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**Eighth Century Prophets: Major Preaching Themes, Effects
and Need for Prophecy Today**

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Introduction

Prophets in the Old Testament could be found as early as the patriarchs, when Joseph prophesied of a visitation by God that would bring the people out of Egypt.¹ When it did happen, and the people marched out to Mount Sinai to receive the Covenant with glory and fire, they were henceforth bound to a new framework that would give them the power for life, blessings and abundance if obeyed; or plagues, destruction and exile if transgressed.²

Once in Canaan however, it wasn't long before Israel betrayed the Covenant and rejected the kingship of God for human kings.³ These human kings would then go on to become the spiritual barometers for the nation and contribute actively to Covenant faithfulness or infidelity.

It was into this period that God raised up fearless men who would haunt the corridors of power and rail against all manner of Covenant transgression, denouncing the societal degeneration and rampant idolatry that had been institutionalized by royal edicts. Armed with unshakeable prophetic consciousness, these spiritual watchmen spoke zealously against the leaders, society and even surrounding nations that chose to lift themselves over the righteousness and justice of God, manifested through the Divine Law.

The function of prophecy during this pre-exilic period evolved from one where the prophets' actions and activities were recorded by a historian or scribe to one where the prophet personally narrated his call, oracles and revelations received. These prophets became known as the 'Writing Prophets'.

Some of these eighth century prophets were Isaiah (739), Amos (760), Hosea (750), and Micah (735). This study will examine the major themes of these four prophets and the effects of their message on the people. It will also comment on the need for modern-day 'prophets' in the church.

¹ Gen 50:25.

² Deut 28:15-68.

³ 1 Samuel 8:10.

Overall: Major Themes

The eighth century prophets preached death and destruction to people who had forsaken the laws of God. Dumbrell states that the prophetic ministry was most associated, up to the exile at least, “with impending judgment”.⁴ He adds that the Israelite prophet was primarily a covenant mediator, and that his appearance and intervention in Israel’s policies and society meant that “covenant breach had taken place”.⁵ Clements echoes this when he describes these prophets as “preachers of repentance whose message was a call to return to the law.”⁶

Apart from moral and ethical trespasses which had taken place, Freeman adds that the prophets spoke out against religious backsliding. “They were watchmen standing upon the walls of Zion to sound the trumpet against dangers of religious apostasy, [...] and warn of approaching spiritual peril to the nation.”⁷ John Peter Lounge, in Freeman, states that “it was their duty to admonish and reprove, to denounce prevailing sins, to threaten people with the terrors of divine judgment and call them to repentance.”⁸

Also, they pronounced judgment in their Oracles against Foreign Nations (OFN). These were collected sayings of judgment and threats that were declared against countries surrounding Israel and Judah, for arrogance and sin. Rust states that these “nations are arraigned not on the grounds of their relation to Israel, but on the grounds of their unrighteousness toward God and toward one another. They do not meet the divine standards for righteous conduct.”⁹

⁴ William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2002), 107-133.

⁵ Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, 107.

⁶ R.E. Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition* (Oxford: Basil, Blackwell, 1975), 41-58.

⁷ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 37-48.

⁸ Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 50.

⁹ Eric C. Rust, *Covenant and Hope: A Study in the Theology of the Prophets* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1972), 43-55.

Amos

Overall Themes: Society's Excesses

Amos was one of two prophets sent by God to speak out against the sins of the Northern Kingdom. Heschel comments that when Amos appeared in the North,

“...there was pride (6:13-14), plenty and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces. The rich had their summer and winter palaces adorned with costly ivory (3:15) [...] At the same time, there was no justice in the land (3:10), the poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery (2:6-8, 5:11) and the judges were corrupt (5:12).”¹⁰

Amos preached against the social injustices shown by the rich and powerful. The society of the time had become “ravaged by greed and poisoned by injustice.”¹¹ Von Rad states it was that element of compassion lacking in the upper classes that Amos vehemently attacked.¹²

Judgment Theme

Because the people had forsaken the Divine Law, Amos preached retributive judgment. Zimmerli states that “the proclamation of Amos is based on knowledge of the legal demands of Israel’s God.”¹³ Amos preached a dread-filled ‘Day of the Lord’ which would descend upon Israel because of the corrupt social systems of the day.¹⁴

The Day of the Lord meant nothing short of exile, and the nation of Assyria would be “no more than a convenient agent of God’s judgment...” used to uproot a people who had polluted and corrupted the land with their debauchery.¹⁵ This theme of the terror of the Day of the Lord could be heard “tolling throughout his oracles, with its announcement of the inevitable, imminent and catastrophic climax of Israel’s present way of life” (Amos 2:14-16).¹⁶

¹⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Massachusetts: Prince Press, 1962), 27-98.

¹¹ E.W. Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophet* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), 72-92.

¹² Gerhard Von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1968), 100-145.

¹³ Walther Zimmerli, *The Fiery Throne: The Prophets and Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 43-56.

¹⁴ Amos 4:1; 2:6-8; 3:9-10.

¹⁵ Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, 78.

¹⁶ Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, 77.

Isaiah

Overall themes

Isaiah was one of the greatest of the Writing Prophets, both in literary as well as spiritual significance. Like Amos, he speaks against injustices (chap. 5); false worship (1:10-17); unbelief (7); and false security (chap. 28, 30). It was the pride of Israel that became her downfall. Eichrodt says in Barton: “[for Isaiah] the central sin of man lay in the overweening pride with which he set himself up against God...”¹⁷ Isaiah illustrates this theme of Pride in his passage on the daughters of Zion who ‘walk with outstretched necks, throwing seductive glances round them’, and whose beauty will soon be put to shame (3:16ff).¹⁸

Judgment Theme

Isaiah’s oracles of judgment are quite similar in their uncompromising character as those of Amos. Jerusalem, he announces, will sink into “impotent anarchy” and the Lord’s vineyard “become a wasteland” (5:1-7, 7:18-22, 32:9-14).¹⁹ Isaiah presented his audience with a choice: “either faith in God’s providential ordering of events, or devastation and destruction.”²⁰ Isaiah’s moral standards are the same as Amos’ and he condemns the same wayward society where faith in God had begun to decline.²¹ He chided the people to ‘seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow’ in response to the zealous cult practices in Jerusalem (1:17).²²

¹⁷ John Barton, “Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem,” in *The Place is Too Small For Us: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Robert Gordon (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 90.

¹⁸ Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Assyrian Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 105-144.

¹⁹ Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, 84.

²⁰ Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, 83.

²¹ *Ibid*, 85.

²² Zimmerli, *The Fiery Throne*, 45.

Hosea

Overview

The book of Hosea has three main themes: the illustration of God's relationship with Israel as that of a husband to a wife; Israel's sin and the coming judgment; and the restoration of Israel from exile.

Marriage Theme

The marriage theme of God's relationship with His people is depicted in graphic form by Hosea's marriage to Gomer in real-life. The subsequent betrayal and adultery was lived out and preached through Hosea's life. This was to show the people's betrayal of trust with the God who had redeemed them and betrothed them to Himself in the wilderness. Von Rad says that "Israel has forsaken YHWH like a faithless wife who runs after her lovers."²³ Hosea uses the symbolic names of the children born of his troubled marriage to proclaim the message of YHWH's impending wrath and his violent turning away from his people.²⁴

Israel's Sin and Infidelity to the Covenant

The Covenant is pivotal in Hosea's message.²⁵ The breaching of this Covenant has brought into motion a series of events that will ultimately lead to judgment. Although the Covenant appears as "an external and legalized framework", its inner context, however, is a word translated as steadfast or covenant love.²⁶ The prophet's challenge to Israel was ultimately "covenant law, not sacrifice".²⁷ Hosea's treatise of Israel's sin is deeper and more personal than Amos. He views that the problem of sin starts from within, and goes beyond external acts.²⁸ Hosea also attacked Israel's false worship of YHWH, dressed up in a façade of familiar religious terms but retained the immorality and ritual prostitution that YHWH so detested (4:13-14).²⁹

²³ Von Rad, *The Old Testament Prophets*, 111.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 111.

²⁵ Rust, *Covenant and Hope*, 43-65.

²⁶ Rust, *Covenant and Hope*, 62.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 62.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 64-65.

Restoration

However, unique also to Hosea's message was YHWH's unremitting grace in spite of grave trespasses. While Amos sees God as judge, Hosea sees God as redeemer.³⁰ For Hosea, the center is not righteousness but covenant love. Hosea preached that "YHWH is involved with his people, and in the end he will have mercy."³¹ Although Israel's repentance is misdirected through ritualistic oblations, Hosea still offers a message of salvation and hope. (9:9-11)³² Hosea says that YHWH is waiting for them to acknowledge their guilt and return to Him (5:15-6:3) and then will He redeem them if they serve him in truth.³³

Micah

Judgment

Micah was called by God "to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin."³⁴ Micah's message was against the "hearts of the house of Jacob and the rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all iniquity."³⁵ The people Micah attacked had been misusing the time of prosperity early in King Hezekiah's reign. They had been accumulating wealth at the expense of the poor and had "build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong".³⁶ Micah shared the moral norms of Amos and Isaiah and spoke out against a society "corrupted by the power of wealth and the exploitation of the ordinary citizen" (Micah 2:1, Hos 5:10, Is 5:8-10).³⁷ Micah pronounces "inescapable destruction of the whole intolerable brood, which by its inhumanity had ceased to be God's people and become, instead, his enemy" (Micah 2:8, Jeremiah 26:18).³⁸

³⁰ *Ibid*, 63.

³¹ *Ibid*, 63.

³² Curt Kuhl, *The Prophets of Israel* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver ad Boyd, 1960), 58-73.

³³ Kuhl, *The Prophets of Israel*, 71.

³⁴ Micah 3:8.

³⁵ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 98.

³⁶ Micah 3:9-10.

³⁷ Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, 89.

³⁸ Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, 90.

Hope

In spite of these pronouncements of judgment, Micah predicted a coming day when conditions would be reversed, when there would be a flood of blessings for the common folk who would enjoy new freedom from all their manifold sufferings.³⁹

Some scholars say however, that it is quite unreasonable that the same preacher, on the one hand “lashing out more bluntly than any other at the intolerable state of affairs” and prophesying a devastation during which “even Jerusalem will be erased from the earth” could, at the same time, have drawn so bright a picture of a better future.⁴⁰ But these debates are out of the scope of this paper.

Positive/Effective effects of Prophetic Messages

According to Heschel, Amos and Hosea had devoted their ministries to trying to save the people of the Northern Kingdom. “They had called for return, but met with no response.”⁴¹ It was not much different for Isaiah. His plea to the rulers of Jerusalem to not trust in military alliances made little impression upon the government.⁴² It is said that Hezekiah was open to Isaiah’s messages and responded to his calls in his dealings with the Assyrian empire. However, these were isolated incidents. Eventually, according to tradition, Isaiah was sawn in two by Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh. Micah, like the others, also did not meet with any more sympathy in the south than Amos and Hosea did in the north. His Judean listeners were so sure of their God that they indignantly rejected what he had to say (2:6).⁴³

³⁹ Andrew W. Blackwood Sr., *The Prophets: Elijah to Christ*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 133-153.

⁴⁰ Koch, *The Prophets*, 102.

⁴¹ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 62.

⁴² Heschel, *The Prophets*, 72.

⁴³ Koch, *The Prophets*, 96.

Should there be Prophecy today?

Whether or not the role of Prophets is received by the mainstream Church today, individuals throughout history have arisen to speak out against injustice, abuse and cruelty. The likes of Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr. and Albert Schweitzer are some Christian examples.

Today, the need to declare the Divine Will to a relativistic world has not diminished in the least. It is not messages of adherence to dogmatic creeds or impotent traditions, but a deep and compassionate re-looking of the Covenant, fleshed out in policies and measures that liberate. Such calls for the rising and empowerment of such 'prophetic' voices are still warmly received today.⁴⁴

However, at the other end of the spectrum lies the abuses and excesses of erroneous interpretation. Some Evangelical activists take on Biblical prophetic literature literally and attempt to speak in that capacity. Paul Marshall observes:

[These] prophetic proponents outline the latest eschatological scenario and sometimes lend their support to U.S. or Israeli policies, believing such policies might fulfill prophecy. Even apart from problematic interpretation, however, this approach gives no guide to action. [...] Predictions about the future provide no guidance, political or otherwise, on what God calls us to do today.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Calenthia S. Dowdy, "Voices from the fringes: a case for prophetic youth ministry," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 3, no 2 (Spr 2005): 95.

⁴⁵ Paul Marshall, "The Problem with Prophets: in their zeal for social change, some evangelical activists stand on shaky biblical ground," *Christianity Today* 50, no 9 (Sept 2006): 91.

Conclusion

The words of judgment spoken by the prophets of old are still relevant. They show to us the limits of human depravity and how we need to return to the Source of all Life. The psalmist says, “Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.”⁴⁶ Even more so is the application of the role of prophet as ‘auditors’ for the Divine Standard for the world. The blatant abuse by contemporary ‘prophets’ have done much harm for Christianity’s reputation in the world today, but the world is still in desperate need for the Truth, spoken by fearless people sent by God to a hostile society. Whom shall He send? Who will go for us?

⁴⁶ Ps. 119:91.

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