the flesh. His commandment to his people was 'be holy because I am holy' (Leviticus 11: 44-45).

The task of the priests was to teach the people how to be separate from the world. 'You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses' (Leviticus 10: 10-11). A major reason why God removed his covering of protection from Jerusalem and banished the people into exile was the failure of priests to carry out this command (Ezekiel 22: 26 and 44: 23). This is still the central command of God to his people who are called by his name, to be separate from the world. It must be a major cause of God's grief both with modern Israel and with his church.

I have digressed somewhat in pursuing this theme, but it is so important for an understanding of the personal

experience of God which was central to the ministry of all the prophets of ancient Israel. You cannot understand their ministry without grasping their strong sense of awe in the presence of the one true, holy and almighty God.

It is this sense of awe which has so largely been lost in modern society although it is clearly there in New Testament teaching, eg Hebrews 12: 28-29, as well as running right throughout the earlier Hebrew scriptures. This personal experience of being allowed to enter the presence of the Lord Almighty who was wholly separated from the world of human beings was the foundational experience out of which the prophets exercised their ministry.

Question 1

Find two or three passages which you would quote in support of the view that the prophets had a strong sense of awe and of the holiness of God in their ministries.

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Students of History

Judaism is an historical faith, therefore, and the history of Israel was of supreme importance for all the prophets. They saw this not through the eyes of secular historians simply as the record of a series of events. They held a theocratic view which saw all history, and especially that of the of Israel, as the record of the deeds of the Lord. He was the God of all the nations and he held them in his hands as a drop in a bucket (Isaiah 40: 15). The surrounding nations held a narrower view of their own deities and often believed them to be constrained by geographical limitations.

The prophets saw international history as a record of the way in which God was working out his sovereign purposes among the nations. Their approach to the history of Israel was more particular in the sense that all events were judged according to the standard provided by the covenant relationship between God and Israel. When the people were faithful they were surrounded by his protection and blessings were poured upon them. When they were unfaithful, running after other gods, profaning his holy name, denying his sovereign presence among them, forsaking his ways and breaking his statutes and commandments, then judgment followed and everything went wrong in the life of the nation. The ultimate humbling of Israel was the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE and the ultimate humbling of Judah was the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the beginning of the Babylonian exile.

The northern kingdom of Israel never recovered from the scattering across the Assyrian Empire under the policy of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727) and his successor Sargon II (722-705 BC). Amos prophesied this complete destruction of Samaria and the northern kingdom. There is no mention of a remnant in the Book of Amos due to the complete dichotomy between the peasantry and the ruling elite who were responsible for the religious life of the nation and who since the time of Jeroboam I had steadily drifted away from the word of God and broken the covenant. Amos saw no hope of a remnant coming out of the uneducated peasantry who had lost all understanding of their history. The educated elite who knew their history, suppressed the truth, deceived the people and were therefore entirely to be held responsible for the nation's destiny. The northern kingdom of Israel, an apostate state, was to be entirely destroyed.

The prophecies concerning Judah, by contrast, always contained the promise that a remnant would survive and would again become holy unto the Lord, a redeemed people, a cleansed people, restored into a right relationship with the holy one of Israel. Out of that restored remnant would come the Messiah and the people of the new covenant.

Again, I have digressed somewhat to give an overview of the significance of history for the prophets in the task they were given of revealing the nature and purposes of God through their ministries.

The prophets all used the past deeds of the Lord to show his nature as loving, merciful, concerned for his people as well as for showing the people the requirements of the Lord. It has been suggested that part of the cultic formulations included a recitation of the deeds of the Lord. The prophet's recitations may reflect this practice

Question 2

Discuss a passage in the prophets which illustrates the use of the history of Israel for showing (a) the requirements of the Lord and (b) some characteristic in his nature. (Paragraph)

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Students of Contemporary Events

All the prophets were men of their times. Although they knew past history they were all highly contemporary in the keen interest they took in what was happening during their own lifetime. Each of the prophets was alert not simply to events occurring on the national scene but also on the international scene. They were also interested in anything that indicated the moral and spiritual state of the nation.

The prophets made it their business to know what was going on in royal palaces as well as in the homes of ordinary people. They watched the activities of the judges who were supposed to administer justice in the name of Yahweh. They studied the pronouncements of politicians who advised the king. They were therefore aware of the different factions and the advice being given to the king from the pro-Egyptian party or the pro-Assyrian party or other factions such as those who advocated forming alliances with neighbouring states such as Syria, Moab, Edom, Philistia and Lebanon. The prophets usually saw all such alliances as a lack of trust in Yahweh or even as acts of treachery against the Lord God of Israel.

The prophets not only studied national and international affairs at a high level, they were also aware of the situation among the peasant farmers and artisans who formed the bulk of the working people in both Israel and Judah. There are numerous examples throughout the prophets which illustrate their familiarity with the socio-economic and political scene as well as the moral and spiritual state of the nation. It was the task of the prophets to interpret these contemporary events and to tell the people what God was saying through them. The outstanding example is in Amos 4: 6-12 where the prophet reels off one local event after another which would have been familiar to all his hearers. He repeated the charge, 'yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord'.

The prophets all saw their task as 'watchmen' for the Lord as being to interpret the significance of contemporary events and to use them to call the people back to faithfulness according to the terms of their covenant relationship with God. It was when the prophets failed in this duty that disaster occurred. When the false prophets prevailed over the true prophets of Yahweh the consequences were tragic. There is a poignant verse in Lamentations 2: 14 which expresses this, 'The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity. The oracles they gave you were false and misleading.'

Question 3

How does the prophet Amos illustrate that slavery was rife in Israel in his day. (Include the references in your answer)?

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Standing in the Council of God

From the time of their call into ministry the prophets made a practice of learning to enter the presence of God, or to use Jeremiah’s phrase ‘to stand in the Council of the Lord’ (Jeremiah 23: 18). In one sense this was the most important part of the task of the prophets. For if, as in the case of the false prophets to whom Jeremiah refers so bitterly in chapter 23, they did not get into the presence of God to hear his word they could not faithfully declare what he was saying to the people. Hence the heart of the prophetic ministry was to learn how to approach God, how to discern what he was saying, how to listen to him.

Isaiah used the early mornings as his time for specifically listening to the Lord. He had trained himself to allow the Lord to waken him each morning so that before he had any human conversation his first waking thoughts were to turn to the Lord and allow him to whisper into his inner ear. He listened with the same attentiveness that a student gives his most revered professor. (Isaiah 50: 4-5)

Learning to listen lies at the very heart of the prophetic ministry and has always been the key difference between the false prophets and the true seers who learned to listen, to sit at the feet of the Lord, and to walk humbly with their God.

Question 4

Amos was used to standing in the Council of the Lord. Which passage best illustrates the necessity of the experience ? Comment on why it was essential.

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Proclaiming the Word

When the prophets were sure of what God was saying to them concerning the present state of the nation, or the consequences thereof, they were under a compulsion to declare what they had heard. Jeremiah speaks of this compulsion as a fire shut up in his bones. He says ‘I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot’ (Jeremiah 20: 9).

He speaks of this compulsion in the context of the trouble that it has brought him. Every time he opened his mouth to declare the word of the Lord it brought him insult and reproach. Even his friends were waiting for him to slip up, or looking for some evidence that what he was declaring to be the word of God was not true, or some prophecy did not fully come to pass so that they could declare that he was deceived and dismiss him, or even stone him as a false prophet. The regulations laid down by Moses for dealing with false prophets are found in Deuteronomy 13: 1-11. Jeremiah’s enemies would have been only too glad to have seized any weakness in the ministry of the prophet to condemn him to death; see Jeremiah’s heart rending outburst in 20: 7-18.

There is a sense in which none of the prophets wanted to carry the message they were bidden to declare. They would all much rather be prophets of peace and give promises of prosperity but they were under a divine compulsion to declare what they had heard in the council of the Lord, therefore they could not keep quiet.

Amos 3: 8 expresses this strong sense of compulsion where the prophet says 'the lion has roared - who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken - who can but prophesy?' For Amos this was not just theory; he put it into practice. The account of his confrontation with Amaziah the priest of Bethel in 7: 10-17 is a vivid portrayal of the boldness displayed by the prophet when the *ruach* of God came upon him - it was like a hurricane wind blowing through him that could not be held in or controlled. It meant more to the prophet than life itself that he had to speak forth the word he had received in the council of God. It was not his word, he was simply a messenger, the mouthpiece of the Lord. Therefore he was content to leave the consequences to God.

Question 5

Comment upon a passage giving the text reference which shows that despite the harshness of the message which the prophet Amos proclaimed he nevertheless had a soft heart and felt great compassion for Israel.

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The Four Stages

In studying the method of the prophets we can distinguish four stages. These are all well illustrated in the ministry of the prophet Amos.

- 1) The first stage is that of personal experience or the call of God upon the life of the prophet.
- 2) The second stage is the prophet doing his research. Here you find the prophet going to places and doing things which God has told him to do, such as Jeremiah visiting the house of the potter (chapter 18), or Amos wandering around the market stalls in Samaria observing the traders cheating poor housewives and listening to the travellers' tales, or the grumbling of the merchants. Isaiah was appalled to see the desolate countryside and cities burnt with fire (1: 7) and you find him moving among the people in the streets of Jerusalem, even singing a 'rap' song (5: 1-7 where the cadence of verses 3-5 are in the form of a rap song - probably with the prophet playing an instrument to accompany his own rendering. This would certainly have got the attention of the crowds in the street markets of Jerusalem!).
- 3) The third stage in the method of the prophets was getting into the presence of God to spread before him the information they had gleaned in their study of contemporary events. The most dramatic example of this is where Hezekiah and Isaiah take the threatening letter received from Sennacherib when the Assyrians had invaded the land. King and prophet together spread the letter before the Lord in the temple and cried out to God for help, (2 Chronicles 32: 20, Isaiah 37: 14f).
- 4) The fourth and final stage in the prophetic method was the delivery of the word of God, its proclamation to the people. What the prophet had heard in the council of God he was then instructed to deliver, often with explicit directions regarding time and place so that the word made maximum impact. A good example of this is found in Jeremiah 7 where the prophet was told to go and stand at the gate of the temple and proclaim a message to all the people who came through the gates to worship.

On another occasion Jeremiah was told to write the words down on a scroll so that there was a permanent record. He sent his servant Baruch to a house overlooking the entrance to the temple courtyard which was occupied by his friend Gemariah son of Shapan. Baruch read the scroll aloud to the people from the window of Gemariah's house (36: 10). On other occasions the prophets were told to carry out actions such as

Jeremiah smashing a vessel (19: 10) or Micah going about the streets of Jerusalem barefoot and naked and howling like a jackal (1:8) which no doubt attracted some attention!

The duty of the prophets was to be obedient to God and to follow whatever method of proclamation he chose for them. They were to carry out God's instructions regardless of the inconvenience or even danger to personal safety this entailed.

Question 6

The life of the prophet was one of constant communion with the Lord. Which passage shows that Amos was listening to the Lord even while walking along the city streets.

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Assignment

Write an essay of about 1000 words showing the prophet Amos' understanding of the social, economic, political, moral and spiritual life of Israel and the way he used this to declare the word of God.

Answers for Lesson 4

1. Isaiah 6: 3, Jeremiah 23: 9, Ezekiel 39: 7, Zechariah 14: 20-21 in which the prophet foresees the faithful Gentiles joining with the remnant of Israel and all becoming holy to the Lord.
2. a) Jeremiah 7: 22-26 or 11: 1-8;
b) Hosea 11: 1-11.
3. Amos 2: 6 and 8: 6. The rich were buying and selling 'the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals'.
4. Amos 3: 7. 'Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.' You may have made a comment that stresses the importance of being in the presence of the Lord and receiving his council in order not to miss direction concerning that which he is about to do; also the importance of being a faithful messenger.
5. Amos 7: 1-6. This shows Amos in the council of the Lord hearing God speak of judgment and pleading for mercy 'Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!'
6. Amos 8: 1-2 where Amos saw a trader with a basket of ripe fruit which God used to communicate a message to him which he probably used immediately to draw peoples attention to the fruit and say 'This is what the Lord says ... ?'