

KNOW YOUR FAITH

The Prophetic Books

BY MSGR. JOSIAH CHATHAM

Hebrew used the word nabi for prophet. The exact derivation of the word is disputed. Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Miriam and Josiah, by a certain throw-back of terminology, were called "prophets." A divine call, involving a direct personal experience of God and resulting in the proclamation of God's word, was of the essence of the prophetic vocation.

Israelite prophecy must be understood from the many references in the Bible to prophets, their lives and activity. The references become frequent with Samuel, about 1400 BC. They contain so much substance that scholars find the fund of information practically inexhaustible. Fresh insights and understanding continue today, both in the world of biblical scholarship and in the hushed world of devout Bible readers.

Samuel himself functioned as prophet from the Shiloh sanctuary. Here we learn of the "sons of the prophet," bands or fraternities of ecstatics who were associated with a leader who had the title of "prophet" and who participated in worship with dance and song.

Prophets, in the proper sense, appear in the Bible singly and in groups. Authorities are divided on the interpretation of the evidence as to whether or not an organization of prophets exercised assigned functions in the temple liturgy.

A distinction is made between "writing prophets" and "non-writing prophets."

Many of the non-writing prophets are not called by name. Among those whose names are given were Gad, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha. Women, too, are named among the non-canonical prophets; for example, Huldah, in the time of King Josiah.

Another distinction, between

"major" and "minor" prophets, is based solely on the length of the books ascribed to them. The major prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. The minor prophets are: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. In Catholic listings, Lamentations and Baruch follow Jeremiah.

The Hebrew list of "inspired" books groups the minor prophets together, designates them as "the book of the twelve" and lists them among "the later prophets." Baruch and parts of Daniel are not in the Hebrew canon. It retains most of Daniel, which it lists along with Lamentations, among "the writings."

Amos, in the middle of the eighth century, was the first of the "writing prophets." The "golden age" of the prophets lasted from Amos through the Babylonian exile (539). Prophecy gradually diminished after the exile. In the period immediately before Jesus, there was no lawful prophet in Israel.

The prophets were men inspired of God and they knew it. They were men totally consumed with the word and work of God, and were characterized by unusual sanctity. Their very lives were part of their message.

The content of their message can be summed up in three words: monotheism, morality and messianism. Though the prophets knew it was God's word they spoke, they did not necessarily understand the full implications of what they said.

Nathan's oracle to the House of David (2 Samuel 7.5-16; 1 Chronicles 17.4-14; Psalms 89.20-38), to which reference has been made, persisted and is elaborated in Isaiah 6.9. In later prophecy (Isaiah 40:55), a mysterious figure emerged, the man of sorrows, the Suffering Servant whose vicarious sufferings would redeem his people.

These would be the true Israel, the Israel of the spirit, the anawim, the poor of Yahweh.


When the apostolic Christians read the prophets in the light of their faith-experience of the Resurrection (Luke 24.25-27, 45); they could see reference to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, an almost every line. Christians today should read the prophets in the light of the New Testament with their hearts and lives open to the Spirit.

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