

THE PROPHETIC LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

Our Old Testament contains a number of books that we classify as prophetic literature. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are called the *Major Prophets* because the books that bear their names are longer than the books of Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (called the *Minor Prophets*, primarily because their length is shorter than the Major Prophets).

Daniel is not included among the prophets in the second section of the Hebrew Bible. That book is placed in the third section of the canon, the Holy Writings (*Hagiographa*). Daniel is considered a sage in Jewish tradition, which helps to explain the book's place in the third section, composed primarily of books of wisdom.

PROPHETS IN ISRAEL

In the Bible, non-Israelite prophets are acknowledged (Numbers 22:2), but the prophetic tradition in Israel was extraordinary in the numbers and fervor of the prophets. Before the establishment of the monarchy, tradition recalls Abraham, Aaron, Miriam, Deborah, and Moses as prophets. Six important figures appeared from the eleventh to the ninth centuries: Samuel, Nathan, Ahijah, Elijah, Micaiah, and Elisha. To all of them the term *prophet* was applied. These are the “non-literary” prophets. They were endowed with prophetic and sometimes miraculous powers. Sometimes groups of persons were associated with a major prophet, such as Elisha.

The great age of prophecy was during the Divided Kingdom period and into the

Exile. About 750 B.C., the earliest “literary prophet,” Amos, appeared. In the book that bears his name we have a collection of his oracles, visions, and some biographical information. Similar materials are found in the other writing prophets. We often speak of the *preexilic prophets*—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Jeremiah, and perhaps Habakkuk and Obadiah. The dating of some of the prophets is uncertain. Jonah is more a story about a prophet than a collection of prophetic oracles. The story is set in the preexilic period.

The Old Testament prophets warned Israel and Judah of a national disaster that would come upon them from the Lord because of religious corruption and social injustice. They spoke out against kings, priests, and people as spokespersons for the Lord. The key phrase that introduces their oracles again and again is, “Thus says the LORD.”

Before Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., Amos and Hosea had prophesied there. The remainder of the literary prophets spoke to the kingdom of Judah. The oracles of the preexilic prophets were carried to Babylon by devout disciples. There they played an important role in the religious reforms of the people before the return.

All of Ezekiel and the last half of Isaiah encouraged the Jews in exile. Obadiah and possibly Daniel are also set in this period. They gave hope of restoration. After the return to Jerusalem and until the time of Ezra (about 430 B.C.), Zechariah, Haggai, Joel, and Malachi prophesied. They are called the *postexilic prophets*. According to Jewish tradition, the prophetic spirit left Israel in the time of Ezra.

THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE

Prophets were spokespersons for God. They were “forthtellers” more than “foretellers.” Their predictions usually concern the *day of the Lord*, an approaching day of destruction, due to the sin and rebellion of the people. But later generations could often see how the words of the prophets spoke to their times and to the future. This characteristic of prophecy is in line with the recognition that the word of God is living and active.

The influence of the prophets grew after the destruction of Jerusalem when the doom they had foretold came about. The prophets inspired the religious concept of ethical monotheism. This is the concept of God as the only ruler of the universe.

The biblical prophets emphasized the relationship between God and Israel through the covenant. They were well

ahead of their time in social, moral, and humanitarian issues. They taught that religious ritual without a genuine concern for the welfare of the weaker members of society was unacceptable before God. This idea prepared for the survival of the Jewish religion when the Temple was destroyed.

While they described the suffering that would come as the result of transgression, the prophets also planted the idea that a remnant would return. This idea gave rise to the messianic hopes of postexilic times. Even in the postexilic era, the prophets continued to look forward to a bright future for God’s people. Thus Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, closes with the promise: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes” (4:5). John the Baptist was the fulfillment of that prophecy (Matthew 11:11-15).