

A rich look at the prophets' motives

From Amos to Zephaniah: everything you ever wanted to know about the biggest mouths in the Old Testament.

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The books of the prophets take some getting used to. They don't have the narrative style of Genesis, the drama of Exodus, or the familiarity of the Gospels. They seem to be chapter after chapter of hellfire and brimstone preaching, punctuated with a complaint here and a harangue there. The history is there, but you have to know what to look for.

Still, the prophets are worth the trouble. Without them, there would be no Judaism, no Christ, and no Catholic Church.

Oh, we would have religion all right. We'd gather maybe four times a year in a field, with the other members of the First Church of Fertility, and do unspeakable things to make the rains come and the crops grow. We wouldn't care about the old, the poor, or the oppressed—for the church would honor only the young, the rich, and the powerful.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be an historical curiosity. Nothing more.

Fortunately, there were prophets. For all their complexity, the prophets had a simple role. They reminded the people of who their God was (YHWH) and of how this God was to be worshiped (with justice).

The major and minor prophets—the ones with books named after them—also occupied a particular niche in history. They appeared right before, during, and right after the exile of the Jews into Babylon and Assyria. The prophets helped people preserve their religious and cultural values during this terrible time of transition.

The biblical prophets should not be compared to the professional prophets of the time. The pros were often attached to the royal courts and were charged with the task of divin-

ing propitious times for battle, keeping tabs on God's mood, and generally acting as a telephone between God and the king. They were soothsayers, not unlike the astrologer who gave advice to Nancy Reagan during her husband's presidency. The biblical prophets did act as the mouthpiece of God, but they were usually not professionals and often took great pains to avoid being tarred with this brush. Their function was a little different, too: they were less interested in prediction than in calling the people back to their God and to the principles of justice found in Mosaic Law.

Aside from the major and minor prophets, many biblical figures filled prophetic roles. The two most important were Moses and Elijah, who appear with Jesus at the Transfiguration. Moses laid down the law and called the people to holiness. Moses'

call, in which he argues that he is slow of speech, typifies the true prophet's reluctance to play this role.

Elijah is notable for his miracles, for his forthright attack on worshipers of Baal, and for his compassion for the poor and the oppressed. The miracles are unusual in the prophetic business, but standing up for the one God and for the oppressed became a requirement.

To make things easy, here are some sketches of the major and minor prophets, plus Daniel, in chronological order.

AMOS

If I were going to have a beer with one of the prophets, I'd pick Amos. He lived in the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in times that were in some ways similar to modern America. The rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer.

Amos was a working stiff—a shepherd and pruner of sycamore trees, whose bland fruit fed the poor. He flaunted his lowly status and was proud that he wasn't a professional. He hated titles—"prophet" in particular—and was a shining example of God's habit of using ordinary people to do extraordinary tasks. In keeping with his working-class image, his God came not like a still small voice



AMOS



HOSEA

but like a roaring lion.

Amos himself does not mince words. He calls the indolent women of the kingdom "cows" and scolds them for oppressing the weak and abusing the needy while lying on their backsides, waiting for their bartenders to come around again (4:1). He chides merchants for using dishonest weights and measures (8:5) and for selling inferior produce (8:6). And he yells at people for using these ill-gotten goods to worship idols (2:6-8).

Amos predicts rack and ruin; and, as most prophets do, he ends with hope for restoration. Amos is no radical. He is a conservative who is angry because his people have spurned the law of the Lord.

HOSEA

It's natural to pair Hosea and Amos. They were contemporaries

(almost) in the last days of the Northern Kingdom, and their lives were a part of their message. Not much is known about Hosea's occupation. Some scholars think he was a priest; others think he was a professional prophet, a baker, or a farmer. On the other hand, given some of his language, he might have been a lawyer. What is known for sure is that his family life left something to be desired.

His wife, Gomer, turned out to be a harlot. And his children? How would you like to be named Jezreel, Unloved, or Not Mine?

Hosea was not happy, especially because Gomer kept stepping out on him. He responded first with rage and then, eventually, with tenderness and renewed commitment. This loyalty reflected the commitment that the Lord had for his people, even though they had repeatedly wandered away to other gods.

Hosea, more than any other figure in Hebrew Scripture, presents a new way to look at the relationship between God and humanity—as a marriage. He differed from Amos in emphasis. Where Amos raged at the people for their oppression of the poor, Hosea raged at them for their infidelity to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

ISAIAH

Isaiah is the patrician of prophets. He seems to be part of the ruling class in the Southern Kingdom. His basic vision—of God enthroned in glory—comes from temple imagery. He moves easily within the priestly



ISAIAH

circles—he may be a priest himself—and is adviser to kings. His poetic style is smooth, familiar with the wisdom tradition, and not as passionate as Hosea nor as biting as Amos.

But these are tough times. Isaiah lives through the fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 B.C.) and a siege on Jerusalem (701 B.C.) by the Assyrians. Isaiah, seeing the latter coming, protests a Judean alliance with Egypt by walking the streets of Jerusalem buck naked, for three years. This was to be a warning that Assyria would “lead away captives from

Egypt, and exiles from Ethiopia, young and old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered” (Isa. 20:4). So much for patrician behavior. But his posture was probably good.

Isaiah’s message is marked by his sense of the enormous abyss between God’s holiness and human frailty, both his own and his people’s. Only a burning coal could purify his lips so that he could speak his response: “Here I am.” Only the fire of suffering could purify the people to re-enter God’s covenant.

The book of Isaiah from Chapter 40 on is often called “Deutero-Isaiah” because it comes from an anonymous poet who prophesied toward the end of the Babylonian exile.



MICAH

And like all good cowboys, Micah is a loner. He trusts no human being—not a friend, not a lover, not a family member (7:5-6). “But as for me, I will put my trust in God my savior” (7:7). Micah, the unsophisticated one, repeats a memorable phrase from Isaiah: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the swords against another, nor shall they train for war again” (4:3).

MICAH

Micah is a contemporary of Isaiah and seems to have influenced the religious reforms of Judah’s King Hezekiah. Micah’s personality, however, is a perfect contrast to Isaiah’s.

Micah is all country music with a distrust of the big city. His language is blunt and unpolished—and he takes up the case of the poor as Amos does, and rages against idols as Hosea does. Like Hosea, too, he begins with threats of reproach and ends with promise.



Zephaniah prophesied just before Jeremiah during the reign of Josiah (640-609). He probably influenced Jeremiah. Little is known about him except that he has a genealogy that goes back four generations. Judah during this period was going back to old idolatries. People worshiped the sun, moon, and stars. His book is small, but it follows the usual pattern of reproach ending with a promise of redemption. The depressing first chapter became the basis of the old Christian funeral hymn, “Dies Irae” (“Day of Wrath”).

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah is the Rodney Dangerfield of prophets, the man who invented the tradition that a prophet

Paul
doesn't get any respect in his own country.

Jeremiah, during his long career as a prophet in Judah, faced a mob that demanded he be put to death; was whipped and put in stocks (20:2); was beaten and thrown into prison for "a long time" (37:15); was thrown into a cistern with mud up to his armpits and left to starve (38:6); and was kept under house arrest (39:15). After the fall of Jerusalem, he wound up in Egypt where, according to tradition, his own people stoned him to death.

Jeremiah, and this is no surprise to me, did not walk around with a smile button on his shirt. "Woe to me, mother, that you gave me birth!" he grumps (15:10). "You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped," he complains elsewhere (20:7). "All the day I am an object of laughter, everyone mocks me."

Yet Jeremiah carried out his mission with intensity and sometimes with flair. You can hear him sounding like a priest when he blasts from the temple gate: "This is the temple of the Lord! This is the temple of the Lord! This is the temple of the Lord! Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds; if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow . . . will I remain with you in this place, in the land which I gave your fathers long



HABAKKUK

ago and forever" (7:5-7). And he took a page from Isaiah's notebook by walking around for months with a wooden yoke across his shoulders as a sign that Judah would be led into captivity.

Like most of the prophets, though, Jeremiah always moved from anger and reproach to hope. Never the other way. One of his enduring legacies is what Christians sometimes call the "gospel before the Gospel," in which God promises through Jeremiah to make a "new covenant" with Israel and Judah. "I will place my law within them, and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (31:33).



NAHUM

Nothing is known about Nahum the person. However, his gloating over the fall of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, is so unseemly that some people consider Nahum a false prophet. But Assyria was a hideous regime, perpetrating the kind of horror seen in this century in Nazi Germany and Pol Pot's Cambodia. A little dancing in the street at the end of such an empire is understandable—and even Nahum's glee occurred in the context of a God who did the liberating. "See, upon the mountains there advances the bearer

of good news, announcing peace! . . . The Lord will restore the vine of Israel" (2:1,3).

HABAKKUK

Saint Jerome calls Habakkuk the prophet "who wrestled with God." Habakkuk, who might have been a professional prophet, witnessed the Babylonian invasion of Judah and the fall of Jerusalem. The idea that God could permit such terrible evil tormented him. And he said so, right from the first verse: "How long, O Lord? I cry for help, but you do not listen?" This willingness to challenge God is his real gift.

EZEKIEL

*after
Babylonian
Captivity
and
Died
aged*
Ezekiel has the distinction of being the strangest of the prophets, which is no small task. One biblical commentator calls him the "first fanatic in the Bible"; another respected scholar describes him as a "catatonic schizophrenic." Yet he is also called the "father of Judaism."

Who was this man?

He was a priest, well versed in temple ritual. He was married, but his wife died just before the fall of Jerusalem in 586. He was carted off into exile in 597, which is when his work as a prophet begins. His first



EZEKIEL

role in Babylon is to prepare the exiles for the fall of Jerusalem, which his fellow exiles believe is impossible. He reproaches them for their sins and predicts even more devastation and a general exile of the people.

When Jerusalem falls, which is one of the darkest moments in Jewish history, this nutcase softens and begins offering the exiles some light. This madman borrows the symbols from a liturgy that can no longer be celebrated and gives meaning to the exile. The exiles, once they have suffered enough, will lead the way to the restoration of the nation and the temple. Like the dry bones coming to life in Ezekiel's most famous vision, Israel will rise up out of the graveyard of Babylon (Chapter 37).

There was method to Ezekiel's madness. With it, he kept his people sane. And with it, he showed those who came after him how life comes out of death, light comes out of darkness, and victory comes out of defeat. Christians would later have their own name for this: the paschal mystery.

HAGGAI

Haggai was the first prophet to appear when the exile ended and the people returned to Jerusalem. His message: build the temple. Now.



HAGGAI

Before anything—even homes. Not much is known about him, but he was probably a priest.

ZECHARIAH

Zechariah was, like Haggai, probably a priest whose mission was bound up in the rebuilding of the temple. Zechariah's vision, however, seems to have been a little wider than his contemporary's.

Zechariah linked the rebuilding of the temple to the beginning of the messianic age. He saw Jews return-



ZECHARIAH

ing to their homeland and the beginning of a nation built on concepts of prosperity. His was not a vision of pure nationalism, for he saw a vision of ten foreigners following every Jew into the city of peace (8:23).

MALACHI

Malachi is a pseudonym meaning "My Messenger." The author probably wished to conceal his (or her) identity because his attacks on the priests and ruling classes were very sharp.

Malachi arrived on the scene after the excitement of the return from exile had worn off. Morals were suffering. People were renegeing on their tithes, intermarrying (and losing their cultural and religious identity),



MALACHI

and oppressing the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. For Malachi, this moral slide began in the temple. Malachi scolds the priests for sacrificing utility-grade animals to the Lord. "Try serving bad meat to the governor," he snorts. "And see how he likes it" (1:8).

JONAH

Jonah, unlike the other prophets, is more cartoon than history. Although the story was set in the eighth century before Christ, it was



JONAH

written 300 years later in the fifth century after the exile. Jonah personifies the era's narrow-minded nationalism. He refuses to carry the good news to Nineveh, not because he is the traditional humble prophet but because he is a racist. He hates Ninevites.

The Lord resorts to vaudeville drama when Jonah runs away to sea. A big fish chases him down, swallows him, and belches him back on shore. Jonah finally delivers the message and gets angry when the Ninevites repent. The story ends with the Lord reprimanding Jonah who, it seems, remains a grump forever. There are two powerful messages in this "children's" fable: the Lord cares for outsiders, and even a racist can be a prophet.

OBADIAH

Jonah's nice, but if you're really into mean prophets, Obadiah's your man. Nothing is known about him, except that he wants to see Edom crushed. This is a rather unseemly emotion for a prophet. Nevertheless, Obadiah is worth a look because he raises the issue of the animosity between Israel and Edom, which began according to tradition in the wrestling between Jacob and Esau and continues to this day in the struggles between Israelis and Palestinians.



OBADIAH

JOEL

Joel is the exterminator—as in Orkin. His familiarity with liturgy suggests he was attached to the temple in some way. But his thing is locusts—billions of locusts. Though



JOEL

some scholars doubt that Joel witnessed a literal plague of locusts, there were periodic invasions of locusts and the imagery has the force of someone who has been there: "They assault the city, they run upon the wall, they climb into the houses, at the windows they come like thieves" (2:9). The people gather in assembly and cry out to God—much as they do when invaded by Assyrians or Babylonians—and God hears their prayer and promises to repay them for "the years the locust has eaten" (2:25). They say that war can turn a man mean.

Well, Joel dreams of vengeance against the nations—the locusts having been replaced in later chapters by more conventional pests. He sees the nations gathering at the Valley of Jehosaphat where they will be cut down in a bloody harvest and stomped on like grapes in a wine vat. Joel even perverts the famous line from Micah and Isaiah: "Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears" (4:10).

*Let's go to
war
in response
to invaders*

Nevertheless, Joel spoke to a people who had been brutalized by one invasion after another. Even Peter saw the coming of the Holy Spirit—which prompted old men to dream dreams and young men to see visions—as evidence that the time Joel had foretold was now here. (See Joel 3:1-5 and Acts 2.)

DANIEL

Daniel, in most ways, does not belong on this list. Although Christians usually list him as a prophet, Jews consider him more of a sage. He is not the author of the book. He is the hero—and he lived 400 years before the book was written. So the Book of Daniel, which is set in the sixth century, actually reflects the conditions of the second century when Seleucid Kings were torturing Jews who did not give up their ancestral religion.

Daniel appears as a wise young man who interprets dreams and resists the persecution of his enemies. Daniel is full of rollicking good stories—the three men in the furnace, Daniel in the lion's den, Susannah and the three judges—but the main message is that God is the Lord of history no matter who thinks they're boss on earth. □



DANIEL