

UNDERSTANDING THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS



When God decided to reveal Himself to us, He did not do it in the form of 28 Fundamental Beliefs – a systematic chain of theological truths, or a recipe for a happy marriage, or a detailed manual on how to know God's will. He revealed Himself in a story. Thus the Bible has a storyline starting from the Garden of Eden and ending in the New Jerusalem. God, who exists in a community as plurality of persons, created mankind in His image to form a community. And when sin thwarted God's original intention (Gen 3), God started a long process of restoration of community. He not only wants to have a personal relationship with each one of us ("Adam, where are you?" Gen 3:9), He also wants to deal with systemic and structural evil in the human society ("I have heard their cry!" Ex 3:7-9) and create a new type of community that His people would model to the world.

The historical books of the Bible tell us the story of God's people in the Old Testament era. Starting with the calling of a man by the name of Abram, whom He not only blessed personally ("I will bless you") but through him ultimately blessed a group of people ("I will make you into a great nation") and who was finally to become a universal blessing for all humanity ("all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-8) God gives His law (*torah*) as a safe guidance for life and the basis of His covenant with His people.

Wisdom literature individualizes the covenant and shows that though generally speaking those who follow God's commands and rules are better off, this does not always work out that way on an individual basis. Seeking wisdom and remaining faithful to God regardless of the circumstances of life is important.

When Israel wants to have a king like the nations around (1 Sam 8:5), a new institution, the monarchy, starts. The king will be the highest political and military authority and inclined to think that he is also the highest religious authority. But a new office takes on a significant prominence now, the office of a prophet who becomes the highest religious authority. The history of Israel will from now on be a history of conflict between the king and the prophet (Saul-Samuel; David-Nathan; Ahab-Elijah; Hezekiah-Isaiah; Zedekiah-Jeremiah; Jeroboam II-Amos, Hosea, etc.)

We will not understand the role and the message of the prophetic books if we overlook this basic historic fact. This is also reflected in the fact that in the Hebrew canon the prophetic books are divided into the former prophets (Joshua, Judges; 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings) and the latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve "minor prophets").

The Christian canon has 17 prophetic books (Is, Jer, Ez, Dan + 12 minor prophets). The distinction between major and minor prophets is based on length and not on significance and the sequence of the books is largely determined by length and chronology (both major and minor prophets).

The later writing prophets continue with powerful ministry of word and deed the tradition of earlier non-writing prophets (Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha). They also use prophetic oracles and acted parables to supplement their ministry.

The writing prophets can best be divided into:

Pre-exilic (Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah)

Exilic (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel)

Post-exilic (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

[The prophet Joel does not have enough information to date him reliably; however his position in the Hebrew canon suggests pre-exilic dating.]

The book of Daniel, though classified among the Minor Prophets in our English Bible is found among the "writings" in the Hebrew canon. Daniel's ministry in Babylon recalls Joseph's role in Egypt and demonstrates the triumph of the kingdom of God over the kingdoms of this world. This theme will be further developed in the New Testament. It is an apocalyptic book, so it uses various apocalyptic symbols to proclaim the prophetic message about the triumph of God's kingdom and a general resurrection at the end of history. The apocalyptic nature of the book is similar to Zechariah and the NT book of Revelation.

The prophetic rebukes of Israel are based on the Sinai covenant and especially criticize Israel's idolatry and failure to respect the principles of social justice as amply found in the Torah. The prophetic books record warnings of coming judgment but they also contain prophecies of restoration after the judgment: God will pardon His repentant people (Hos 2; Jer 31:18-20), the two kingdoms reunited in a purified land (Jer 30:1-11; Ez 37:15-23; 48:1-29) and enabled to obey God in a new way (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:16-21; Zeph 3:9-13); of Jerusalem and the temple rebuilt (Is 54; Jer 33:1-13; Ezek 40-43) and God dwelling once again in the temple (Ezek 43:1-4; 48:30-35), of a king from David's line who will rule the people justly (Hos 3:5; Is 11:1-9; Mic 5:1-5; Jer 23:1-6; Ezek 37:24-28), of the nations coming to Zion to learn the ways of Israel's God (Is 2:1-4; Jer 3:17); and ultimately of a restored creation, as in Ezekiel's vision of a river flowing from the temple to revive the waters of the Dead Sea (47:1-12), or Isaiah's vision of a new heaven and new earth (Is 65:17-25). Israel's restoration is described in resurrection language (Ezek 37:1-14; Hos 6:1-3). Israel's restoration is seen as part of a larger picture, the renewing of creation and the blessing of the nations, in fulfillment of God's purposes in calling Abraham.

It is clear that the events after the return from Babylonian exile, as described in Ezra and Nehemiah fell well short of the hopes expressed by the restoration prophecies.

Each of the post-exilic prophetic books concludes with passages which in different ways restate or develop the earlier prophecies of restoration (Hag 2:20-23; Zech 8; 12-14; Mal 4), indicating that a complete fulfillment is still awaited.

Ezekiel 47-48 speaks of all twelve tribes dwelling in the land again, the new "land of Israel" will be more extensive than even under David and Solomon (47:13-20); the new "tribal territories" consists of twelve strips of land running from east to west, with thirteenth reserved for the Levites and the temple; and no exact boundaries specified (48:1-29). This is Ezekiel's way of saying that Israel has a future that will be as glorious as anything from Israel's past, but will also be qualitatively different from anything Israel has experienced so far.

The prophets predicted the coming of the Day of the Lord. Malachi (3-4) looks forward to a coming purification of the temple by the Lord Himself; Jeremiah (31) to a new covenant with God's people; Ezekiel (36) to a new heart and spirit in Israel; Joel (2) to a new age in which the Holy Spirit is poured out upon all God's people and Isaiah (2; 25; 65-66) to a glorious material world, an eschatological banquet and ultimately new heavens and new earth. The end of historical narrative finds Israel, while restored to her land, still subject to foreign nations and with a rebuilt temple whose grandeur pales in comparison with the Solomon's temple (Hag 2:3).

The Old Testament provides an account of "fair beginnings and foul ending" (D.J.A. Clines) hardly conducive to faith building. Thus Muslims establish their faith on updating the OT on basis of the Quran, Judaism on updating it with Talmud and Christianity updates it with the New Testament. The understanding of prophetic books is crucial for seeing how the New Testament writers understand and apply the Old Testament promises and how the Bible storyline moves forward. Proper understanding of the Old Testament prophecies is crucial for appreciating the New Testament worldview and appreciating the overall story of the Bible.

[Daniel Duda, Education Director, Trans-European Division of Seventh-day Adventists]