



**NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA**

**SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**COURSE CODE: CTH 217**

**COURSE TITLE: THE PROPHETS**

## COURSE GUIDE

### CTH 217 THE PROPHETS

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**CTH 217:** The Prophets is a one-semester, 2-credit unit course. The course is available toward the award of first degree in Christian Theology. The course material can also be useful for students in other levels of Christian Theology. Besides, those who wish to broaden their knowledge on religious ideas, especially prophecy and prophetism in the Old Testament can find this course material beneficial.

This course is made up of 15 units where we shall trace the evolution and development of Israelite prophetism. The factors responsible for the emergence of the prophetic ministry in Israel would be examined. The activities and the messages of the prophets in those periods before the exile would be made a focus of our searchlight.

The course guide tells you briefly what the course is about, what you are expected to know in each unit, what course materials you will be using and how you can work your way through the materials. It also emphasizes the need for Tutor – Marked Assignments (TMAs). Detailed information on TMAs is found in a separate file, which will be sent to you later. There are periodic tutorial classes that are linked to this course.

## **WHAT YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS COURSE**

The overall aim of CTH 217 is to draw your attention to the centrality of prophecy in Israelite religion and its relevance in contemporary socio-religious set-up. You will understand why prophecy and prophetism are important concepts in the evolution and development of the religion of the Israelites. You will also find out why biblical scholars regarded the religion of the Israelites as prophetic in character.

## **COURSE AIMS**

- The aim of this course is to help you discover the importance and contemporary relevance of the ministry and message of the prophets in ancient Israel. This will be achieved by:
- Introducing you to the history and development of prophecy in ancient Israel.
- Exposing you to the classification of prophets in the Old Testament.
- Giving you the distinctive traits that distinguish ancient Israelite prophets from those of other cultures in the ancient Near East.
- Helping you understand the socio-political background of the Biblical prophets.

- Leading to better appreciate and appropriate the message of the prophets.
- Giving you an overview of the processes involved in the composition of the Old Testament prophetic books.
- Challenging you to further probe deeper into the life and messages of the prophets in the Old Testament.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

To achieve the aims set out above, there are set overall objectives. Besides, each unit has its specific objectives. The unit objectives would be included in the beginning of each unit. You should read them before you start working through the unit. It is advisable that you refer to them during your study of the unit to check on your progress. At the end of every unit, you should also revise the unit objectives. In this way you can be sure that you have done all you are expected to do in the unit.

Listed below are the broader objectives of this course. It is expected that by meeting these objectives, the overall aims of the course must have been achieved. At the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Discuss the meaning and goal of prophecy.
- Discuss extensively the origin and development of prophecy in ancient Israel.
- Account for the factors that led to the emergence of prophets.
- Discuss the roles and functions of prophets.
- Appreciate the messages of the prophets.
- Compare and contrast activities of Israelite prophets with those of other cultures.
- Evaluate the socio-political contributions of prophets in Israel.
- Appreciate the contemporary relevance of the prophetic ministry.

## **WORKING THROUGH THIS COURSE**

To complete this course, you are required to read the study units, read the recommended books and the other materials provided by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Each unit contains self assessment exercises, and at points during the course you are required to submit assignments for assessment purposes. At the end of this course there is a final examination. Below you will find listed all the components of the course and what you have to do.

## **COURSE MATERIALS**

Major components of the course are:

1. Course Guide
2. Study Units
3. Textbooks
4. Assignments file
5. Presentation schedule

You must obtain these materials. You may contact your tutor if you have problems in obtaining the text materials.

## **STUDY UNITS**

There are fifteen study units in this course. They are listed as follows:

### **Module 1**

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| Unit 1 | Prophecy from the Biblical Perspective    |
| Unit 2 | The Making of a Prophet                   |
| Unit 3 | Characteristics of the Prophets           |
| Unit 4 | Inspiration of the Prophets               |
| Unit 5 | Development of Prophecy in Ancient Israel |

### **Module 2**

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| Unit 1 | Functions of Prophets in Ancient Israel |
| Unit 2 | True and False Prophets                 |
| Unit 3 | The Prophets and the Cult               |
| Unit 4 | The Prophetic Books: An Introduction    |
| Unit 5 | Major Prophets 1: Isaiah and Jeremiah   |

### **Module 3**

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Unit 1 | Major Prophets II: Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel.                           |
| Unit 2 | Minor Prophets I: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah.                                  |
| Unit 3 | Minor Prophets II: Jonah, Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk.                           |
| Unit 4 | Minor Prophets III: Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi                   |
| Unit 5 | The Relevance of the Prophetic Ministry in Contemporary Socio-Religious Set-up |

Each unit contains a number of self-tests. In general, these self-tests question you on the material you have just covered or require you to apply the material in some ways, and thereby, help you to gauge your progress and to reinforce your understanding of the material. Together with your tutor-marked

assignments, these exercises will assist you in achieving the stated learning objectives of the individual units and of the course.

## TEXTBOOKS AND REFERENCES

These textbooks are recommended for your study in this course:

Blenkinsopp, J. (1995). *Sage, Priest, Prophet; Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Israel*. Louisville; Westminster John Knox.

Conrad, E. (2003). *Reading the Latter Prophets*. London: T & T Clark International.

Forbes, C. (1995). *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity*. Tubingen: JCB Mohr.

Gitay, Y. (1997). *Prophecy and Prophets*. Atlanta: Scholar Press.

Grabbe, L.L. (1998). *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel*. Valley Forge: Trinity Press International.

Hill, C. (1989). *Prophecy: Past and Present*. Suffolk: Highend Books.

Hooker, M.A. (1997). *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Action of Jesus*. London: SCM Press.

Koch, K. (1983). *The Prophets: The Assyrian Period*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1983). *The Prophets: The Babylonian period*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Ndiokwere, N.J. (1995). *Prophets in the Independent African Churches and in Biblical Tradition*. London: SPCK.

Rofe, A. (1997). *Introduction to the Prophetic Literature*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Uffenheimes, B. (1999). *Early Prophecy in Israel*. Jerusalem: The Magness.

Good books on prophecy in ancient Israel are not easy to come by these days. However, you should visit the web to locate relevant materials. The following are some suggested sites:

[www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org)  
[www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org)  
[www.biblestudies.org](http://www.biblestudies.org)

## **ASSIGNMENT FILE**

In this file you will find all the details of the work you must submit to your tutor for marking. The marks you obtain from these assignments will count toward the final mark you obtain for this course. Further information on assignment will be found in the assignment file itself and later in this Course Guide in the section on assessment.

## **PRESENTATION SCHEDULE**

The “presentation schedule” included in your course materials gives you the important dates for the completion of your tutor-marked assignments and attending tutorials. Remember, you are required to submit all your assignments as and when due.

## **ASSESSMENT**

There are two aspects to the assessment of this course. First are the tutor-marked assignments; second, there is a written examination. While working on your assignments, you are expected to apply information and knowledge acquired during this course. The assignments must be submitted to your tutor for formal assessment in accordance with the deadlines stated in the assignment file. The work you submit to your tutor for assessment will count for 30% of your total course mark. At the end of the course, you will need to sit for a final three-hour examination. This will also count for 70% of your total course mark.

## **TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

There are fifteen tutor-assignments in this course. You need to submit all the assignments. The best three (that is, the three with the highest grades of fifteen assignments) will be counted. The total mark of the best three will be 30% of your total course mark.

Assignments for the units in this course are contained in the Assignment File. You should be able to complete your assignments from the information and materials contained in your set textbooks, reading and study units. However, you are advised to use other references to broaden your viewpoint and provide a deeper understanding of the subject.

## **FINAL EXAMINATION AND GRADING**

The examination will consist of questions you will come across in tutor-marked assignments. You are therefore advised to revise the entire course after studying the last unit before you sit for the examination.

## COURSE MARKING SCHEME

The table below gives a break down of the course mark:

<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Marks</b>
Assignments 1-15	Three assignments, best three marks of the assignments counts for 30% of course marks.
Final examination	The final examination counts for 70% of overall marks.
Total	100% of course marks

Table 1: Course Marking Scheme

## COURSE OVERVIEW

This table brings together the units, the number of works you should take to complete.

<b>Unit</b>	<b>Title of Work</b>	<b>Week's Activity</b>	<b>Assessment (end of unit)</b>
<b>Course Guide</b>			
<b>Module 1</b>			
1	Prophecy from the Biblical Perspective	1	Assignment 1
2	The Making of a Prophet	2	Assignment 2
3	Characteristics of the Prophets	3	Assignment 4
4	Inspiration of the Prophets	4	Assignment 4
5	Development of Prophecy in Ancient Israel	5	Assignment 5
<b>Module 2</b>			
1	Functions of Prophets in Ancient Israel	6	Assignment 6
2	True and False Prophets	7	Assignment 7
3	The Prophets and the Cult	8	Assignment 8
4	The Prophetic Book: An Introduction	9	Assignment 9
5	Major Prophets I: Isaiah and Jeremiah	10	Assignment 10
<b>Module 3</b>			
1	Major Prophets II: Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel	11	Assignment 11
2	Minor Prophets I: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah	12	Assignment 12
3	Minor Prophets II: Jonah, Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk	13	Assignment 13
4	Minor Prophets III: Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi	14	Assignment 14
5	The Relevance of the Prophetic Ministry	15	Assignment 15

	in Contemporary Socio-Religious Set –Up		
	<b>Revision</b>	<b>16</b>	
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Table 2: Course Overview

## **HOW TO GET THE BEST FROM THIS COURSE**

In distance learning the study units replace the university lecturer. This is one of the great advantages of the distance learning system. You can read and work through specially designed study materials at your own pace.

Each of the study units follows a common format. The first item is an introduction to the subject matter of the unit and how a particular unit is integrated with the other units and the course as a whole. Following this is a set of learning objectives. These objectives enable you know what you should be able to do by the time you have completed the unit. The objectives should guide your study. After studying the units you must cross check whether you have achieved the objectives. If you adhere strictly to this art of checking whether the objective is achieved or not, you will definitely improve your chances of passing the course.

The main body of the unit guides you through the required reading from other sources. This will usually be either from your set books or from a “Reading” section. Whenever you need help, do not hesitate to call and ask your tutor to provide it.

1. Read through this course guide thoroughly.
2. Plan your study schedule. You should refer to the ‘course overview’ for more details. Find out the time you are expected to spend on each unit and when and how to turn in your assignments.
3. Stick to your study schedule. Do not allow anything to get you distracted from your study schedule.
4. Turn to Unit 1 and read the introduction and objectives for the unit.
5. Gather the study material you need. All you need or a unit is given in the ‘Overview’ at the beginning of each unit. The study unit you are working on and one of your set books should be on your desk at the same time.

6. Work through the unit. The content of the unit has been arranged in a sequential order. Instructions would be given on where to read from your set books or other articles. Use the unit to guide your reading.
7. Review the objectives for each study unit to confirm you have achieved them.
8. Do not proceed to the next unit, until you are sure you have achieved the objectives of the unit you are working on.
9. Do not wait until your assignment is returned before working on the next unit. Keep to your schedule.
10. When you complete the last unit, you can be preparing for exams. Be sure that you have achieved the unit objectives (listed at the beginning of each unit) and the course objectives (listed in this Course Guide).

## **FACILITATORS/TUTORS AND TUTORIALS**

There are 8 hours of tutorials provided in support of this course. The dates, times and location of these tutorials, together with the name and phone number of your tutor will be communicated to you. This will be done as you are allocated to a tutorial group.

Your tutor will mark and comment on your assignments, keep a close watch on your progress and on any difficulties you might encounter and provide assistance to you during the course. You must mail your tutor-marked assignments to your tutor well before the due date (at least two working days are required). They will be marked by your tutor and returned to you as soon as possible. Do not hesitate to contact our tutor by telephone, e-mail or discussion board if you need help. The following might be the circumstances in which you will find help necessary. Contact your tutor if:

- You do not understand any part of the study units or the assigned readings.
- You have difficulty with the self-tests or exercises, and
- You have a question or problem with an assignment, with your tutor's comment on an assignment or with the grading of an assignment.

You should try your best to attend the tutorials. This is the only chance to interact with your tutor by asking questions which are answered

instantly. You can raise any problem encountered in the course of your study. To maximize the benefits of the course tutorials, it is advisable that you prepare a question list before attending them. When you participate in the discussions your intellectual life will be deeply enriched.

## **SUMMARY**

CTH 217 intends to expose you to the background history and development of prophecy and the prophetic ministry in ancient Israel as well as the relevance of the prophetic ministry in contemporary socio-religious set-up. On successful completion of this course, you will be able to answer questions such as:

1. What is prophecy from the biblical viewpoint?
2. What distinguishes a prophet from a soothsayer?
3. What makes a person a prophet?
4. Discuss the evolution and development of Israelite prophetism?
5. Account for the rise of prophecy in the time of the kings?
6. What factors led to the emergence of the prophets?
7. Why are the messages of the prophets unpopular among their contemporaries?
8. Discuss the processes involved in the composition of the prophetic books?
9. Why is it difficult to distinguish the true and false prophets?
10. Of what relevance are the messages of the biblical prophets in contemporary times?

The questions you will be able to answer should not be limited to the ones above. The Prophets is a course you will find interesting and stimulating. It is a course that covers important aspects of the Israelite religion and history. I hope that as I lead you through this course you will find it a worthwhile challenge and experience.

**MAIN  
COURSE**

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## **MODULE 1**

Unit 1	Prophecy from the Biblical Perspective
Unit 2	The Making of a Prophet
Unit 3	Characteristics of Prophets in Israel
Unit 4	Inspiration of the Prophet in Ancient Israel
Unit 5	Development of Prophecy in Ancient Israel

### **UNIT 1 PROPHECY FROM THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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2.0	Objectives
3.0	Main Content
3.1	What is prophecy?
3.2	Forth Telling
3.3	Foretelling
3.4	Functions of prophecy
4.0	Conclusion
5.0	Summary
6.0	Tutor-Marked Assignment
7.0	References/Further Readings

#### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

It is expedient for us to know what prophecy means. Today we have different definitions and usages of the word 'prophecy'. However, it is very important for you to know the nature and scope of the subject. If you understand prophecy as a biblical concept, it will not be difficult for you to comprehend the issue of prophets and their functions in ancient Israel. In this unit, you will understand prophecy from the Biblical perspective and be able to see the peculiarity of ancient Israelite concept of prophecy.

#### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- define prophecy meaningfully
- address the nature of prophecy in Israel
- explain what made Israelite concept of prophecy distinct from other ancient cultures.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 What is Prophecy?**

Prophecy in the broad sense is said to be a mode of communication between the divine and human audience. In societies that believe in the possibility of such contact, this communication takes the form of dialogue; messages in both directions are channelled through individuals who are recognized by others in the society as qualified to perform this function. From this you can see that prophecy is a social phenomenon. The prophets operate in a particular society and one way or the other; the people are the central focus in the ministry of the prophets.

From the biblical perspective, prophecy is regarded as an inspired word (message) from Yahweh through a prepared and sanctified vessel (a prophet). In essence, prophecy is a mediated message from God. Since God is Spirit and interested in communicating with His people, He does this through men and women who have been prepared for this task.

The source of Israelite prophecy is Yahweh. This is the difference between Israel and other ancient Near Eastern cultures. In the ancient Near East, religious experts manipulate natural and supernatural objects and phenomenon for a message from their gods. However, for the Israelites, prophecy is a divine-initiative; it is Yahweh who speaks to the people through the prophets.

For most people, prophecy is understood to mean prediction or prognostication. Prediction or prognostication is the ability to indicate what is to happen in the nearest or distant future. However, from the biblical viewpoint, prophecy is not just about prediction. This fact becomes clearer against the background of the biblical understanding of prophecy as “forth-telling” and “foretelling”. We shall examine these key concepts.

### **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1**

What is the difference between prophecy and soothsaying?

### **3.2 Forth-Telling**

Forth-telling basically deals with preaching. In the process of forth-telling, the prophet preaches to the people to turn from their evil and wicked ways. Besides, he also warns them of the consequences of their actions. From this, it is evident that the prophets were primarily concerned with bringing God’s word to the people. This shows that prophets in ancient Israel were primarily preachers. Most of the ancient

Israelite prophets were itinerant preachers. Prediction was not their main task. In fact, it is said that 75% of the prophetic books in the Old Testament are forth-telling, while prediction made up 25%.

### **3.3 Foretelling**

Foretelling is prediction. Foretelling comes into the picture when the prophet relates to the people the implication of their response to his message. If the response is positive to the prophet's message, then blessing awaits them. But if they responded negatively, by failing to repent of their evils, then judgment is inevitable. The prophet will then predict against their disobedience. Some of the visions of the prophets about future events can be understood in the light of this background. For example, the vision of the wrath to come is made the basis for a call to repentance; while the vision of a future bliss is made the basis for a call to continued faithfulness. This made Israelite prophetism different from their neighbours, whom Israel was warned to avoid like plague (Dt. 18:19ff). In Israelite prophecy, prediction is not made out of a vacuum.

From the foregoing, you can now see the place of prediction in prophecy. It can be clearly seen that prophecy is not solely prediction. Moreover, you should also know that prophecy can either be inspired words of rebuke or words of encouragement. Whenever an individual or the nation turned from right path to evil they were always rebuked by God. But whenever they were in a difficult situation, words of encouragement were often sent to them by God (see Isa. 40:1).

### **3.4 Functions of Prophecy**

Prophecy serves different functions in ancient Israel, these are examined below:

#### **Sustenance of Covenant**

The Sinaitic covenant remains the foundation of Israelite religion (Ex. 19-24). The covenant contains the regulations and the blessings that the people would derive from keeping such rules as well as the curses that would follow any disobedience to any of God's regulations or commands. Through their preaching, the prophets constantly reminded the people of their statutory duty-abiding by the letters of the covenants. By reminding the people, prophecy helped in sustaining the Sinaitic covenant.

## **Social Change**

Prophecy is often one of the media employed to bring about social change in ancient Israel. The prophets through their messages addressed, through Yahweh's mandate, the injustice and other social vices in the society. The result of the prophet's crusade is often a changed society for the better.

## **Preservation of Tradition**

Israel's religion was based on her written traditions. The prophets called the attention of the people to the need to return to the teachings and instructions embedded in the Torah. By doing this, the tradition is preserved.

## **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2**

What are the functions of prophecy in ancient Israel?

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have learnt the meaning of prophecy. It has come to the fore that prophecy is not solely prediction, but a combination of preaching and prediction. You also learned that there is a world of difference between prophecy and soothsaying. In prophecy, prediction is not made out of a vacuum, but in the context of preaching.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

- Prophecy is an inspired word (message) from God through a prepared and sanctified vessel (a prophet) to the people.
- Prophecy is a combination of foretelling and forth-telling.
- Forth-telling has to do with preaching, while foretelling has to do with prediction.
- Both elements make up prophecy, from the biblical point of view.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. What is prophecy?
- ii. Distinguish forth-telling from foretelling
- iii. Can we say prophecy still exists today?
- ix. Is prophecy solely prediction of the future?

## **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS**

Clements, R.E. (2002). *Old Testament Prophecy*. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Rofe, A. (1997). *Introduction to the Prophetic Literature*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Uffenheimer, B. (1999). *Early Prophecy in Israel*. Jerusalem: The Magness Press.

Vangemeren, A. (1990). *Interpreting the Prophetic World*. Grand Rapids: Zonderan Publishing House.

## **UNIT 2 THE MAKING OF A PROPHET**

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- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Who is a Prophet?
  - 3.2 The Making of a Prophet
  - 3.3 Classification of Prophets in Ancient Israel
  - 3.4 Prophets in Contemporary Religious set-up
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The word “prophet” today carries a variety of meanings. Its uses also go beyond the religious boundary from where it originated. For example, weather forecasters are called “prophets of weather”. Exponents of a new ideology and teaching are also called prophets. In the light of this, it is expedient for us to find out who a prophet is. Since we are dealing with prophets in ancient Israel, we hope to find out from the extant prophetic tradition the definition of a prophet. A sound working definition of a prophet will no doubt illuminate your understanding of subsequent units. Besides, the process involved in the making of a prophet will be examined. This perhaps will help you understand what it means to be called a prophet. In our society today, many people call themselves prophets, but can they really be called prophets?

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- define the word *prophet*
- differentiate a prophet from a charlatan
- explain what makes a person a prophet.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Who is a Prophet?**

A prophet is not just anyone who can accurately predict the future. Some people tend to equate a soothsayer to a prophet. You will recall that in our society today, at the end of every year, some religious specialists

come out with various predictions about events to happen either soon or the following year. These people are more or else called prophets. But are these people really prophets? A biblical understanding of who a prophet is, will give a proper answer to the question raised above.

From the Old Testament point of view, a prophet is the mouthpiece of God. The prophet is one called, sanctified and divinely inspired to reveal Yahweh's will to the people. In essence therefore, a prophet is an intermediary between Yahweh and his people. In view of his vantage position the prophet sees ahead of his contemporaries and warns them of impending doom. This therefore makes the prophet first and foremost a preacher. He calls the people to repentance and teaches them godly living.

Ancient Israelite prophets addressed local, national and international situations. This they did by warning about the future consequence of the present and giving exhortations that provoke spiritual dedication that would ensure divine blessing to the people instead of destruction.

From this definition you could see clearly that a prophet is different from a soothsayer. A soothsayer is someone who foretells the future, but the prediction of the soothsayer has nothing to do with the present. For ancient prophets in Israel, it is the present event and situation that inspire them to predict about the future events. For a proper grasp of the difference between a prophet and a soothsayer, it will be better if you read over the first unit, where we distinguished between forth-telling and foretelling.

### **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1**

Identify the difference between a prophet and a soothsayer.

### **3.2 The Making of a Prophet**

Now since we know who a prophet is, it would not be out of place to find out how one becomes a prophet. To answer this question satisfactorily, it will be necessary to examine the meaning of the word "prophet" in Hebrew language. The word that is translated "prophet" from Hebrew is "Nabi", but its precise meaning cannot be etymologically unraveled. However, several suggestions have been made as to the meaning of the word "nabi". Among the many suggestions that have been made, the most acceptable traces the word to an Akkadian root "nabu", which means to announce, or to call (the Akkadian are one of the ancient peoples in the ancient Near East). From this Akkadian root, the word "nabi" can mean "One who announces" or "One who has been called". In a real sense, both are true. The prophets

of Israel were called of Yahweh to announce Yahweh's word. They spoke for Yahweh and this message carried the authority of the one who had given them the message.

From the observation above, we can deduce that it is Yahweh who decides and determines who will be his spokesman. He calls, prepares and sanctifies the vessel he intends to use. This perhaps is responsible for the occurrence of the call narratives in the extent works of the prophets (see for example Isaiah 6:1-10, Jeremiah 1:4-19, Ezekiel 1:1-15; Amos 7:14). The fact that it was the call that makes one a prophet, is further established through the example of Moses. Moses constituted a standard of comparison for all future prophets (see Deut. 18:15ff). He was specifically and personally called by God (Ex. 3:1-14, 17 compare Isaiah 6, Jer. 1:4ff, Amos 7:14f). Only false prophets took the office upon themselves (See Amos 7:14f). You can see therefore that "call" is an important element in the making of a prophet. It is not the prophet who decides to become one, but God.

## **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2**

Does the ability to predict the future accurately make one a prophet?

### **3.3 Classification of Prophets in Ancient Israel**

In Old Testament prophetic studies, prophets are usually classified as classical or non-classical. The classical prophets are the prophets whose works are extant. In other words, these are prophets whose oracles (or message) were recorded. That is why they are also referred to as literary prophets. Among the classical prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos and Hosea among others. On the other hand, the non-classical prophets are those prophets whose oracles were not recorded. However, references are made to their exploits in some other books of the Old Testament. Prominent among this category of prophets are: Elijah, Elisha, Ahijah, Nathan, etc. Moreover, you should also note that the prophetic ministry is not limited to the male. We also have prophetesses such as Deborah, Huldah and others.

## **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3**

What is the difference between classical and non-classical prophets?

### **3.4 Prophets in Contemporary Religious Set-Up**

You will recall that in 3.1 of this unit, we made reference to the fact that charlatans now parade themselves as prophets in our land. In view of this do we have prophets in our land today? We can answer the question

in the affirmative in the light of our understanding of prophecy as forth-telling and foretelling. Contemporary pastors and other religious leaders can be regarded as prophets. They, like the ancient Israelite prophets, warn the people to turn from their wicked ways. They also remind the people the consequences of their actions.

#### **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 4**

Can the contemporary pastors be regarded as prophets?

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have learnt that there is a world of difference between a prophet and a soothsayer. Prophets are specifically called and chosen by God for the task of reaching out to His people. From the Old Testament's viewpoint, no one can be a prophet by his own volition. You also learned that prophets in ancient Israel are classified into classical and non-classical or literary and non-literary. Also, technically, contemporary pastors can be regarded as prophets, because they declare the whole counsel of God.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The prophets contributed immensely as custodians of public morality to the socio-political development of Israel. In the same vein, contemporary religious leaders are contributing to the moral enhancement of our society.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. Why did God choose a certain class of people as His spokesmen?
- ii. Does the ability to predict the future accurately make one a prophet?
- iii. Do we still have prophets around us today?
- ix. Identify the works of the classical prophets.

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## **UNIT 3 CHARACTERISTICS OF PROPHETS IN ISRAEL**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Characteristics of Prophets in Israel
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In unit two of this study, we looked into the question “who is a prophet?” We discovered that the ability to say something definite about the future does not make a person a prophet. It is stressed that the call by Yahweh determines who becomes a prophet. Let us now take a step further in this unit to examine the characteristics that made those Israelite prophets unique in their call by God. This may guide us in determining, in our contemporary time, who a prophet of God really is.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- identify those characteristics that made Israelite prophets unique
- use those characteristics to judge the contemporary prophetic ministry
- explain those qualities that made the Israelite prophets have lasting impact on their audiences.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Characteristics of Prophets in Israel**

There are certain sterling qualities that distinguished leaders from the crowd or other people. The prophets as we have earlier observed, are unique, because, they exhibit certain qualities or characteristics that made them stand above their contemporaries. If the extant prophetic traditions are given an in-depth study, these characteristics will be evident. In the light of this, we shall examine some of the characteristics that distinguished the Old Testament prophets. However, I will like to

inform you that these characteristics will be given as outlined in *Clifford Hill's Prophecy: Past and Present* (pp. 43-60). Moreover, you should also note that the individualism of the prophets of ancient Israel is undeniable, yet these characteristics are common to all genuine prophets. The characteristics which distinguished them from others, notably the false prophets are as follows:

### **Messenger of God**

The first major characteristic that all the prophets have in common is that they were sent by God. They were messengers rather than orators. They did not make up their own speeches; they simply relayed the words that they had been given by Yahweh.

### **Under Authority**

The experience of being sent by God gave each of the prophets the authority to announce God's message. They were not giving voice to their own ideas; they were under the direction of the spirit of God (Holy Spirit). It was the living God who gave them authority to speak in His name. The priests had authority to perform ritual; the scribe had authority to copy the law and even to interpret it. Only the prophets had the authority to speak in the name of God. Therefore, the phrase "thus saith the Lord", became one of the marks of a true prophet.

### **Absolute Obedience**

The prophet, being a man sent by God and under His authority, was required to show absolute obedience. When God spoke to him, he had to be able to discern what was said so that he knows what is required of him. Once he was sure of the mission and the message, he was under the obligation of absolute obedience to do exactly as he was told. This may be responsible for the reason some said the prophet's will is subsumed in God's will.

### **Total Commitment**

The message of the prophets was never popular. They called for loyalty to God and adherence to a strict ethical code that ran contrary to the desires of the people and to the selfish ambition and self-indulgence of the rulers. For this message, all the prophets encounter opposition. But one of the marks of the true prophet was the fortitude with which he met the opposition and the tenacity with which he continued to proclaim the message. From this action of the prophet, it can be seen that he displayed an unequalled quality of total commitment to the ministry to which he was called. For the prophet in the face of serious opposition,

there was no turning back or weakening. This made ancient Israelite prophets unique when compared with their contemporaries.

### **Compassion**

There is a deep compassion running through the ministry of the prophets that reveals their understanding of God as merciful, compassionate and overflowing with loving kindness. The compassion of the prophets in Israel was best revealed in their persistence to see change in the life of the people as they were ready to go through the most difficult pain, to see changes in the people's lives.

### **Patriotism**

All the ancient Israelite prophets were great patriots. The patriotism of the prophets was never a blind loyalty to nation, right or wrong. It was always seen primarily as loyalty to God to whom the land and the entire people belonged. The patriotism of the prophets is beautifully illustrated in the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5, where God's relationship to the land and the people is expressed through the simile of a Gardner who loved his vineyard situated on a fertile hillside. He planted the choicest vines and did everything he could to care for them and when he came to reap the harvest he found only bad fruit. The interpretation given in verse 7 is that "the vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed, for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. This therefore made judgement inevitable. However, in spite of judgement, the prophets still highlight the message of restoration, which reveals the depth of their patriotism.

### **Fearlessness**

The absolute loyalty to God by the prophets led them to display a high degree of fearlessness in public that probably none of them felt in private. They experienced the same emotions and they shrank from pain and suffering in the same way as any normal human being. But their consciousness of being messengers of God and their total commitment to carrying out their divine instructions produced fearlessness in the face of brutal opposition or overwhelming numbers such as those faced by Elijah on Mount Carmel (see I King 18).

### **Faith**

It was the prophets' faith in God that gave them the confidence to carry out their ministries in the life of the nation. Throughout their ministries, the prophets staked their lives upon their understanding of God. Their

experience of God's presence and power sprang from the knowledge, which the prophets had of God, of his nature, of his purpose and of his faithfulness. The characteristics listed above are found in all the genuine prophets of Israel. In fact, these qualities distinguish them from the false prophets who are only interested in personal gains and gratification.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Those ancient Israelite prophets possessed some unique qualities, which distinguished them from their contemporaries, is evident in our examination of their characteristics. The ancient Israelite prophets were men of probity and integrity; this therefore enhanced their message. Besides, these unique qualities possessed by the ancient Israelite prophets also brought them in conflict with the powers – that be – in their days. Their lifestyle challenged their contemporaries who were corrupt, vile and wicked.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The ancient prophets were not only messengers of God, but men committed to the one who sent them and their messages. Their absolute obedience to God in face of persecution and hatred made their lifestyle worthy of emulation.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. List the characteristics found in the ancient Israelite prophets.
- ii. From the experience of the Israelite prophets, is it possible to be patriotic and godly?
- iii. What do you think is responsible for the Israelite prophets' fearlessness in the face of brutal opposition?

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## **UNIT 4    INSPIRATION   OF   THE   PROPHETS   IN ANCIENT ISRAEL**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Meaning of Inspiration
  - 3.2 Prophetic Inspiration
  - 3.3 Vehicles of Inspiration
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment (TMA)
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit, we shall discuss the way the Israelite prophets received divine messages. Since God is Spirit, He cannot be seen physically. This therefore presupposes that the method He would use in communicating with the prophets will not be the same as in man to man communication. Under the inspiration of the prophet, we shall examine the different ways by which Yahweh communicated His will to the prophets and how the prophets perceived His presence and message.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- explain what is meant by “Inspiration”
- identify the different methods of prophetic inspiration
- explain the role of phenomena like dreams, visions, etc in prophecy.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Meaning of Inspiration**

The term inspiration is used in a number of passages in the Bible. In Most instances, the term connotes the action of God in bestowing wisdom or skill on particular individuals. Sometimes, it denotes the operation of the Holy Spirit in guiding the minds of the prophets. For example, God may inspire or put in the heart of the skilful artist, Bezaleel to teach his craft (Exodus 35:34). The wise king utters inspired

decisions (Prov. 16:10). Inspiration from the Christian point of view has been described as the action of the spirit of God on Biblical writers, in order to make them the instrument of divine revelation. The Old Testament is the product of men who were specifically inspired and empowered by the divine spirit. The Old Testament prophets fall into this category. This is made evident in the sense that prophecy is generally seen as a specific category of human utterance with particular attention either to its form or to its content. In terms of its form, attention is often focused on the ecstatic messages received or spoken or on the unpredictability or suddenness of the utterance, which most of the time guarantee the divine origin of what is said.

### **3.2 Prophetic Inspiration**

From the biblical viewpoint, the divine power, which comes over a human being and compels him to see and hear things which otherwise would be hidden from him is one of the results of divine inspiration. Prophetic inspiration is variously described in the Old Testament. For example, it is said that the spirit of God has come over someone (Numbers 24:2) or has fallen upon him (Ezekiel 11:5), or that the hand of the Lord has come over him and laid hold of him (2 Kings 3:15, Ezekiel 1:3, 3:4-2) or that the Holy Spirit has been put on him like garment, that is, the prophet has become incorporated in him (1 Chronicles 12:18, 2 Chronicles 24:20) or that God has given His spirit to him (Numbers 11:2, 4). However, prophetic inspiration does not suppress the human consciousness of the recipient. Rather, the recipient is in possession of his full consciousness, and is able afterward to give a clear account of what happened. It has to be noted that the individuality of the prophet is not eliminated by this divine inspiration.

### **3.3 Vehicles of Inspiration**

By vehicles of inspiration, we mean the mode of receiving revelation. In Israelite prophetism, there are different ways of receiving revelations. The following are the common ones:

#### **Visions**

It is virtually impossible to draw clear distinctions between dream and visions. The emphasis on visions seems to be on the unusual nature of the experience and on its character as revelation. It points to a special awareness of God. Most of the visions of the prophets conveyed one spiritual truth/lessons or the other. For example, Amos 7:1-3 saw locust eating up greens, at the beginning of the harvest. This registered to him a message of judgement. This is because the locusts would eat up the crops, and Israel would face famine and starvation. Another example of

vision that serves as a mode of receiving revelation is the dream of Jeremiah who looked at the almond tree (Jeremiah 1:1-18). Perhaps everyone also around saw the tree with him but for them the sight did not register any message. It is possible even for Jeremiah himself to see the same almond tree from time to time with no message at all. Under the inspiration of God, however, the sight conveyed a message. In this case, the sight of the prophet was inspired (Jeremiah 1:11-12). God inspires the totality of the personality of the prophet. You should note that vision may come by the day (see Acts 9:7) or night (Gen. 46:2). There are many examples of visions in the Old Testament.

## **Dreams**

As earlier observed, the borderline between dream and vision is thin. However, among the Israelites, dream is recognized as a means by which God communicates to people. Two kinds of dreams are identified in the Bible. In one, the sleeper sees a connected series of images, which correspond to every event (e.g. Gen. 41:1ff). In the other, dreams communicate a specific message from God. Among the ancient Israelites there was a close connection between dreams and the function of the prophet (see Deuteronomy 13:1ff, Jeremiah 23:16ff).

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you have learnt the meaning of inspiration and its relationship to prophecy. It can be seen that inspiration cannot be divorced from prophecy without occasioning disastrous consequences. The difference between inspiration of persons and the writings was clearly spelt out. Also the different vehicles of inspiration were examined.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

Prophetic inspiration indicates the coming of divine power over a human being and compels him to see and hear things which otherwise would be hidden from him. There are different modes of inspiration; these include visions, dreams, and interpretation of signs.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. What is the difference between inspiration of scriptures and inspiration of writers?
- ii. Differentiate between dream and vision
- iii. What is the function or place of dream in prophecy?
- ix. In what ways can ordinary object or event assume a new meaning?

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## **UNIT 5      DEVELOPMENT OF PROPHECY IN ANCIENT ISRAEL**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Origin of Israelite Prophetism
  - 3.2 Development of Israelite Prophetism
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

A closer look at the Israelite prophetic tradition reveals that the prophetic ministry went through different phases of development. In this unit, we shall trace the evolution and development of Israelite prophetism. We shall pay particular attention to the factors responsible for the metamorphosis noted after briefly tracing the origin of prophecy in Israel.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- itemise the different designations for prophetic personages in ancient Israel
- describe the tension among the different prophetic guilds in Israel
- write an exposition on why the classical prophets dissociated themselves from the guilds of prophets in ancient Israel.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Origin of Israelite Prophetism**

The origin of prophecy in ancient Israel remains a puzzle that contemporary Old Testament scholarship found difficult to unravel. However, over the years, influences from other cultures in ancient Near East have been linked to the origin of prophetism in Israel. At various times, Egypt, Canaan, Syria and Mesopotamia have all been suggested as possible sources for particular features of prophetic thought and behaviour found in Israelite prophetism. Some scholars have even

argued that certain types of Israelite prophecy were originally borrowed from the Canaanites. Well, it would not be out of place here, to say that it is difficult if not impossible to determine how prophecy started in Israel. However, that prophecy is a phenomenon that has long been known in Israel is undeniable. But the prophetic movement in Israel came into prominence during the period of monarch; it also carried its importance into the early post exilic period. Its fullest development came during the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries B.C.

### 3.2 Development of Israelite Prophetism

In the early stage of the prophetic ministry, we have the seer (*hozeh* or *roeh*) (1 Samuel 9:1-9) whose principal function is to describe events, present or future, past, which are hidden from the ordinary man. He is in essence the man people consulted in order to find lost articles. A fee is usually required for the service of a seer. A perfect example of a seer was Samuel, who was consulted by Saul while searching for his father's asses (I Samuel, 9:1-10). With the rise of the monarch and the setting up of the great sanctuaries, the seers were no longer mentioned. At this period, the *Nabi* (translated "Prophet" in English language) came into prominence. *Nabis* are first mentioned in Israel round about the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the tenth century BCE, at the same time as the rise of the monarch. The *nabi* and the monarch emerged after Yahwistic religion had long become established in the agricultural areas of Palestine. The early *nabis* are ecstatic in character (that is, they often go into trance).

We heard of the first ecstatic *nabi* groups in connection with King Saul. They came down from the cultic high places making music, dancing and singing (I Sam. 10). After supplying information about the whereabouts of the lost animals, Samuel went further and arranged for Saul to meet a band of ecstatic prophets who roamed the vicinity. Saul did as instructed and encountered a strange group dancing to the accompaniment of harp, tambourine, flute and lyre. Clearly, this group was in a frenzied mood. When Saul met the prophetic band, "the spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon him, and he prophesied among them" (I Sam 10:10). Infected by the ecstasy of this strange group, Saul himself became ecstatic and acted like the *nabi*. Samuel too is associated directly with the ecstatic bands. Always, however, Samuel as the man of Yahweh stands above the group. We are told that he was a man held in honour because "all that he says comes true (I Samuel 9:6). This indeed was one of the tests of true prophecy in later Israelite tradition. In Samuel therefore, we see a merger of two functions, the seer and the *nabi*.

The *nabis* tended to be gregarious and usually appeared and acted in bands. This was partly because ecstasy was held to be infectious. In

contrast to the seer, their social and moral standing was low, as is shown not merely by the amazement of Saul's friend at his association with such disreputable people. With the passage of time however, the group gradually came into prominence, because Kings and nobles patronized them. Their status in the society therefore improved considerably. This led many to join the guilds of the ecstatic. Moreover, because many of them became consultants and found their ways into the palace. Thus, this marked the beginning of the professionalisation of the prophetic ministry. They became sycophants and so lacked inspiration from Yahweh. Thus, the prophetic ministry was brought into disrepute among the people.

However, individuals who saw the excesses of the ecstatic prophets separated themselves from these guilds of *nabi*. The first person of whom this independence is recorded is Micaiah son of Imlah (I Kings 22:5-28). Micaiah and his contemporary Elijah appeared in marked contrast to these official prophets. They stood alone and spoke upon the impulse of their own experience with Yahweh. Micaiah, in opposition to both the deceivers of the king and the views of the majority of the prophets, presented the word of Yahweh as he understood it. His message did not support the throne; it spelled out doom and disaster. Micaiah then stood outside the ranks of official prophetism. For the first time, a prophet of woe stood opposed to other prophets, expressing both an idea and an attitude that would characterize prophecy for the next centuries. Prophetic independence of the throne was established and oracles of denunciation were often directed towards the king.

After Micaiah, individual prophets had become a familiar figure. It was no longer on the crowds of ecstatic prophets that the people relied for divine message. It was rather the single independent speaker whose words they held to be due to the direct inspiration of Yahweh. The classical or literary prophets fall into this category. This fact is seen in Amos indignant repudiation of any connection with the ecstatic *nabis*, when he declared, "I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. The Lord took me from behind the flock and the Lord said to me, go prophesy to my people Israel" (Amos 7:14-15). Isaiah is named as "the prophet" only three times in his book, all in chapters 36-39, a section that is actually copied from 2 Kings 18-20. Jeremiah is called a prophet twenty-one times, but in his own speech the term is used only of those sent in the past and of contemporaries who are also alleged to be liars. Twice, Ezekiel is indirectly referred to as a prophet (Ezekiel 2:5, 33:33); otherwise "prophet" is also used of the past or of contemporary liars. No where is Hosea or Micah or Malachi called a prophet. Zechariah is only the "Son of prophet". Only Habakkuk and Haggai are called prophets and in the remaining books of the prophets the word is not even used.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you have been taken through the processes involved in the evolution and development of Israelite prophetism. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine where and how Israelite prophecy originated. However, that the prophetic ministry came to prominence during the monarchical period in Israel cannot be contested. If you critically sieve the prophetic tradition, it will be evident that the prophetic ministry went through series of development. Different factors responsible for this were given adequate attention in the main content of the unit.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

That we have different prophetic personages in Israelite prophetic tradition is evident in the different names used in addressing them. We have the seer (*hozeh* us *roeh*), the prophet (*Nabi*) who operated in group and the people who operated individually. Perhaps different socio-religious factors were responsible for the differences in the classification of these prophetic personages.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARK ASSIGNMENT

- i. Trace the evolution and development of Israelite prophetism.
- ii. Read I Kings 22:5-28 and comment on the action of Micaniah, son of Imlah.
- iii. Can riches and honour corrupt men of integrity?
- ix. What is the effect of failure of religious leaders on the efficiency of their messages?

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## **MODULE 2**

Unit 1	Functions of Prophet in Ancient Israel
Unit 2	Distinguishing between True and False Prophets
Unit 3	The Prophets and the Cult
Unit 4	Old Testament Prophetic Books: An Introduction
Unit 5	Major Prophets I: The Books of Isaiah and Jeremiah

### **UNIT 1      FUNCTIONS   OF   PROPHETS   IN   ANCIENT ISRAEL**

#### **CONTENTS**

1.0	Introduction
2.0	Objectives
3.0	Main Content
3.1	Functions of Prophets in Ancient Israel
3.2	The Prophets as Military Strategists
3.3	The Prophets as Social Reformers
3.4	The Prophets as Political Activists
3.5	The Prophets as Religious Thinkers
4.0	Conclusion
5.0	Summary
6.0	Tutor-Marked Assignment
7.0	References/Further Readings

#### **1.0      INTRODUCTION**

In the general introduction to this study, we said that the Old Testament prophets played an important role in shaping the course and context of Israelite history and religion. This is because the prophets were actively involved in the political, religious and economic life of the nation of Israel. And it was through the prophets that God disclosed his intention and will to the people in politics, business and interpersonal relationship. This therefore places ancient Israelite prophets in a strategic position. In this lecture, we shall look into how they performed this role.

#### **2.0      OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- account for the roles of Israelite prophets in the socio-religious life of the nation
- explain the revolutionary character of the Israelite prophets
- learn from the experience of all prophets and influence your society.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 Functions of the Prophets in Ancient Israel

In ancient Israel, especially in the time of the monarchy, Israelite prophets functioned in variety of ways. In the light of this, the functions of the prophets would be examined below:

#### 3.2 The Prophets as Military Strategists

An Israelite king never waged war without having a prophet beside him. For example, we see that the part played by prophets is made clear in I Kings 20, a dramatic episode belonging to the almost hundred year war between the Northern Israelites and Syria. The Syrian leader besieged Samaria and boasts to his North Israelite opponents that the rubble of Samaria would not be sufficient “to fill the hollow-hands of all the people who follow me”. The situation seems hopeless. The numerical superiority of the Syrian is indisputable. Then, surprisingly, a prophet comes to the king of Israel:

“Have you seen all this great roving pack? Behold  
I will give it into your hand this day, and you  
shall know that I am Yahweh”

The prophet describes the situation as it is. But he evaluates it in a new way. What the Aramean king proudly describes as “People, a well-disciplined army” becomes for the prophet what he contemptuously describes as a great noisy pack. After this unexpectedly favourable message, the Israelite king asked about the strategy to be employed. This was given and the Israelite army, though inferior in number, inflicts a severe defeat on the Syrians. Prophet Isaiah was also actively involved in the prosecution of the Syro-Ephraimite war and the Assyrian campaign. When King Ahaz was confused and not knowing what to do, he consulted Isaiah, who gave assurance that the Syro-Ephraimite alliance would not last (Isaiah 7). Also, when king Sennacherib of Assyria besieged Jerusalem, Isaiah was actively involved by giving assurance to the Israelite king and his people, that the Assyrians would surely be defeated by Yahweh (Isaiah 39). Jeremiah, during Nebuchadnezzar’s attack on Jerusalem, was also active in giving direction on what to do to prevent the impending doom. But his advice fell on *deaf ears*. Though his suggestion was resented, it was at their peril (Jer. 42).

### **3.3 The Prophets as Social Reformers**

At the time Prophets emerged on the scene, Israel and Judah had undergone drastic development in economics and sociology. The state with its taxation and its civil service had brought about a further disintegration of the old social order in Israel. In this connection, the transference of the focal point of the economy to the towns was a particular blow. The great landowners who were living in the towns gained control over the village people, and the result was a severe social injustice. Because of the burden of taxation, the peasant who were economically weak, were no longer able to maintain their land. This is because the ownership of land was of a small number of capitalists town-dwellers. The village people became increasingly poor (Isaiah 5:8, Micah 2:1f). The Old Testament prophets condemned in clear terms those who exploited and despised the poor, "Your houses are full of what you have taken from the poor". You have no right to crush my people and take advantage of the poor (Is. 3:14-15). "They sell into slavery honest people who are unable to pay their debts, poor people are sold for the price of shoes (Amos 2:6, cf. 8:4-8), "You women ... grow fat like well-fed cows, who ill-feast weak, and oppress the poor ... the day will come when they will drag you away with hook ..." (Amos 4:1). The prophets also spoke out particularly to challenge, in God's name, those who made laws that allowed the poor to be exploited. "You make unjust laws that oppress my people ... Prevent the poor from having their rights ..." (Is. 10:1-2, Jer. 22:3). This condemnation of unjust legislators is matched equally by strong words against unjust judges: "You persecute good people, take bribes and prevent its poor from getting justice in the courts (Amos 5:12).

### **3.4 The Prophets as Political Activists**

An activist has been described as a person who supports a policy with vigorous action. In other words, an active participant in an event. In the light of this, the ancient Israelite prophets could be regarded as political activists. This is because they were actively involved in the political life of Israel as a nation. They helped especially in the period of monarchy to shape the course of Israel's history. In the annals of monarchy in the Old Testament, the prophets took active part in the appointment and deposition of Kings. In Yahweh's name they designated candidates for the throne and saw to it that they were deposed again if necessary. Because of an infringement of the rituals of the holy war, the same Samuel who nominated the peasant farmers son, Saul, to be king with the words, "Yahweh has anointed you over his people" also had him removed with the following words, "the Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to one who is better than you" (I Samuel 10:1, 15:28).

The next king, David, is fortunate because after the Bathsheba episode the same Nathan who, after the conquest of Jerusalem, had promised him that his dynasty would be eternally established on the throne, only threatened him: “The sword shall never depart from your house (II Samuel 7:10-12). Besides, the prophets did merely help to put their respective rulers on the throne, and threaten them later with the end of their government but saw to it (at least Samuel and Ahijah did) that an active opposition, bent on revolution, soon appeared on the scene. Samuel anointed David immediately after the dispute with Saul. Elijah encouraged Jeroboam to rebel. Even Nathan’s speech attacking David indirectly promoted Absalom insurrection. Moreover, the end of Omri’s dynasty was the responsibility of Prophet Elisha. He was the one who accomplished the task of cleansing the political terrain that had long been defiled by this dynasty (2 Kings 9:10).

### **3.5 The Prophets as Religious Thinkers**

In the time of the monarchs, Yahwism (that is the worship of Yahweh), the religion of Israel went through series of challenges. This is seen in the constant struggle between Yahwism and the nature religions of the Canaanites. It went to the extent that the nature of primitive Yahwism had long been forgotten in Israel. The consequence of this is that in many minds, the essential distinction between Yahweh and the pagan gods had been obscured. Thus, Yahwism was in danger of slipping unawares into outright polytheism. This situation calls for reforms and the prophets carried out the early attempts at reform of Yahwism. As loyal Yahwists the prophets fought rigorously for the enthronement of Yahweh in the national life of Israel. The activities of Elijah can be understood against the backdrop of this prevailing situation. As deep religious thinkers, the prophets saw the shift of allegiance from Yahweh to the emerging world powers in ancient Near East as an abomination. The prophet sees Yahweh as the Lord over all creation and all powers were subject to him. To enter into any alliance therefore, portend undermining the person of Yahweh (Isaiah 30:1-7).

### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have learnt that the prophets in ancient Israel functioned in different capacity. Their activities were not limited to what we call the “sacred sphere” today. In ancient Israel like the traditional African society, life is generally viewed holistically. The socio-political realm is therefore intrinsically interwoven with the religious realm. The religious and socio-political functions of the prophets in ancient Israel can be explained in the light of this background.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The prophets in ancient Israel functioned in a variety of ways. They were military strategists who supported the king in the prosecution of the 'Holy Wars'. As social activists, the prophets advocated for a new social order in which the rights of the poor would be protected. As political activists, the prophets were deeply involved in the rise and even sometimes fall of the king while as religious thinkers, they sought a new direction for the understanding and worship of Yahweh the king of Israel.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. Do you think it is wrong for thee prophets to intervene in the political life of the nation?
- ii. Can contemporary clergy be political activist?
- iii. Is there any similarity between contemporary human rights activists and ancient Israelite prophets?
- ix. In what ways can you help bring about reforms in your society?

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## **UNIT 2     DISTINGUISHING   BETWEEN   TRUE   AND FALSE   PROPHETS**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0    Introduction
- 2.0    Objectives
- 3.0    Main Content
  - 3.1    True and False Prophets
  - 3.2    Suggested Criteria for Determining a False Prophet
- 4.0    Conclusion
- 5.0    Summary
- 6.0    Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0    References/Further Readings

### **1.0    INTRODUCTION**

In the world today, there are genuine and fake things, this is not just limited to industrial goods. In Israelite prophecy, just as we have true prophets, so also there are false prophets. However, it is not easy distinguishing the true prophets from the false prophets. In this unit, however, we shall look at the criteria used in determining the false prophets. We shall see if these criteria can hold water. If they cannot stand the test of time, we shall look at other devices that can help to determine those that can be regarded as false prophets.

### **2.0    OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- identify that the issue of true and false prophets is not just a recent development
- discuss some of the suggested criteria used in determining false prophets and their weaknesses
- discuss some guidelines that may help you not to fall into the hands of false prophets.

### **3.0    MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1    True and False Prophets**

The issue of true or false prophet remains contentious in Old Testament scholarship. When Micaiah, son of Imlah and Zedekiah, son of Chenaanah confronted each other before promising victory, and both appealing to the authority of the Lord (I Kings 23), how could the

people distinguish the true prophet from the false prophet? In the story, King Ahab consulted Micaiah, before setting out for a war. But Micaiah told him that the Lord showed him that he would be defeated. Zedekiah, on the other hand, promised victory for Ahab. He made his declaration based on the Lord's assurance. But how do we know who is false or true among these prophets?

Another example is the case of Jeremiah and Hananiah. When Jeremiah was going round the town of Jerusalem, carrying a yoke, which symbolizes captivity, he said that the Lord would definitely send the people into captivity. Hananiah, however, accosted him and broke the yoke symbolizing liberation for the people. Hananiah based his action on the revelation from Yahweh that the people will not be taken away to exile. From these examples, how do we recognise a true or false prophet because both appealed to the authority of Yahweh? This is one of the reasons it is difficult to know who is a true or false prophet.

### **3.2 Suggested Criteria for Determining a False Prophet**

Certain general external characteristics have been used as distinguishing the true from the false prophets. Some of these will be examined below:

#### **Ecstasy**

The ecstatic prophets were regarded as false. You will recall that it was the common mark of the "nabi" in the time of Samuel (2 Samuel 9-10), though ecstasy may be looked upon as a feature of Baalism and at Canaan in general. But this is no sufficient ground for a plain identification with false prophet and that ecstasy was not in any way frowned upon either by the people at large or by the best of their religious leaders. Samuel foretold with apparent approbation that Saul would join a group of ecstatic prophets and this will signify his becoming a new man (I Samuel 10:6). Also, the emissary of Elisa is called by Jehu's fellow captains 'this mad fellow' (2 Kings 9:11) probably indicating that ecstasy was still a feature of the prophetic group. Furthermore, Isaiah's Temple experience was certainly an ecstasy (Isaiah 6), and Ezekiel was without doubt an ecstatic prophet. This fact has to be used along other characteristics to distinguish someone as a false prophet.

#### **Professionalism**

This is another suggested identification of false prophets. The false prophets were said to be paid servants of some kings and it was in their interest to say what would please the king. But, again, this will hardly serve as a criterion. Samuel was clearly a professional prophet but was

not a false prophet. Nathan was very likely a court official of David, yet professionalism was by no means equivalent to sycophancy. Like the ecstatic prophets, the court prophets are found in groups (I Kings 22) and no doubt their professional status could have been a corrupting influence but to say that it was so is to run beyond available evidence.

## **Call**

This is another criterion put forward as a means for distinguishing true from false prophets. All true prophets are said to be called by God, while false prophets are not. This was the only credential Jeremiah had to dangle passionately before the face of his critics and unbelieving audience. “Of a truth the Lord hath called me”, was the only objection Amos could raise against the stigmatisation of Amaziah (Amos 7). Though other prophets had call narratives built into their stories, it is difficult to use it as a sole distinguishing mark for knowing the true from the false prophets. The reason for this is that call is a subjective individual experience, which cannot be subjected to the parameters of verifiability. In other words, there is no way to find out if God has called anybody to be a prophet or not. It is an experience known only to the one laying claim to being called by God.

However, we may conclude here by saying that the answer to the problem of discerning the false prophet may be found in Deuteronomy 13. The test is a theological one, the revelation of God at the Exodus. The essence of the false prophet is that he calls the people after other gods, which you have not known (v.2), thus teaching rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt (v..5). Here was the final feature of Moses, the normative prophet; he also fixed the theological norm by which all subsequent teaching could be judged. A prophet might allege that he spoke in the name of Yahweh, but if he did not acknowledge the authority of Moses and subscribe to the doctrines of the Exodus, he should be regarded as a fake prophet.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

It should be evident to you now that it is difficult from the Old Testament perspective to determine who a true or false prophet is. In some of the examples in the Old Testament, the so-called true and false prophets appealed to Yahweh’s authority. This made it difficult to know who is true or false. However, certain general external characteristics have been used as distinguishing the true from the false prophets. These suggested criteria have, however, been found wanting in the process of distinguishing the true from the false prophets.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The issue of true and false prophets remain a serious contention in Old Testament scholarship. However, we conclude that a false prophet is anyone who calls the people after other gods, apart from Yahweh, God of Israel.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. Why do you think it is a difficult task to discern between a true and a false prophet?
- ii. Is being called by God enough to be regarded a true prophet?
- iii. Do we have false prophets in contemporary religious set-up?
- ix. Can we regard every prophet that appealed to the authority of God as a true prophet?

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## **UNIT 3 THE PROPHETS AND THE CULT**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Prophet and the Cult
  - 3.2 Moses and Elijah as Examples of Priest-Prophet
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In the opinion of some scholars, the Israelite prophets are regarded as the proponent of an ethical religion. In other words, the main concern of the prophets is to guide the citizens on how to live a faithful and fulfilled life. In essence therefore, they were said to have nothing to do with the cult. When we talk about the cult here, we are referring to the formal and ritual aspects of worship. The cult is the visible expression of faith. You should therefore, understand that the cult has to do with things relating to sacrifices and other rituals. However, as earlier observed, some scholars believed that the prophets have nothing to do with the cult. In this unit, we want to see if it is possible in ancient Israel to have prophetism that is totally independent of the cult.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- list the reasons for which the prophets condemned the cult
- explain why it is impossible to maintain prophetism independent of the cult.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Prophet and the Cult**

Both the priests and the prophets occupied important place in the cultic history of Israel. However, the priests were generally regarded as the cultic officials. Though, the origin of priesthood in Israel is unknown, the contribution and activities of the priest in the cult of Yahweh are well-known. The three main functions of the priesthood in ancient Israel are: administration of a sanctuary, divination by means of the lots in the

sacred box and transmission of traditional ritual and related issues. It is good to know from the observation above that the priests were the managers of the cult. They were the ones who prescribed and performed the rituals and sacrifices for the individual and the nation as a whole.

Perhaps, because of the functions of the priest in the cult of Yahweh, they were regarded as the only stakeholder in the cult. On the relationship of the prophets to the cult some scholars believe that the prophets, especially the classical prophets are strongly and predominantly anti-cultic. In support of this interpretation, some passages are often quoted to support the positions that the prophets in ancient Israel are anti-cultic. An example is found in Isaiah 1:10; 14.

*The multitude of your sacrifices what are they to me? says the LORD. I have more than enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats when you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts, stop bringing meaningless offerings, your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations I cannot bear your evil assemblies.*

In Amos 5:5 we also read:

*Do you seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba for Gilgal will surely go into exile, and Bethel will be reduced to nothing.*

From the passages above, especially the second one, Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba were principal cultic centre in ancient Israel. It is not a surprise that these lines have been repeatedly interpreted to mean that the prophets categorically condemned Israel's cult and their worship centre. Thus, the prophets were seen as protagonists of an ethical religion. It has been observed, however, that it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to maintain an anti-cult and anti-institutional prophetism in Israel. The cult was, from the beginning, the tangible expression of Israel's faith. However, prophetism almost certainly remained in close rapport with the cult. The relationship indeed was one of mutual indebtedness. It is obvious that the prophets were familiar with the rituals and meaning of the cults and that they sometimes spoke in languages borrowed from it.

### **3.2 Moses and Elijah as Examples of Prophet-Priest**

It is to be observed that prophets and priests were not so consistently and inimically opposed as has sometimes been assumed. It is significant that the two figures accorded important position in Israel's religion.

Moses and Elijah are both remembered and recorded in the dual role of prophet-priest (Moses was a Levite – Exodus 2:1), Elijah conducted sacrifice (I Kings 18:32ff). Jeremiah and Ezekiel were also priests at the same time prophets (Jer. 1:1, Ezek. 1:3). Moreover, a Levite, a cultic official was inspired by the spirit of God to bring a prophetic message at a time of national crises (2 Chronicles 20:14). Also, possibly the group of Leviticus singers after the exile were survivors of groups of cultic prophets attached to the sanctuaries. Prophets are also associated with temple singers (2 Chronicles 29:25). Prophets and Priests are associated together in a way that suggests professional association (e.g. 2 Kings 23:2). On the other hand, the condemnation of the cult by prophets like Isaiah and Amos, is not to be interpreted to mean that they were against the cult but the lack of moral concern and holy living on the part of those who bring sacrifices and join in the rituals (Amos 5:21ff). Isaiah too brings strong condemnation of sacrifices, the Sabbath and even prayer (Isaiah 1), with the intention of showing that it is all-useless in the context of a blatantly sinful life (Isaiah 1:15).

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have learnt that prophetism and the cult in ancient Israel cannot be separated. The prophets merely condemned the unwholesome practices by some corrupt officials in the cult. You also learned that two key figures in the religious tradition of Israel – Moses and Elijah – functioned as priest – prophet, one time or the other in the history of Israel.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The cult refers to the rituals and things that pertain to place of worship. Some people however believe that the prophets in ancient Israel were against the cult. It is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to maintain anti-cult prophetism in ancient Israel. This is because the prophets and the priests functioned side by side. Moreover, it is significant that the two figures accorded important position in Israel's religion – Moses and Elijah are both remembered and recorded in the dual role of prophet – priest.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. What are the functions of Priests in the cult of Yahweh in ancient Israel?
- ii. Why was Elijah regarded as prophet – priest?
- iii. What are the reasons for the condemnation of the cult by the prophets in Israel?

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## **UNIT 4 OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETIC BOOKS: AN INTRODUCTION**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Making of the Prophetic Books
  - 3.2 Popular Themes in the Prophetic Books
    - 3.2.1 The Lord as Ruler of all History
    - 3.2.2 The Primary Need to be Right with God
    - 3.2.3 Moral Foundation of Religion and Society
    - 3.2.4 A Blend of Hope and Judgement
    - 3.2.5 Messianic Kingdom
  - 3.3 Prophetic Genres
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit, we shall focus our attention on the prophetic books. You will recall that we classified some prophets as classical prophets. These are the prophets whose works survived them. Before we study these books, we shall look into the processes involved in the composition of the prophetic books. Also, we shall examine the prophetic speeches and genres. In other words, we shall study the methods the prophets employed in order to convey their messages to their audiences. We shall look into the texts to find out these speeches and genres.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- recognize the prophetic books
- account for the process of composition of the prophetic books
- read and understand the purpose and the message of the prophets
- relate the message of prophetic books to contemporary socio-political set-up.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 The Making of the Prophetic Books**

The Old Testament prophetic literature is not directly the product of prophets, but the scribes who have compiled books of “prophecy” under the name of individuals. The contribution of any particular individual to the books ascribed to him varies considerably. The first of the prophets who is known to have collected or recalled his own words to any large extent was Jeremiah who was at one time or the other banned from public appearance. In the light of this, he summoned Baruch, a professional writer, and dictated to him his messages. These were read in public assembly, and as a result the volume was destroyed by King Jehoiakim. A second volume, containing the same material was prepared in a similar way. Until Jerusalem fell, the prophet kept this, having additions made where necessary (Jeremiah 36).

Oral tradition played some part in the preservation and transmission of the materials of which the prophetic books are composed. But opinion differs about the stage at which, and the extent to which these materials were committed to writing. It has been suggested that those who composed the prophetic books worked in the post exilic period. Before the Israelites were taken to exile in Babylon, the prophets had warned them ahead of the impending doom. However, the message of the prophets was discarded, because they sounded absurd. But when the predictions of the prophets were fulfilled, the people looked back and recalled the words of the prophets. These were then set into writing. This was the process the prophetic books underwent during composition.

### **3.2 Popular Themes in the Prophetic Books**

A cursory look at the prophetic books shows that the following themes run through them:

#### **3.2.1 The Lord as Ruler of all History**

For the prophet, God is actively involved in human history. The rise and fall of Empires and Kingdoms from the prophetic viewpoint, reveal the hand of Yahweh. In fact, some of the mighty empires of their day e.g. the Babylonians and the Assyrians among others were seen as tools in the hands of God (Isaiah 10:5-15). Besides, the prophets understood history as moving towards a purposeful end. This fact is expressed in idea of “the day of the Lord”. It was the period the kingdom of God will be established. A period when justice and good will triumph over the

forces of evil and wickedness (see Isaiah 13:9, Ezekiel 30:2, Obadiah 1:15, Zechariah 2:11, 14:1-7).

### **3.2.2 The Primary Need to be Right with God**

The prophetic books taught that the most important thing is the need to be right with God. Since it is God who determines the outcome of every situation, the important things are not to have the best and strongest human allies (Isaiah 30:1-2, Hosea 5:13), but to side with God. The admonition on the need to be right with God was necessitated by the unfaithfulness of the Israelites.

### **3.2.3 The Moral Foundation of Religion and Society**

The prophets as a whole insist that to have a sound society, people must live right. The leaders must be upright. The rich must not oppress the poor. In essence, a right relationship between man and God, man and man produce a harmonious society. However, once people are alienated from God, they cannot maintain right relationships with each other (Amos 2:7-8). This perhaps informed the clarion call by the prophets in their books for right relationship between people.

### **3.2.4 A Blend of Judgement and Hope**

This is another theme that runs through the prophetic books. Time and again, as we hear the prophets analyze the situation in which they live, we see that God's judgment is inevitable. The situation looked bleak because of God's impending judgment. But in the midst of this darkness, a bright shaft of hope pierces through (Isaiah 6:13, 28:5, 29:15, Amos 9:11ff). This blending of darkness and light, judgment and hope is more than a fact of the prophetic message. It is a necessity, for the prophets spoke in the name of Yahweh, the God whose mercy endures forever.

### **3.2.5 The Messianic Kingdom**

With the failure of monarchy in Israel, there arose a messianic anticipation. Before the people were taken to exile in Babylon, the office of the king and priest were highly respected. However, when they were taken to exile, the Israelites became disillusioned. The people looked forward to the time in the future when God would raise a king who will deliver Israel from all their enemies. This king who is called Messiah (anointed one) will establish Israel as the kingdom of God. This idea is widely taught in the prophetic books (see Jeremiah 31:32, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 53:55).

### **3.3 Prophetic Genres and Speech**

Unlike many other biblical books where a pattern of organization is evident, the prophetic books seem to have no order in most cases. However, the prophets used various types of didactic discourses/methods for the clarity of their messages. These will be examined below:

#### **Call Narrative**

In the call narrative, the subject is the initial encounter of the prophet with the Lord. This is a form that validates the prophet's credential as someone designated by the Lord as a messenger (see for example, Isaiah 6). In the call narratives, a basic pattern is observable:

- The Lord appears or speaks.
- The prophet expresses unworthiness.
- The prophet is reassured.
- The Lord commissions the prophet.

#### **Symbolic Actions**

This is another form found in the prophetic narrative involving symbolic statements to the people of the divine will. For example, when prophet Jeremiah bought a piece of land in Anatboth near Jerusalem, it was a symbol of his confidence in the Lord's promise to restore Judah after the exile (Jeremiah 32:14) (see also Isaiah 20, Jeremiah 35, Ezekiel 4-5 and Hosea 1:3:1-5). In all cases, the prophet is directed by the Lord to carry out an action that seems strange in order to draw attention to himself and thereby be heard.

#### **Covenant Lawsuit**

This is another developed prophetic saying. In the covenant lawsuit, the Lord is portrayed as bringing Israel to court, accusing the nation or its leaders of violation of the stipulations of the Sinai covenant. The evidences and punishment are then announced. The prophet plays the role of persecutor, Hosea 4, provides a good example of this form of prophetic speeches.

#### **Oracle of Judgment**

This is another pattern in the prophetic books. It might be a denunciation in a situation of present faithlessness. Or it could be an announcement of a future punishment. Sometimes a present indictment is combined with

the announcement of coming results. For example, the book of Amos begins with a series of oracles of this type (Amos 1:3-2:8).

### **Wisdom Thinking**

Proverbs, popular wisdom sayings, parables and allegories are often used by the prophets in their works to drive home their point.

### **Poetry**

Like other aspects of Old Testament poetry, prophetic poetry is rich in imagery, which unfortunately loses some of its import for modern readers as a result of translation from the original languages (see Isaiah 5:1-9).

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have learnt that most of the books of the prophets in the Old Testament were not written by them. Most of the books were the expansion of the oracles of the prophets that were later collected, reinterpreted and expanded to reflect prevailing sensibilities. You also learned that some common themes run through the prophetic books. Besides, to pass across their messages to their audiences the prophets used different didactic discourses/methods.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The Old Testament prophetic books were compiled by scribes, long after the death of the prophets. There are common themes that run through the prophetic books. The prophets also used various types of discourses for the clarity of their messages.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. Write out the prophetic books.
- ii. Who can be regarded as the author of a work? The writer himself or those who recorded the speech of another person?
- iii. List the common basic themes that run through the prophetic books.

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## **UNIT 5 MAJOR PROPHETS: THE BOOKS OF ISAIAH AND JEREMIAH**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Book of Isaiah
  - 3.2 Authorship of Isaiah
  - 3.3 Historical Context of Isaiah
  - 3.4 Theological Messages of Isaiah
  - 3.5 The Book of Jeremiah
  - 3.6 The Message of Jeremiah
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The prophetic books in the Old Testament are classified into two: the Major and the Minor Prophets. The Major Prophets comprise the following: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel while the Minor Prophets include the following: The books of Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. These books are regarded as Minor Prophets, not because their messages are of less importance, but for their length. All the twelve Minor Prophets books are roughly equal to the length of one of the three Major Prophets. In this lecture, we shall focus attention on the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. We shall discuss the authorship and messages of these books.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- recognize the socio-political context in which the Old Testament prophets operated
- understand and relate the message of the prophets, particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah
- relate the significance of the prophetic books, especially the book of Isaiah and Jeremiah for the Christian understanding of salvation.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 Authorship of Isaiah**

For many centuries, prophet Isaiah was unanimously accepted as the author of the book that bears his name. This position was, however, questioned towards the end of the eighteenth century AD. Notable scholars like Doderlein (1789) and Eichorn (1783), pioneered this challenge in their works. These scholars and some of their followers opined that chapters 1-39 of the book of Isaiah were written by Isaiah son of Amoz while 40-66 was written by an unknown writer called second Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah). There are three major lines of argument advanced for attributing Isaiah 40-66 to another author:

#### **The Historical Situation**

Chapters 1-39 of the book assume a setting in Jerusalem in the eighth century BC during the period when Assyria was dominant in the region. In the second half of the book (40-66), the audience addressed forward to a time they would return to Jerusalem (Is. 40:9-11, 42:1-9, 43:1-7, 51:11, 52:1-12, 58:12, 60:10, 61:4). Moreover, at the time Isaiah son of Amoz lived, Babylon was not a power to reckon with that will take the people away into exile. Also, the reference to Cyrus, the Persian king (45:1, 13) who lived more than two hundred years after Isaiah shows that this section (40-66) must have been written long after the death of Isaiah the son of Amoz.

#### **Theological Difference**

Isaiah 1-39 is said to emphasize God's modesty, whereas Isaiah 40-66 emphasizes his universal dominion and infinitude. In the first part of the book, the nation is led by a king descended from David (11:1). In the second part of the book leadership belongs to priests, Levites and princes (66:6, 66:21) and there is no mention of the Davidic dynasty. The "messianic king" of the first half of the book (9:6-7, 11:1-11) is replaced in second Isaiah by "the servant of the Lord", a figure not mentioned in the earlier portion.

#### **Language and Style**

Isaiah 40-66 is often described as more "lyric, flowing, impassioned, hymnic" than 1-39. The frontier of the differences in language and style was pushed further. In the process 56-66 was found to be different in language and style from 40-55. This therefore leads to the conclusion that 56-66 must have been composed by a different author. This author is called the Trito-Isaiah, post-exilic writer. Isaiah 56-66 was regarded

as reflecting the conditions of the restoration commonly back in Israel, the walls of Jerusalem were standing (62:6).

From the observations on the authorship of Isaiah, we can conclude that Isaiah can still be regarded as the author of the whole book. This is in spite of the fact that the whole book was not written by him. This conclusion can be established by understanding the concept of authorship in the ancient world. In the ancient world, the followers of a philosopher or sage can recollect and preserve in written form, the sayings and ideas of their master. This written record can still be regarded as the sage's work. For example, Socrates the Greek Philosopher did not write anything while he was alive. However, today, we have complete work of Socrates. These are collections of 50 Socratic sayings, gathered by his disciples after his death. In the same vein, the work of Isaiah must have been collected and reinterpreted to reflect contemporary sensibilities by his subsequent disciples.

### **3.2 Historical Context of Isaiah**

Prophets, especially biblical prophets are not extra terrestrial beings, but human beings who operated in a historical, social, cultural and political context. In the light of this, we shall examine the historical period in which Isaiah operated. Having the knowledge of the historical context of a prophet usually help in understanding the message of the prophet. Isaiah, the son of Amoz was a resident of Jerusalem. He began his prophetic ministry in the year that king Uzziah died (740BC Isaiah 6:1) and continued through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Is. 1:1). He was married to a prophetess and was the father of at least two sons (7:3, 8:3). He lived at the time that the Assyrian empire was a powerful force in the geo-political life of the ancient Near East. When Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727BC) extended the frontier of the Assyrian empire, he captured Syria; this led to the formation of an alliance between Syria and Israel. Isaiah, however, warned King Ahaz of Judah against participating in an anti-Assyrian coalition led by Aram and Israel (Isaiah 7). After the death of Tigalath-Pileser, Shalmanesser and Sargon moved against the northern kingdom (Israel). The capital Samaria was destroyed and the people dispersed to different nations in 722 BC.

### **3.3 Theological Message of Isaiah**

Isaiah is regarded as the theologian of the Old Testament. His description of God and the divine attributes and acts in history, in the book are profound and beautiful. Several themes dominate the prophet's utterance. This will be examined as outlined in R.B. Dillard: T. Longman III *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 278-80.

## **God as the Holy One of Israel**

When Isaiah received his call to prophetic ministry in the year that King Uzziah died (Is. 6) he saw the Lord seated, high and exalted, on His throne, surrounded by seraphs calling out “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD Almighty”. The prophet’s experience of his call set the tone for the remainder of his ministry. Throughout the book, Isaiah’s favourite designation for God is “the Holy One of Israel” (1:4, 5:19, 24:10-17, 20, 12:6, 17:7, 29:19, 23, 30:11-12, 15:31:1, 40:25, 41:14, 4:3, 45:11, 47:4, 48:17, 49:7, 54:5, 55:5, 60:9). Outside of Isaiah this phrase occurs only six times in the remainder of the Old Testament. This term explicitly described the moral perfection of Yahweh, the God of Israel. He expected the Israelite to deal with him based on his moral character, but this was ignored in their relationship with him (Yahweh).

## **God as Saviour and Redeemer**

God’s holiness meant that he would be faithful to his own promises. It was because God was holy that he would not utterly abandon Israel, but he would be her saviour and redeemer (41:14, 43:3, 47:4, 48:17, 49:7, 54:5). Isaiah’s own name (Yahweh will save or Yahweh is salvation) reflects these aspects of God’s character. He would deliver the nation from the Syro-Ephramite coalition (8:1-14), from Assyria (17:10, 11:10-12:3), and from Babylon (45:17, 48:14, 49:25-26). The Lord would vindicate himself before the eyes of the nations by saving his people (52:7-10). Their real father was not Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, but the Lord himself and he would have compassion on his children (63:16).

## **The Remnant Theme**

Isaiah’s concern to present God both as the Holy one of Israel and her saviour and redeemer leaves a profound tension. How can the divine holiness and the resulting just judgment against sin be reconciled with divine grace and promise in the most often thought the remnant theme? The remnant is that the group of people who survives some catastrophe brought about by God, ordinarily in judgment for sin. This group becomes the nucleus for the continuation of human kind on the people of God. This surviving remnant inherits the promise of God. In Isaiah the returnees from exile in Babylon best signifies the remnant that confirms God’s promise of restoration (Isaiah 51:11ff).

## **The Servant of the Lord**

Few items in the study of the Old Testament have generated as much interest as the so-called servant songs (Isaiah 4:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53, 61:1-3). The servant of Isaiah, 40-66 has been variously

identified as a collective group or an individual. Collective interpretations identify the servant as the nation, Israel or as the faithful remnant or as some other ideal representation of the nation. Individual interpretations have identified the servant as a particular person (Zerubabel, Jehoiachin, Moses, Uzziah, Ezekiel, the prophet himself Cyrus etc) or an eschatological figure (the messiah or Jesus as Messiah). In some respect, this debate is endless. The passages themselves will not be pinned down to a collective or individual interpretation alone, instead they require both approaches.

### **The Spirit of the Lord**

In much of the Old Testament, and the prophetic books in particular, the spirit of God is the spirit that inspires and enables the prophets (number 11:25-29, I Sam 10:6, 18:10, 19:20-23). This emphasis is also found in Isaiah: the Spirit of God gives wisdom and understanding (11:2), the Lord's servant, anointed by God's Spirit, responds by proclaiming goodness (61:1). The Spirit of the Lord also makes possible the announcing of the purposes of God (48:16).

### **God's Rule over History**

The major criterion used in the Old Testament for distinguishing the word of the true prophet from that of the false is the fulfilment of the prophets utterance (Deut. 18:21-22). The premise of this criterion is that the Lord who reveals his plans to his prophets (Amos 3:7) rules over the course of history to bring his purpose to function. This celebration heightened in Isaiah 40-66. Just as Israel had been what God had announced and done in the former Assyrian crisis, now they could believe him when he announced that he was about to do a new thing for the nation (Is. 42:9, 43:9, 44:19, 48:3, 6). Because he had spoken with power and authority before past events, we can believe God when he speaks about the future. The idols have never done this, and their inability shows that they are not gods at all (43:12). He announces his intent before hand, he brings it to pass, and he sees to its proclamation. Isaiah exalts in the sovereign rule of God over the course of history (41:21, 43:8-13, 44:6-8, 45:20-21, 46:8-10).

## **3.4 The Book of Prophet Jeremiah**

In the Hebrew text, the book of Jeremiah is the largest book of the prophets. It is longer than the twelve Minor Prophets combined. Moreover, the book bears the name of the prophet which it is called. Jeremiah's ministry covered one of the most turbulent and decisive periods in the history of the ancient Near East. He prophesied for 40 years: a period which spans the reign of five kings in Judah. At the time he prophesied, Assyria was already going down as a power to reckon with in the ancient Near East. And it was Babylon and Egypt that were

struggling for supremacy, with Judah caught in the middle. Jeremiah's career runs from the time of his call to prophetic ministry during the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign through the destruction of Jerusalem (627BC-587BC). Later traditions said that Jeremiah was taken to Egypt by the fleeing people of Judah (Jer. 41:16-44:30) and he probably died there. It is not possible, however, to establish the date of his death.

The prophet went through a severe persecution in the course of his prophetic ministry. He was regarded a saboteur by the royalties in his days, because he advocated that the nation should willingly surrender to Babylonian yoke. The kings and the people, however, preferred to side Egypt. Jeremiah's stance was based on his conviction that Babylon has been chosen by Yahweh as an instrument of punishment. Besides, the prophet Jeremiah was also a priest from the clan of Hilkiyah. His hometown was Anathoth (1:1). He was not permitted to marry and raise children by God, because impending divine judgment of Judah would sweep away the next generation (16:1-4). He was labelled a "prophet of doom" perhaps because of the gloomy nature of his message. His closest friend and companion was his secretary, Baruch. It has been suggested by scholars that Baruch must have been responsible for the final compilation of the book of Jeremiah.

### **3.5 The Message of Jeremiah**

In the book, the prophet stresses the fact that God is the creator and sovereign (25:51). He is omniscient and the source of life for those who trust him (17:5ff, 13). He demands his people's allegiance and hates idolatry (7). In the time of Jeremiah the people ran after other gods and idols (2:13). Moreover, the situation became pathetic that idols were even found in the temple at Jerusalem. The consequence of this is the moral corruption and perversion. There was oppression in the land and empty religiosity.

The professional priests and prophets were Jeremiah's enemies, as he complained about their policy of making material gain from their office and their contention that the Jerusalem Temple will never fall into the hands of the Babylonians (14:14ff, 23:9ff). The prophets also contended that knowledge of the law without obedience to it was worst than idolatry (2:8). For the law to be effectively obeyed, it must be written on the heart. This could only happen if God gave a new covenant (31:31ff). With these situations, judgment is inevitable. The theme of judgment was very prominent in Jeremiah's message. The people of Judah will be punished through drought and famine (14:1ff) and invasion by a foreign power (Babylonians) (6:1-15). In spite of the judgment, the theme of restoration is also evident in Jeremiah's message. The exile in Babylon would not last for ever (29:10ff) and Babylon itself would be overthrown eventually (50). This hope gave

birth to his great act of faith – buying land – in the darkest days (see chapter 32). But he looked even beyond the return from exile to an ideal future in which Samaria would have a part. Abundance would prevail and Jerusalem would be holy to the Lord because its people had repented and he had forgiven them (31). The Lord will also establish over them the rule of the Messianic prince (23:5-16).

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have learnt the reason for the classification of Old Testament prophetic books as Major and Minor Prophets. You have also been taken through two of the books classified as Major Prophets – Isaiah and Jeremiah. Issues like the authorship, date of composition and messages of these books were examined.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The prophetic books are classified into two: Major and Minor prophets. The Major Prophets comprise the first five books, while the Minor Prophets comprise the last twelve prophetic books in the Old Testament. Isaiah and Jeremiah are among the books classified as Major Prophets. Isaiah is regarded as the theologian of the Old Testament. His description of God and the divine attributes and acts in history are profound and beautiful. While the book of Jeremiah gives a clear picture of what a prophet goes through in the course of discharging his duties. The book of Jeremiah stresses the fact that God is the creator and sovereign (25:51). He is omniscient and the source of life for those who trust him (17:5ff).

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. Why are the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah classified among the Major Prophets?
- ii. Can Isaiah be regarded as the author of the whole book that bears his name?
- iii. Why was Jeremiah called the prophet of doom?

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS**

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## **MODULE 3**

Unit 1	Major Prophets II: Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel
Unit 2	Minor Prophets I: Hosea, Joel, Amos and Obadiah
Unit 3	Minor Prophets II: Jonah, Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk
Unit 4	Minor Prophets I: Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi
Unit 5	The Contemporary Relevance of the Prophetic Ministry

### **UNIT 1 MAJOR PROPHETS II: LAMENTATIONS, EZEKIEL AND DANIEL**

#### **CONTENTS**

1.0	Introduction
2.0	Objectives
3.0	Main Content
3.1	The Book of Lamentations
3.2	The Message of Lamentations
3.3	The Book of Ezekiel
3.4	Collective to Individual Responsibility
3.5	Authorship and Date of the Book of Daniel
3.6	The Message of Daniel
4.0	Conclusion
5.0	Summary
6.0	Tutor-Marked Assignment
7.0	References/Further Readings

#### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In continuation of our study of the prophetic books, we shall examine briefly, the authorship and message of the books of Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel. These books are among those classified as Major Prophets. In the previous lecture, we had examined the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, which are the longer of the prophetic books. Before reading through this lecture, I will want you to read through these books. This will facilitate your understanding of the lecture.

#### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- explain the role of the prophets as reformers in the society
- relate the message and the purpose of the books of Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel
- relate the message of the prophets to today's Nigeria socio-political situation .

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Book of Lamentations**

The book of Lamentations was written as a reaction to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587BC. Like many of the books of the Old Testament, Lamentation is an anonymous work. That is, who the author was, is not indicated. However, like many books of the bible, tradition will always ascribe the book to one person or the other. The book has been ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah. The Septuagint (the Greek Old testament) makes the connection between Lamentation and Jeremiah obvious in two ways:

1. It places Lamentations immediately after Jeremiah and before Ezekiel.
2. It adds the following words to the beginning of the book “And it came to pass that Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament over Jerusalem and said”

The Targum, the Peshitta, the Babylonian Talmud and the Vulgate all follow the Greek tradition. If one accepts the tradition that, Jeremiah authored the book, then it must have been written around 587BC. But if otherwise, then the book must have been written perhaps after the Babylonian captivity.

#### **3.2 The Message of Lamentations**

It should be noted here that the book of Lamentations is not the only book that contains individual and community laments. There are individual and community laments in the book of Psalms. Moreover, the Old Testament laments found a paradigm in the overall context of the ancient Near East. For example among the Sumerian we have “Lamentation over the Destruction of wr,” “Lamentation over the destruction of summer and wr” etc.

The book of Lamentations grapples with corporate suffering in the same way as the book of Job struggles with the issue of individual suffering. The writer acknowledges God’s wrath against Jerusalem, and this motivates him to pray for her restoration. Israel’s sufferings were catalogued in a variety of ways: wholesale killings, king (2:6,9,4:20), princes (1:6:2:2, 4:7, 5:12), elders (1:19, 2:10, 4:16, 5:12), priests (1:4, 19:2:6, 20, 4:16), prophets (2:9,20) and ordinary citizen (2:10-12; 3:48, 4:6) as well as cessation of worship (1:4, 10). These are not only for its own sake but also for the profound lessons to be learned from it. Behind this judgment, which is due to the sin of the people, is God himself. It is

not the Babylonians, but God himself who will destroy them, because of their sins (as we see in Lam. 2:4-5).

However, the author of Lamentations did not just paint a gloomy picture of the situation. He still kept his hope alive. He expresses the assurance that God does not abandon those who turn to him for help (3:22-33). In spite of Israel's sins (1:8, 14, 18, 2:14: 4:13), God will still forgive and restore. His compassion and mercy are everlasting and greater than his anger (3:31-33).

### **3.3 The Book of Ezekiel**

Prophet Ezekiel was one of the people deported to Babylon, along with King Jehoiachin in 597BC (2 Kings 24:14ff), before the final deportation in 587BC. In 606 and 597BC, different categories of people were carried away on exile in Babylon. Ezekiel was called to be a prophet five years after settling in Babylon. He was possibly called at the age of 30 (Ezek. 1:1f) and lived at least for another 22 years (29:17). His wife died on the day Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem (24:1f, 15ff). However, there is no mention of children. Prophet Ezekiel's prophetic activity started around the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile (592B.C).

On the authorship of the book, it is very difficult to precisely say who the author was. However, the fact that the book must have been expanded over the years, by probably the disciples of the prophets has to be accepted. Besides, prophet Ezekiel is also from the priestly family. His membership in a priestly family is evident throughout the book. This can especially be seen in Ezekiel's concern with the temple and its ritual. The prophet was, however, unable to fulfil his calling as a priest while living in exile far from Jerusalem. Instead, in the year that Ezekiel would have began his priestly vocation, God called him to serve as a prophet.

### **3.4 Collective to Individual Responsibility**

Like other prophets before him and his contemporaries, the prophet Ezekiel condemned in clear terms the idolatry and empty religiosity of the people. However, Ezekiel more than any prophet before him emphasized the individual consequences of both obedience and transgression (18:1-32, 33:10-20). This is what made his message unique. The people had been using a proverb that in effect claimed that God was unjust. What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel; "The Father eats sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge (18:2)".

For the people felt that the exile had come about in part as a result of the cumulative guilt of generation of Israelites who had lived in rebellion against God and his law. For them, God is unjust for punishing them for the sins of the fathers. With this action, the people are shying away from the need to face their own sinfulness.

Ezekiel, however, taught that God is not unjust, because every generation, will face the consequence of their sins. Moreover, it is the individual that sinned that will be punished. It is not the whole nation (Ezek. 18:1-10). For Ezekiel, the sins of the exiled generation also contributed to the destruction of Jerusalem.

### **3.5 Authorship and Date of the Book of Daniel**

For many centuries, the Jews and the Christians believed that Daniel, a prophet and statesman who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC was the author of the book. This fact is supported because Daniel speaks in the first person especially in the second half of the book (e.g. Dan. 7:2, 4, 6, 28:1, 15, 9:2, 10:2). For many scholars today, however, Daniel was not the author of the book. Most scholars now believe that the book of Daniel is a work that was composed in the second century BC. There are many objections against Daniel's authorship of the book of Daniel and these include:

- (a) It is said that the usage of the term "Chaldean" indicates an age later than the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. It was said that the term was used long after Daniel's time.
- (b) It has also been charged that Daniel would not have been admitted into the Babylonian priesthood or have been made its head.
- (c) It has also been maintained that there are no extra-biblical allusions to the account of Nebuchadnezzar's madness and therefore the narrative is not historical.
- (d) Aramaic language in which a part of the book is written belongs to a time after that of Daniel's.

However, we may conclude this section by saying that the 6<sup>th</sup> century Daniel must have written some sections of the book which was later edited and expanded by subsequent generation to reflect prevailing sensibilities.

### **3.6 The Message of Daniel**

The theme of the book is God's sovereignty "The Most High God is sovereign over the Kingdoms of men" (5:21). The book of Daniel set out to pursue this thesis. In the book we see the emergence of different world powers – Babylon and its fall and the emergence of the Persian Empire. In the second part of the book, the destiny of the subsequent world powers was also revealed. It was done through an apocalyptic vision. Apocalyptic characteristics such as dreams and visions, often centred on the heavenly throne-room, portraying a future salvation, which transcends ordinary experiences, are seen in the book. In apocalyptic literature, different images and features are used to drive home points. In the apocalyptic section of Daniel, the different empires and kingdoms that will arise before the final setting up of God's kingdom were described in Daniel. This begins with the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the ten nations empires, the kingdom of God will now be finally established. But this kingdom will be for those who lived a holy and righteous life (Dan. 12:2-3).

### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have been taken through the three other Major Prophetic books – namely Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel. The concern of Lamentations is to depict the fate of Judah after the 586BC.Babylonian invasion. In spite of the gloomy picture painted in the book, the writer of Lamentations still expresses the assurance that God does not completely abandon his people (3:22-23). You also learned about the shift from collective to individual responsibility in the book of Ezekiel. Every generation will face the consequence of their sins. Besides, it is the individual that sinned that will be punished. The book of Daniel also introduces you to apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament. In apocalyptic literature different images and features are often used to drive home points.

### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The book of Lamentations is a dirge (a funeral song) composed by one of the people who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The writer also anticipates hope for future restoration. The book of Ezekiel is about the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel who was deported to Babylon in 597BC. His principal message is the shift from corporate to individual responsibility.

The book of Daniel is also an account of the activities of Daniel, one of the people carried into captivity in Babylon. The apocalyptic section of

the kingdoms of the world of the book described the rise and fall of human kingdoms, before the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. Can God be regarded as unjust for sending the people of Israel to exile in Babylon?
- ii. Discuss the shift from corporate to individual responsibility in the book of Ezekiel.
- iii. What is apocalypticism? Who can we regard as the author of Daniel?
- iv. What lessons can be learnt from Daniel's integrity and leadership qualities by our leaders today?

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## **UNIT 2    MINOR PROPHETS I: HOSEA, JOEL, AMOS AND OBADIAH**

### **CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 The Book of Hosea
  - 3.2 The Message of Hosea
  - 3.3 Hosea's Personal Message: An Epitome of His Message
  - 3.4 The Book of Joel
  - 3.5 The Message of Joel
  - 3.6 The Book of Amos
  - 3.7 The Message of Amos
  - 3.8 The Book of Obadiah
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

At one time or the other in one of the past lectures, we said the prophetic books are classified into major and minor prophets. In this lecture, we shall examine the Minor Prophets. Four books would be examined; these are Hosea, Joel, Amos and Obadiah. I will like to state here, that what we hope to do is just an overview study of these books. We are going to examine the prophets, the prevailing circumstances at the time they were prophesying and their message. Besides, I want you to also know that some of these prophets operated in the North (Israel) while others lived and prophesied in the South (Judah). It is pertinent to state here that the four Major Prophets, whose works were earlier studied, are from the southern kingdom of Judah.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- identify the theme of the book of Hosea
- identify the theme of the book of Joel
- identify the theme of the book of Amos
- identify the theme of the book of Obadiah.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Hosea, His Time, and Message**

The prophet Hosea, whose name comes from the same root as names like, Joshua and Jesus, was said to come from the northern kingdom of Israel. The main evidence cited to support the fact that he is from the northern Israel, is that references were made to places and sites in the northern kingdom. Tabor, Samaria, Bethel, Jezreel, Ramah are some prominent northern towns mentioned in the book. Also, he demonstrated an unequalled love for his native country (northern) Israel in his writings.

The prophetic ministry of Hosea covers the last thirty years of the northern kingdom. It was a tragic period in which six kings (following Jeroboam II) reigned within twenty-five years (2 Kings 15:8-17:41), four (Zechariah, Shallum, Pekahia and Pekah) were murdered by their successors while in office, and one (Hosea) was captured in battle; only one (Menehem) was succeeded on the throne by his son. For years, during the reign of Jeroboam II the nation of Israel prospered (Hosea 4-5). After the death of Jeroboam II, decline set in and the judgment of God, represented by the Assyrian destruction was approaching. For prophet Hosea, the collapse of Israel in 722 BC, was largely due to its adoption of an alien lifestyle borrowed from Canaanite neighbours. Every part of their life was bound up with Baal-worship, and the nation leaders had promoted it (Hos. 5:1ff). Lawlessness and injustices reigned as a result of burglary, robbery, murder, drunkenness and political intrigues were common (6, 7-7:7). This caused this Lord much grief.

#### **3.3 Hosea's Personal Experience: An Epitome of His Message**

The main purpose of the book of Hosea is to demonstrate God's consistent love. This, however, was best done in the personal experience of the prophet (Hos. 1-3). The prophet Hosea was commanded by Yahweh to go and marry a prostitute. In obedience to this instruction, he married Gomer, who bore him three children. The first was named, "Jezreel", (because I will soon punish the house of Jehu from massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel). The second child, a daughter was named "Lo-Ruhamah" (for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should forgive them). The third son was named "Lo-ammi" (for you are not my people and I am not your God). After giving birth to these children, Gomer left the prophet for her former promiscuous life. Eventually worn down and no longer attractive, she was abandoned but Hosea brought her back. He reconciled with her and she becomes her wife again (Hos. 3:1-5). In his

personal experience, Hosea was showing the undying love of Yahweh for Israel. In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, they will not be ultimately abandoned and rejected. In spite of God's judgment, Israel will be restored to better and sweeter relationship with Yahweh.

### **3.4 The Book of Joel**

The book of Prophet Joel was said to have been written by the prophet Joel (Joel 1:1), however, not much is known about the prophet save the mention of his name in his book. The book seems to point to Judah (2:1, 3:1, 6) and in particular, Jerusalem, as his background. He was probably a priest like Jeremiah and Ezekiel (1:13-17). On the date of the composition of the book of Joel, some modern scholar feels that the book was probably written around 400BC. A variety of reasons have been suggested for this position. These include:

- (a) Israel as the old northern kingdom does not appear.
- (b) National life is on a smaller scale, centring on Jerusalem. But there is no king mentioned.
- (c) The book's language is highly influenced by Aramaic, the language spoken after the Babylonian exile.

### **3.5 The Message of Joel**

What really inspired the message of Prophet Joel is the locust plague that hit Israel in his time. The prophecy begins with an account of a severe locust plague accompanied by drought (Joel 1:4). For the prophet, this event portends the advent of a fearful catastrophe, the dreaded Day of the LORD. The Day of the LORD is a day of judgment. The prophet therefore saw in the outbreak of a locust plague, the hand of God chastening and driving Israel to repentance. This locust outbreak was a warning that if Israel was not repentant, a yet more devastating army would come against the nation. For Joel, God's sovereignty was not contained to Israel alone, he rules over the affairs of all nations. In the approaching Day of the LORD, the nations will also be judged. Evil all over the world will be confronted. However, this terrible Day of Judgment on the nation would also be a day when God would show compassion and mercy to those among his people who repented and called on the name of the Lord (Joel 2:32).

### **3.6 The Book of Amos**

The book of Amos tells us a lot about the prophet who is regarded as one of the early classical prophets. He lived in the first half of the eighth century during the reigns of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C) in Israel and Uzziah (791-740) in Judah (Amos 1:1). Though he was from the

southern kingdom of Judah, he however, prophesied in the northern kingdom. Amos was from Tekoa, a town in Judah five miles south of Bethlehem. He has been thought to have come from the lower social classes of ancient Israel. He was a shepherd (Am. 1:1) and dresser of sycamore (7:14). At the time, Amos lived both in the north of Israel and Judah in the south were in a state of unprecedented prosperity.

The territorial frontiers of Israel and Judah were extended by King Jeroboam II and Uzziah. As a consequence of the military successes and territorial expansion (2 King 14:25, 15:2; Chronicles 26:6-8), great wealth accrued to the two kingdoms. In the light of this, a powerful and wealthy class emerged in Samaria. This wealthy class abused their privileged position by oppressing the poor and the weak. It was the action of these wealthy classes that formed the focus of Amos' message.

### **3.7 The Message of Amos**

Amos condemned in strong terms the way religious and political system was abused. Amos was a vigorous spokesman for God's justice and righteousness. The prophet declared that God was going to judge his unfaithful, disobedient, covenant-breaking people. Despite his special choice of Israel and his kindness to her during the exodus and conquest and in the days of David and Solomon, his people consistently failed to honour him. The worship centre at Bethel and other places were often bastardized by idolatry and Canaanite rituals. Amos also condemned those powerful or rich, who rode on the poor and used their unjust wealth to acquire splendid houses and furniture and that they would lose everything they had (Am. 3:6-16). Amos was in fact one of the first among the classical prophets to pronounce judgement on Israel.

However, the message of Amos is not just gloomy. There is the hope of restoration.

*In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as used to be so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nation that bear my name, declares the LORD, who will do these things (Amos 9:11-12).*

### **3.8 The Book of Obadiah**

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament. It contains the message of prophet Obadiah, whose name means 'Servant of Yahweh'. Little however, is known about the prophet. The prophecy is 'Concerning Edom'. Edom is denounced for her pride, especially for her

lack of brotherly kindness towards Judah. For her action, Edom was judged along with the nations that attacked Israel.

As for the date of the prophecy, two possibilities have been suggested. The first the prophecy may be situated around the time after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon in 587BC. This event seems to be clearly alluded to in verses 11-14. On the other hand, there are scholars who place the prophecy before the fall of Jerusalem and refer to 2 Chronicles 21:16, 17 or 2 Chronicles 28:17 as providing the possible historical content for the attack on Jerusalem to which the book alludes. The main message of the book of Obadiah is moral judgment of nations. Especially Edom, and also that final goal of history is that Israel will become God's people again, after the initial rejection.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have gone through four of the books classified as Minor Prophets. You must have noticed that the different socio-political and religious situations of the time inspired the messages of these prophets. The books of Hosea, Joel, Amos and Obadiah address major socio-political and religious concerns.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The main purpose of the book of Hosea is to demonstrate God's consistent love. This was perfectly demonstrated in the life of Prophet Hosea, who married a harlot and consistently demonstrated his love in spite of her unfaithfulness. The message of Prophet Joel was inspired by the locust plague that hit Israel in the time of the prophet. For the prophet, this event portended the advent of a fearful catastrophe: the day of the LORD (a euphemism for God's judgment). Amos is regarded as the prophet of social justice. He condemned the unjust actions of the wealthy that lived on the sweat of the poor. To the prophet every unjust action will be punished by Yahweh. The book of Prophet Obadiah is the shortest in the Old Testament. It sets out to condemn the action of the Edomites and the nations that attacked Israel.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. In what ways did the personal experience of Hosea portray God's unfailing love for Israel?
- ii. What prompted Joel to interpret the locust plague as God's judgment?
- iii. Explore the relevance of Amos' message in today's Nigerian social and political situations.
- iv. Read the book of Obadiah and identify the purposes of the book.

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## **UNIT 3 THE MINOR PROPHETS II: JONAH, MICAH, NAHUM AND HABAKKUK**

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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit, we continue our study of the Minor Prophets. In the last lectures, four books were treated. In this lecture, the book of prophets Jonah, Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk will also be briefly examined. I will encourage you to read through these books before reading through the unit material. This will aid your understanding of the basic issues discussed by the prophets.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- account for the message of the prophets Jonah, Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk
- explain the message of these prophets

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Book of Jonah**

Prophet Jonah was an 8<sup>th</sup> century BC Israelite prophet. He was from the area of Galilee. The prophet probably lived around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Apart from his exploits in the book of Jonah, we also heard of him in 2 Kings 14:25 where he predicted the territorial expansion of Jeroboam II. In the passage, he was also referred to as Jonah the son of Amittai. However, neither Jonah's name nor that of his father occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament. Thus, in the opinion of some scholars, the Jonah in Kings and the Jonah in the book that bears his name are the same man.

#### **3.2 Authorship and Date of Jonah**

It is very difficult to say precisely who wrote the book of Jonah. The book does not use the first person and does claim to have been written by Jonah, but gives no clue as to its author. The book was probably written after the fall of Nineveh (it was destroyed in 612BC) and probably not earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This is because by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the book had been known among the Jews.

#### **3.3 The Message of Jonah**

The book of Jonah is a sort of biographical narrative. Its message is best understood in the context of the story of Prophet Jonah himself. The prophet was sent to preach the message of repentance to the people of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians had earlier carried away the people into exile and threatened some part of Judah. Jonah was called to preach to the Assyrians. He was, however, reluctant. However, God used different natural elements, to teach him some vital lessons. He was thrown into the sea; however, God prepared a fish that swallowed him. He was in the belly of the fish for three days. It was there he agreed to obey the Lord's directions. He was later convinced and he preached to the Ninevites (Jonah 1:1-17). The Lord also used nature to teach him lesson on compassion and mercy (Jonah 4:1-10). From the story of Jonah, we see clearly God's supreme mercy and justice in granting Nineveh's 'repentance unto life' and on the other hand, the narrow-mindedness of Jonah, in believing that Israel is the only one that can obtain God's mercy. Jonah perhaps was written to counter the exclusivist attitude of Israel. The Israelites believed that the salvation of God is for them alone. But in Jonah we see that God's salvation is universal.

### **3.4 Interpretation of Jonah**

Over the years, the book of Jonah has been differently interpreted. The main event that made the book open to a variety of interpretations is the story of fish that swallowed Jonah, and his survival for three days in the belly of the fish. In the light of this, the book is open to different interpretations which include the following:

#### **Mythical Interpretation**

For people who see the story of Jonah as a myth. It is just a moral fiction intended to teach certain truth in real life situation. In mythical interpretation, the story of Jonah has no valid historical reality. It was just a story intended to teach some moral lessons.

#### **Allegorical Interpretation**

An allegory is a word picture that has a spiritual meaning. For those who held on to this view, the fish is Israel's captivity in Babylon; the vomiting out of Jonah on dry land is Israel's return from captivity.

#### **Historical Interpretation**

The exponents of the historical interpretation believe that the story of Jonah actually happened. That it is based on the fact of the prophet's experience.

### **3.5 The Book of Micah**

In the opinion of some Old Testament scholars, the book of Micah contains one of the best summaries of true religions to be found in the Bible. The book of Micah is the sixth of the twelve Minor Prophets. And its author bore a name which is in itself a confession of faith. The name Micah in Hebrew language probably means 'who is like Yahweh? The prophet Micah was from Moresheth, a village said to be approximately twenty-five mile south west of Jerusalem.

The prophetic ministry of Micah begins with the fall of Samaria at the hands of the Assyrian army in 722B.C. Micah's prophecy looks forward to the destruction of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, which actually took place in 586BC, and even further ahead to the restoration from captivity 539BC.

### **3.6 Authorship and Date of Micah**

The book itself claims to be the work of Micah of Moresheth, a younger contemporary of Isaiah. Some scholars have, however, suggested that only chapter 1:2-2:10 and parts of chapters four and five are from Micah himself. The rest were probably written by some unknown writer. The reason for this is the difference in style of the two sections. However, some other scholars have accepted Micah as the author of the whole book.

### **3.7 The Message of Micah**

At the time Micah was called to preach, Israel and Judah witnessed a terrible socio-political and moral situation. Micah was, however, concerned mainly about the internal situation of Judah. In most areas of life, there was corruption of the highest order. In the view of Micah, the nation had lost her moral integrity; she had become sinful and therefore predisposed to judgment. The message of the prophet was aimed at strengthening the people morally so that they would be saved from the impending doom.

Foremost among the evils seen by Micah was the greed of the nobles showing itself in the attempts to build up large estates by forcibly ejecting smaller property holders (Micah 2:1-2). The judges seem to have been quite willing to arrest their powerful friends in robbing the weak (3:11). Widows and orphans, without powerful defenders, were cruelly robbed and plundered, and even sold into slavery (2:9). Creditors were without mercy, and common people were oppressed by the rich and powerful (3:10). The religious scene was not even spared. The prophets and priests were corrupt, selfish, immoral and greedy. They merely wanted money, ease, cheap popularity and some assurance that they could continue to live in luxury. Micah in reaction to the situation insists on the holiness of Yahweh. To Micah, as long as Yahweh's people do the right, they will enjoy divine favour (3:7) but when they turn against him, they must suffer punishment (1:2-4, 10-10).

### **3.8 The Book of Nahum**

In the first verse of the book, we are informed that the author of the book was Nahum. Little is, however, known about the prophet. He comes from a town called Elkosh. There is no evidence of the exact location of the town. All the possible sites suggested are mere speculations. The prophet Nahum probably lived and prophesied around 664-612BC. This date is established by the mention of the destruction of Thebes which occurred in 664BC (Nah. 3:8) and the major focus of the prophecy, the destruction of Nineveh, which took place in 612BC. If the

content of the book are to be taken seriously, then Nahum must have began his ministry a couple of years before the destruction of Nineveh.

### **3.9 The Message of Nahum**

Before Nahum began his prophetic ministry the Assyrian empire was the world power. And the latter half of the eighth, and into the seventh centuries was a period of Assyrian power and expansion. Under such able leaders as Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727) Shalmaneser V (726-722), Sargon II (721-705), Sennacherib (704-681), and Esarhaddon (680-669) the Assyrian empire reached unprecedented heights of imperial control. In their effort to extend the frontiers of their empire, the Assyrians destroyed many nations and kingdoms. Moreover, their imperial policy of scattering inhabitants of conquered territory into different lands caused a serious commotion in the ancient Near East. The people of Israel (The Northern kingdom) are also a victim of Assyrian imperial policy. The land of Israel was destroyed in 722BC and the inhabitants were taken to different lands. Strange people were, however, used to replace those carried away. The focus of Nahum's prophecy is the judgment of Assyria. Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, will face judgment for oppression, cruelty, idolatry and wickedness. In Nahum, God is not only "slow to anger" (Nah. 1:3) and "a refuge, for those who trust in him" (1:7) but also one who "will not leave the guilty unpunished" (1:3). God's righteous and just kingdom will ultimately triumph, for kingdoms built on wickedness and tyranny must eventually fall, as Assyria did. The prophet also declares the universal sovereignty of God. God is Lord of history and of all nations; this indicates that Yahweh controls the destinies of nations.

### **3.10 The Book of Habakkuk**

Little is known about the prophet. His name occurs only at the beginning of the book. The name 'Habakkuk' may be derived from a Hebrew language meaning "embrace". He was probably from the southern kingdom of Judah. This is perhaps because he was acquainted with the local and political situation in Judah (Hab. 1:3, 4). Some scholars also believed that Habakkuk was probably one of the disciples of Isaiah. He was in all probability a priest (see chapter 3).

### **3.11 Authorship and Date of Composition of Habakkuk**

The book of Habakkuk was probably written at the time the Babylonians emerged on the scene (Hab. 1:6); that is around the seventh or early in the sixth century BC. The mention of the rise of the Chaldeans (1:6) suggests that the book must have been written between 625 and 504BC. However, because of the mention of the numerous conquests of the

Babylonian armies, some scholars believe that the book was written long after the Babylonian exile of 586BC. Whichever be the case, the prophet Habakkuk was probably a contemporary of Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Nahum.

### **3.12 The Message of Habakkuk**

The problem of the prosperity of the ungodly is one that humanity has sought to unravel over the years. Habakkuk too was out to address this problem. In Habakkuk's day, corruption and injustice were the order of the day in Judah, especially Jerusalem. The rich were prospering at the expense of the poor and evil was perpetrated in the name of God. This situation called for a drastic change. The prophet appealed to God in form of complaints (1:2-4). However, the response of God to Habakkuk was shocking. God promised to use the Babylonians as an instrument of judgment against his people. For the prophet, it is like God is using evil to punish evil. How can a holy God use an unholy nation to punish his people?

In spite of Habakkuk's complaint, God seemed to be inactive and unconcerned. However, the prophet later came to the realisation that no matter how difficult conditions might become, he must continue to trust the promises of God and have confidence that the Lord of the earth would do right (3:16-19). To do this, he had to live by faith (Hab. 2:4).

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You are now familiar with the message of the prophets Jonah, Micah, Nahum and Habakkuk. You have also learnt that certain socio-cultural and political factors inspired their messages. For Jonah, it was the hostility between Israel and the Assyrians. For Micah it was the unjust social structure that pervaded the society he operated in. The Assyrian's assault on Israel was also the focal point of Nahum's message while the Babylonian assault on Judah and injustices in the land were the motivating factors of Habakkuk's message.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The prophet Jonah was an 8<sup>th</sup> century BC Israelite prophet. He was sent to preach to the Assyrians. He was reluctant to go because the Assyrians attacked the Israelites. He was, however, taught different lessons through natural phenomena which changed his orientation.

The book of Prophet Micah looks forward to the destruction of Judah, because of their sins. The book also looks ahead to the restoration of Judah after the exile.

The focus of Nahum's prophecy is the judgment of Assyria while the book of prophet Habakkuk addresses the prosperity of the ungodly and the certainty of God's judgment.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- i. Do you believe that nature can teach spiritual lessons? In what ways was Jonah taught obedience and compassion through works of nature?
- ii. What are the similarities between social conditions in Micah's days and ours?
- iii. From Habakkuk's complaint about the prosperity of the ungodly are you satisfied with God's response?

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## **UNIT 4 MINOR PROPHETS III: ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH AND MALACHI**

### **CONTENTS**

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  - 3.8 The Message of Malachi
- 4.0 Conclusion
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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this lecture we shall examine the books of prophets Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. It is pertinent to state here, that of these four prophets, only Zechariah was a pre-exilic prophet. The other three are post-exilic prophets. You will recall that at one time or the other we made reference to the Babylonian captivity. In 586BC, the people of Judah were carried into exile in Babylon. They were however returned to their land around 539BC. The prophets who prophesied before 596BC are called the pre-exilic prophets while those who prophesied after 586BC are called the post-exilic prophets.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- explain the message of prophets Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi
- interpret the book of prophets Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Book of Zephaniah**

Among the Old Testament prophets, Zephaniah was the only one whose lineal genealogy was given in detail. He was perhaps from the royal family. This is because he called himself the grandson of Hezekiah. To some scholars, Zephaniah began his ministry around 621 BC during king Josiah's reign. The abuses and low state of religion described in the book (1:4-6, 3-9, 12; 3:1-3, 7) perhaps confirmed that the prophet must have started his ministry in 621, at the time of King Josiah. The socio-religious scene painted in the book was similar to Josiah's time. It was King Josiah that organized the 622BC reforms in Judah.

#### **3.2 The Message of Zephaniah**

Themes of judgment and of grace predominate in the book. Divine judgment is portrayed through the imagery of the 'Day of the Lord' while divine grace is shown through the themes of remnant and restoration. Zephaniah was aware of the use of the concept of the 'Day of the Lord' by the prophets before him (Amos 5:18-20, 8:3-13, Isaiah 2:6-22). This 'Day of the Lord', is the day when God will vindicate his own honour and appear with judgment against sin, whether among Gentile nation and the Israelites (Zeph. 2:7, 3:19-20). For the prophet, Yahweh, the God of Israel is the universal God. His rule covers all nations (Zeph. 2:4-15). His judgment and mercy extend to all nations (Zeph. 3:8).

#### **3.3 The Book of Haggai**

Not much is known about the prophet beyond what can be deduced from the book itself. He was, however, a contemporary of Zechariah and his prophetic ministry was carried out in Jerusalem, after the Babylonian captivity. Haggai's name is derived from the Hebrew word meaning "feast, festival", a fact that suggests he may have been born on one of the religious holidays of Israel's liturgical calendar. In Ezra 5:1-2, prophet Haggai was reported to have prophesied at the time that Zerubbabel the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, began to reconstruct the Jerusalem temple. His work is dated to the second year of Darius I, 520BC.

#### **3.4 The Message of Haggai**

The reconstruction of the temple is the centre of Haggai message. All his preaching focused on the need for the people of Jerusalem to rise up and rebuild the temple of Solomon which Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed in

586BC. Haggai clearly shows the consequence of not rising up to rebuild the temple (Hagg. 1:6, 11; 2:16-17). When the people give priority to God and his house, they are blessed rather than cursed. The prophet as a way of motivating the people promised that the restored temple would exceed the glory of its predecessor (the Solomonic Temple). The wealth of nations would flow into Jerusalem as a result of the restored temple (Hagg. 2:1-9, 20-22). He also promised Zerubbabel (a Davidic descendent), nothing less than the throne of David (2:23; cf. Det. 22:24).

### **3.5 The Book of Zechariah**

The book of Zechariah is the longest of the books of the Minor Prophets and also, perhaps the most complex. The complexity of the book stems from the fact that it is not easy to determine the date and author of various portions of the book as well as the interpretation of the different segments of the book. In spite of these problems, the book of Zechariah occupies a unique place in the New Testament. This is because Zechariah 9-14, the most frequently cited portion of the Old Testament in the passion narratives (the story of Jesus' suffering in the New Testament is called the passion narratives), the influence of the book on the writer of the New Testament book of Revelation is also evident. The prophet Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai. In the introduction to his book, he was said to be the son of Bereshiah, son of Iddo (Zech. 1:7). The prophetic ministry of Zechariah can be located between 529 BC and 515 BC. He was one of the post-exilic prophets.

### **3.6 The Message of Zechariah**

To understand and appreciate the message of Prophet Zechariah, it is important to consider the historical background from which he operated. The prophet was set against the background of the first generation of returnees from the Babylonia exile. Although, Cyrus the king of Persia had authorized the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of God in 539BC, the returnees found themselves facing external opposition (see Ezra 3:8-4:5, 24; 5:1-6;22). In the light of this, work on the house of God was delayed until he raised two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to motivate the people to resume work on the Temple. The work on the Temple was resumed and the construction was completed in 516BC.

The message of Zechariah can be understood against this background. The prophet Zechariah through the different visions recorded in the book, advocate for zealotness in the temple reconstruction project. He also held out the hope of the divine intervention to create an ideal age.

This is represented by the messianic oracles in chapters 9-14 of the book.

### 3.7 The Book of Malachi

The book of Malachi is the twelfth of the Minor Prophets. In the English translation of the Bible which follows the Greek tradition. Malachi concludes the canon of the Old Testament. The fact that Malachi is the last of the twelve Minor Prophets is likely due to the fact that the prophet was the last to minister.

Little or nothing is known about the prophet Malachi apart from the book that has his name. The name Malachi is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Some scholars, because of this, came to the conclusion that Malachi is not a proper name but simply a noun that is translated “my messenger”. This perhaps might be an indication that the book is really anonymously written. The book is silent about when it was written. However, it is believed that the writer lived at the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah. The book must have been written sometime between 460 and 430 BC, when the Persians were in control of the affairs in the ancient Near East. The Temple had been rebuilt and the people offered daily worship and sacrifices in the Temple. At this time, spiritual life was at the lowest ebb. The priest had become relaxed and unspiritual. Animals that were not fit for sacrifice were being sacrificed on the altar. The people were not paying tithes, and divorce was common. God’s covenant was forgotten and the people questioned whether God was righteous. They asked whether they were really the people whom God had chosen.

### 3.8 The Message of Malachi

The message of Malachi is best understood in the light of the literary device he employed. The question and answer method was used by the prophet to drive home his point. It was the method of teaching by argument. In the text, the Lord charged the people by raising questions on how they have breached the covenant.

1. *Charge:* “I have loved you,” says the Lord.  
*Question:* But you say, “How hast thou loved us”  
*Answer:* “Is not Esau, Jacob’s brother?” says the Lord.  
“Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.”  
(Mal. 1:2,3).
2. *Charge:* “O Priest who despise my name!”  
*Question:* “How have we despised thy name?”  
*Answer:* “By offering polluted bread upon my altar.”  
(Mal. 1, 6,7).

3. *Charge:* "You have wearied the Lord with your words."  
*Question:* Yet you say, "How have we wearied him?"  
*Answer:* By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them."  
(Mal. 2:17).
  
4. *Charge:* "You have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you" says the Lord of hosts.  
*Question:* But you say, "How shall we return?"  
*Answer:* Malachi makes no answer because their question is insincere (Mal. 3:7).
  
5. *Charge:* "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing me."  
*Question:* But you say, "How are we robbing thee?"  
*Answer:* "In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me: the whole nation."  
(Mal. 3:8, 9).
  
6. *Charge:* "Your words have been stout against me." Says the Lord.  
*Question:* Yet you say, "How have we spoken against thee?"  
*Answer:* You have said, "It is vain to serve God. What is the Good of our keeping the charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?" (Mal. 3:13, 14).

At the heart of Malachi's message to Israel stands the covenant. Malachi shows that God still loved Israel, but doubted that Israel loved him, because of the way they had violated his covenant especially through their sins. As the exile proved earlier, covenant violation led to judgment. The prophet therefore warned the people to turn a new leaf or face God's judgment afresh. The prophet did not just warn the people to repent; he also presented a vision of hope for their future.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

You have learnt the different socio-political factors that served as the background for the message of prophets Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Zephaniah was concerned about the coming judgment on the people of Israel. The reconstruction of the Temple destroyed in 586 BC was the concern of Haggai; the same issue also preoccupied the mind of Zechariah while Malachi hoped to motivate the people to turn to God by giving themselves first and all they have for His service.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

The last four prophets, except Zephaniah are post-exilic prophets. That is, they prophesied after they returned from the Babylonian exile. The prophet Zephaniah warned the people of the impending judgment of Yahweh. This is represented as the day of Yahweh: when Israel and nations of the world will be judged.

The reconstruction of the Temple destroyed in 586 BC is the centre of Haggai's message. He motivated the people of Jerusalem to rise up and rebuild the Temple. The prophet Zechariah too was an advocate of the reconstruction of the Temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC.

The book of Malachi is the twelfth of the Minor Prophets. The concern of the writer is to call the people back to Yahweh; by keeping to the terms of the covenant Yahweh made with their forefather.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

- i. Which among the four prophets whose works were examined, spoke a "Message from God" that relate to modern Nigerian society?
- ii. Why do people find it difficult to generally give towards God's works?
- iii. Why is God against divorce according to Malachi?

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

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## **UNIT 5 THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY**

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### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

We have so far examined the prophets and the books of prophets in ancient Israel. We have also done a brief study of the Old Testament prophetic books. This lecture will be the last, and it is very important for us to explore the contemporary relevance of our study. In this lecture, we are going to determine if we can talk of the prophetic ministry in the contemporary world. If we can talk of prophets in the modern scene, we shall examine the role and impact of such individuals in the socio-political and religious scenes.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- explain the relevance of this course to the socio-political and religious life of our nation, Nigeria.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Has Prophecy Ceased?**

In the opinion of many modern scholars, Israelite prophecy underwent a decline and ultimately ceased sometime after the Babylonian exile. This thesis has however been challenged by other scholars. The scholars that believed that prophecy has ceased based their argument on the fact that in some Jewish texts that appeared long after the Babylonian exile, no reference was made to prophecy. It is, however, pertinent to ask whether some people after the exile claimed that God had spoken to them. This is because from the time of the exile to the present day some individuals

have made that claim. The fact that prophecy was in existence even long after the exile cannot be denied. Josephus, a foremost Israelite historian refers to several possible cases of prophecy in the era preceding the destruction of the second Temple. He described figures who predicted Jerusalem's doom before 70AD, that in their behaviour and pronouncement they greatly resemble biblical prophets.

Also, that some people viewed Jesus or John the Baptist as prophets, perhaps imply that they believe in an unbroken chain of prophecy going back to the pre-exilic era. This must have influenced the recognition of the office of the prophet by the early Christian community (see Ephesians 4:11). In the history of the church, prophecy is not however given a prime place. However, with the different revivals in Christianity in different parts of the world, the office of the prophet is now given recognition. In most African Indigenous churches, like Christ Apostolic Church, Celestial Church of Christ and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church among others, the office of the prophet is highly recognized. Moreover, some of the Pentecostal preachers in our land today address themselves as prophets.

You will recall at the beginning of this lecture, that we said prophecy is not just prediction, but proclamation and prediction. In other words, prophecy is actually a combination of preaching and prediction. In the light of this, technically, the pastor can be regarded as the prophet; though one is not relegating the fact that some are specifically called to the prophetic ministry.

### **3.2 Nigeria's Socio-Political Situation**

To appreciate the relevance of the prophetic ministry in contemporary Nigeria, there is a need to discuss briefly the country's socio-political situation. The fact that immorality permeates the Nigeria Society today cannot be doubted. The existence of corruption in various stages of development is well-known. Bribery, corruption, embezzlement of public funds, acts of violence, favouritism, stealing and daylight robbery, oppression and exploitation of the poor, are prevalent in today's Nigeria.

Politically, the situation is worst. Our leaders are corrupt and inept. The religious leaders too are not left out. They are not particular about spirituality but prosperity. They ignore the real issue and pay no attention to the true words of God.

### **3.3 The Relevance of the Prophetic Ministry**

As you can see from the foregoing, Nigeria's Socio-political situation is similar to those in which Israelite prophets functioned. Just like the ancient Israel, Nigeria is in desperate need of "prophets" who will condemn the corruption and evil in high places. These prophets must be spirit-filled and bold. Just like the prophets are watchmen visionaries in ancient Israel, Nigeria is in need of men of integrity and courage, who will speak the truth caring less whose ox is gored. Like the ancient Israelite prophets, Nigeria need men and women whose conviction would be rooted and grounded so deeply that they would be able to maintain a stern, powerful, fearless front in denouncing the evil of the society.

The contemporary Nigerian society requires characters whose exhortations to repentance would address the rich, the political leaders, the judges and leaders to be inspired by the deepest moral earnestness. Men and women who like the ancient Israel prophets will stand for justice. Who will condemn the political, economic, social religious and moral ills of the day? To see the emergence of men and women who will operate like the ancient Israelite prophets, the message of the biblical prophets should be taken seriously. The message of the prophets should come alive in our consciousness. In the light of this I will encourage you to embark on a further study of the ancient Israelites prophets and the relevance of their messages.

### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you learnt that the prophetic ministry has not ceased. This is true especially when viewed from the background of seeing prophecy as a combination of preaching and prediction. In the light of this, technically, the pastor can be regarded as a prophet though one is not relegating the fact that some people are specifically called to the prophetic ministry.

### **5.0 SUMMARY**

Some people believe that prophecy has ceased but it was established that long into post-exilic period, to the time of Jesus and present day prophecy still exists in one form or the other. In the light of the moral and social decadence that permeate the Nigerian society, there is the need today for men and women like the ancient Israelite prophets, who will stand against injustices and moral decadence in our land.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

- i. Can clerics who often criticize the corrupt acts of our leaders, be regarded as prophets?
- ii. Can we call the stargazers who predict the future in our land, prophets?
- iii. Among contemporary prophets can you think of how their messages can be compared with those of biblical prophets?

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