

Confirmation 2020-21
Session 12 – Prophets
November 29, 2020

Where are we?

Turn to pages 30ff. in the LSB and find the vertical lines that indicate 900 to 400 BCE. Then find the small pink names among the horizontal line called Key Bible People. Those pink names are the prophets, the subjects of today's lesson.

Background Information

Moses and Exodus

Moses was selected by God to take God's people, known as the Israelites, out of their slavery to Egypt and into the Promised Land. Moses provoked Pharaoh, the ruler of the Egyptians, to release the Israelites by imposing Ten Plagues. When Pharaoh finally gave in, Moses led the people through the Red Sea and to the foot of Mount Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The Israelite people committed to being God's Chosen People, but persisted in sinning, leading God to punish them by making them wander in the Sinai Desert for forty years.

Joshua & the Judges

At the end of their forty years of wandering, Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land so he appointed Joshua to carry on as the leader of the Israelites. After crossing the Jordan River and entering the Promised Land, the Promised Land was divided up among the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites did not eliminate the pagan Caananites who occupied the land, leading to the mingling of the people, the worship of idols, and their faithfulness to God. After Joshua died a series of judges exercised leadership over the Israelites, but not all the judges were godly.

Kings

The Israelites were unsuccessful under the judges and cried out to God asking for a human king like all the other nations. Though God opposed this reminding the Israelites that God was their king, God eventually gave them what they wanted. Saul was the first king and was selected by God using human criteria (Saul was handsome and the tallest Israelite). Saul turned out to be a terrible faithless king, just as God warned, and was rejected by God. David was God's choice because he was "a man after God's own heart." Though David was a sinner, he was a godly man, and God promised that there would always be a descendent of David on the throne of Israel. David was responsible for making Jerusalem the capital of Israel. When David died, his son Solomon became king. Initially, Solomon was a wise king, but his downfall was women, too many women. Solomon was responsible for building the first Temple in Jerusalem.

The Divided Kingdom of Israel

After Solomon died the united kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms – the northern Kingdom of Israel made up of ten tribes, and the southern Kingdom of Judah made up of two tribes (Judah and Benjamin). God did not approve of this split because worship, offerings, and sacrifice could only be performed in the Temple in Jerusalem, and because the line of King David could only continue in Judah. As a result, God did not bless the northern Kingdom of Israel and their people struggled until they were eventually conquered by the Assyrians initially, then the Babylonians. The southern Kingdom of Judah survived longer but they too would eventually be conquered by the Babylonians. It is into this period, the period of the divided kingdoms of Israel that God sent the Prophets.

About the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)

Please turn to page 1088 and read the introduction to the Prophets. Also, be aware that each book of the individual prophet's work has an introduction. Please read the introduction to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is

the prophet we hear from the most in worship. Especially read the articles entitled “Background File,” “What’s the Story?” and “What’s the Message” for each book. These articles can be found at the beginning of every book of the Bible and are very helpful in getting a basic understanding of each book’s content.

Into the Story

In the Old Testament, prophets were appointed by God (often at a very young age) to speak on behalf of God. Prophets informed kings about what God wanted for the people – advice the kings didn't always want to hear or follow. There was no official prophet selection process, which often led to skepticism about the credentials of those who claimed to speak for God.

The context for the rise of the prophets is laid out in Deuteronomy 18:15-22 (pg 332), which details the transition from Moses' leadership among the people to the leadership of others. Moses was so central to the development and identity of God's people that there was likely a great deal of fear and anxiety about what would become of them after he died. This passage is God's reassurance that, just as God raised up Moses, God will call others to speak to the people on God's behalf. As with Moses, the prophet's words would be a sign of God's presence in and among the people.

For the most part, prophets existed on the margins of the community where they would not be influenced by politics and culture. Yet they were still integrally connected to the community. They weren't charismatic figures who popped up out of nowhere seeking glory or recognition. They were committed to the restoration of the people of God. Their sole purpose was to compel and shape the people of God for covenantal faithfulness by speaking the word of God. That means the prophets stood within a tradition that ultimately gets picked up in the New Testament with John the Baptist and Jesus.

Today we think of prophets as being a little off. And some of the prophets in the Bible certainly were. But the prophets were also people of imagination. They inspired hope and offered stories of restoration and renewal. Their laments expressed the darkness of life in captivity and pointed to the light of God's voice and God's presence. Prophets imagined a new day, where God's intention for the world would be realized. Prophets dared to call out problems for what they were but also dared to hope in the face of it all.

What you need to know

Being a prophet was not a paid gig. A prophet brought a prophecy. When a prophet proclaimed a prophecy, he prophesied.

As the leadership of the Israelites passed from Moses to others, God provided prophets to continue to guide the people. While they didn't lead like Moses or rule like kings, they did serve a crucial role in the history of God's people. The words of the prophets acted like a prism, shifting the perception of reality ever so slightly to reveal something distinct, new, and ultimately true.

But that they didn't lead like Moses or rule like kings often put them in danger. Some kings had royal prophets who advised the king on what he should or should not do. Since these royal prophets were always false prophets they could often be wrong. Imagine advising a king predisposed to attacking an enemy. He seeks the advice of his royal prophets who tell the king he will be victorious in battle and then gets beaten, badly perhaps putting himself or his country in peril. That royal prophet will likely lose his head.

Being a true God-sent prophet could be just as dangerous. If the above-mentioned king was predisposed to attacking an enemy and the true prophet tells him the truth, that he will be destroyed, the king may turn on the prophet. To be clear, a prophet is not a fortune teller. The prophet is the mouthpiece of God. If God is silent when the prophet seeks a word, the prophet cannot say anything, no matter how badly the word is wanted.

A metaphor could be the prophets as gardeners. Prophets till and re-till the "soil" of people's hearts and lives, turning it over and over again to let what is ultimately lasting and good emerge and grow. Their disruptive presence is always motivated by the intention that something good will grow out of what they have disrupted. This is a good rule of thumb even today as we listen to people who claim to speak for God: What do their words point to – justice, mercy, peace, or something else? We live in a world where the church's public sway is decreasing in several ways. However, prophets had significant authority – the people needed to be able to trust the words of the prophets as messages from God

Finally, true prophets were not easy to recognize. In fact, the only way to know if a prophet and his prophecy were truly from God was after the fact – if the prophet's words came true.

Conclusion

The order of the prophets in the Bible is not chronological. We will take a look at a few verses from the prophet Isaiah to get a flavor for the prophet's work.

Isaiah is likely not one prophet but a collection of the writings of several prophets spanning hundreds of years. Generally, the personality of Isaiah lived in the southern kingdom of Judah. The book of Isaiah is broken into three parts:

1st Isaiah (chapters 1-39) which was likely written by the authentic Isaiah, contains oracles dealing with foreign enemies like the Assyrians, and domestic enemies like the northern Kingdom of Israel. Read and discuss 9:2-7 (page 1107)

2nd Isaiah (chapters 40-55) is written about the time of the Babylonian Exile and deals with the fall of Babylon and the rise of Cyrus of Persia as God's chosen one. Read and discuss 40:1-11 (page 1157).

3rd Isaiah (chapters 56-66) deals with new life in Jerusalem after the return from Exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. Read and discuss 64:1-9 (page1204).

Essay Questions

In 150 of your own words, briefly answer all three of the following questions below:

1. Referring to Isaiah 9:2-7, the author is prophesying about Cyrus of Persia who will come and conquer Babylon and allow the return of the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem. Why do you think this passage is read in worship on Christmas Eve every year?
2. Referring to 40:1-11, the author is writing during the time of the Babylonian Exile but is prophesying about a savior he sees coming to set the people free. This prophecy is about Cyrus of Persia. Why do you think this passage is read in worship on the 2nd Sunday of Advent (Year B)?
3. Referring to Isaiah 64:1-9, the author preaches a prayer on behalf of the Israelites asking God to come down from heaven and reveal God's power. The prayer recognizes that God must come to them because humankind cannot reach up to God. Why do you suppose this reading is read on the 1st Sunday of Advent, (year B)?

Email your answers back to Pastor Jesse by email at pastor@zionohio.org no later than next Sunday, December 6.