

**A  
FRIENDLY  
GUIDE TO**

THE  
PROPHETS

**BRIAN  
BOYLE**

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# Getting Started

**T**he *Introduction* and *Contents* will give the reader an outline of the scope and purpose of this book. I would like to make some general comments and suggestions to the reader as they take up this book on the fascinating phenomenon of prophecy in ancient Israel.

The translation used is the *NRSV* (New Revised Standard Version) is one of the more accessible and accurate translations of the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures. The reader is encouraged to have the *NRSV* beside them, to read the prophetic passages and texts themselves as they read the chapters of this book. Sometimes a prophetic text is quoted in the book; at other times a reference to a text is given.

The term *Israel* is used in two senses throughout the book. The word is used as a general descriptor for the community addressed by the prophets (*Amos* 4:12). In this

sense the word is used in a religious sense, identifying a group distinguished from other countries in the ANE (Ancient Near East) not only by political boundaries but more importantly by religious history and affiliation. The word *Israel* is also used in the more technical sense as the name of the northern kingdom (with its capital Samaria), the venue of the prophetic ministries of *Amos* and *Hosea*, as opposed to the southern kingdom or kingdom of *Judah* (with its capital *Jerusalem*).

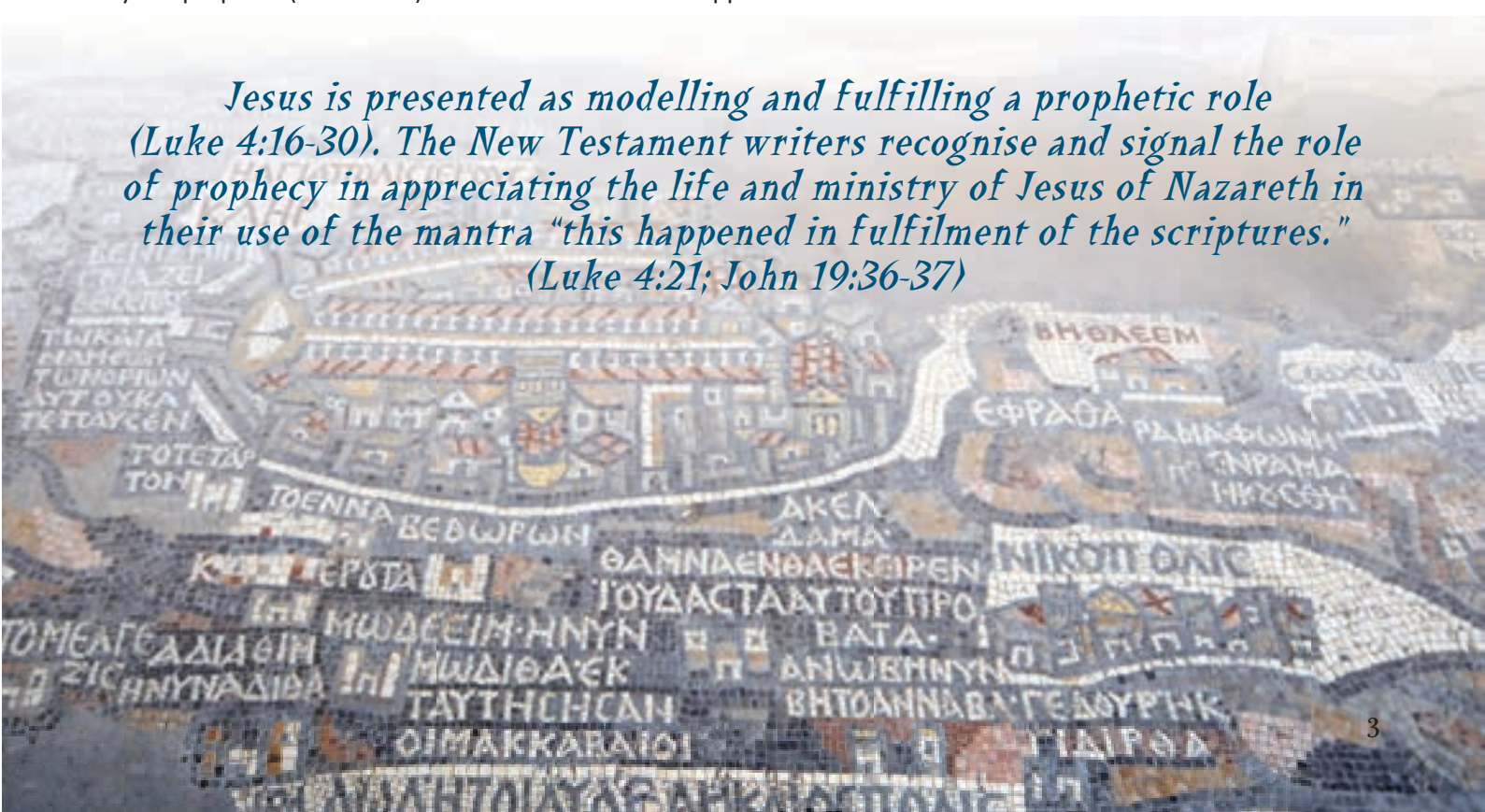
In the Christian tradition prophecy represents one of the great bridges between the Old Testament and the New Testament. *Jesus* is presented as modelling and fulfilling a prophetic role (*Luke* 4:16-30). The New Testament writers recognise and signal the role of prophecy in appreciating the life and ministry of *Jesus of Nazareth* in their use of the mantra “this happened in fulfilment

of the scriptures” (*Luke* 4:21; *John* 19:36-37). The prophetic literature appears in both the Hebrew canon and the Christian canon as inspired literature, as sacred to both monotheistic faiths. Use is made of BCE in this book to indicate dates in recognition of the pivotal interpretive role prophecy played in the formation of both the Hebrew and Christian canons.

The prophetic literature in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures is inspired literature. It is the literary product of both human and divine authors. It has a character, then, which distinguishes it from comparative prophetic literature of other ANE nations. The Nicene Creed identifies this key character and authorship: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life ... who has spoken through the prophets.”

*Brian Boyle*

*Jesus is presented as modelling and fulfilling a prophetic role (Luke 4:16-30). The New Testament writers recognise and signal the role of prophecy in appreciating the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in their use of the mantra “this happened in fulfilment of the scriptures.” (Luke 4:21; John 19:36-37)*







# Introduction



The background of the slide is an illuminated manuscript page. At the top is a mosaic of a dragon or serpent. Below it, three prophets are depicted standing under Gothic arches. The prophet on the left is wearing a purple robe and holding a scroll. The prophet in the middle is wearing a brown robe and holding a scroll. The prophet on the right is wearing a blue robe and holding a scroll. Below the prophets are three labels: 'Izaiáš', 'Jeremiáš', and 'Ezechiel'.

*Prophecy was not about foretelling the future.  
The prophets were more interested in the present,  
in changing people's behaviour and perceptions "now",  
than in predicting the future.*

Izaiáš

Jeremiáš

Ezechiel





We can begin by asking some fundamental questions: why read the prophets of ancient Israel today? What relevance do they have for us? What can we learn from them? The purpose of this book is to offer the general reader an introduction to the fascinating phenomenon of prophecy in Israel, as we find it in the Bible. The prophetic movement spanned approximately three hundred years, between the eighth and fifth centuries before Christ. It had a vital and enduring impact on Israel's religion and faith. We read the prophets today for basically three reasons: the prophets were fascinating and engaging individuals themselves; the world they lived and ministered in, with all its social, political and religious aspects, was a world rather similar to our own; and, finally, the prophets reveal a great deal to us about relationship with God and with each other. The prophets offer us an enduring legacy. This book aims to demonstrate their relevance and to encourage the general reader to pick up something of the fire of these extraordinary people by reading the texts.

While the prophetic movement in Israel had many features common to each of the prophets contained in the canon of scripture, prophecy was also a varied phenomenon. Each prophet, for example, needs to be situated within his specific religious, social and political context to understand his ministry and preaching. No two prophets were necessarily the same. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries, active at the time of the first siege of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, but their messages were somewhat different. Only some of the principal

prophets of Israel are presented here (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and again only selections from their preaching and oracles are examined here. The purpose of the book is to introduce the reader to the phenomenon of prophecy by examining some of its key proponents. This book is intended to be a sampler, to encourage the reader to read more of the prophetic texts.

It is probably easier to say what prophecy in Israel was not, rather than to say positively what this varied and fascinating phenomenon was. Further, prophecy was not anti-religion. Many of the great prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) were priests themselves. The prophets did not set about destroying Israel's religious cult; rather, their purpose was to bring it back to its authentic holiness, to enable the cult to rediscover its capacity to make people holy. Prophecy and religion went hand in hand. Certainly, the prophets found themselves in conflict with religious institutions as they claimed a direct authority from God for their preaching (Amos 7:10-17) rather than an authority mediated through the cult. Stated positively, the prophets were first and foremost *intercessors* between God and the community, messengers of the Lord. The greatest, and most successful, of all intercessors was Moses (*Deuteronomy* 34:10-12). All prophets are presented as modelled on Moses, particularly in the call narratives of the prophets (*Isaiah* 6:1-13; *Jeremiah* 1:4-19). The prophets were inspired, engaging, charismatic individuals whose message to ancient Israel is still relevant and inspiring for contemporary readers and believers.

left: fresco of prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel



## Israel's first kings

When the twelve tribes eventually settled in Palestine (the promised land) after the Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses and the forty years wandering in the Sinai desert, the people quickly became aware that their political survival in the new land depended on unity among themselves and strong leadership. The tribes were faced by powerful kingdoms on the Mediterranean seaboard and in the areas east of the Jordan river. In seeking unity and leadership the tribes eventually opted for the form of government common in the Ancient Near East: monarchy. The first king of the united Israel was **Saul** (1020-1000 BCE), from the tribe of Benjamin, the weakest of the tribes. This was a strategic choice: a king from the smallest tribe posed no threat to the stronger tribes. Saul was a charismatic leader and a great military general. Saul, however, fell out of favour with God and was eventually replaced as king by **David** (1000-961 BCE), but only after a protracted and bitter civil war. David was the archetypal king in Israel. He enjoyed God's favour and support (see *2 Samuel* 7). David was succeeded as king by his son **Solomon** (961-922 BCE), famous for his wisdom and the sophistication of his court. The empire of David and Solomon represented the highpoint of Israel's military power in the region. With the death of Solomon, however, and the succession of his son Rehoboam (922-915 BCE) the great Davidic empire divided into two separate kingdoms: the kingdom of Israel (or the northern kingdom) with its capital Samaria and the kingdom of Judah (or southern

kingdom) with its capital Jerusalem. While related in origins the two kingdoms had a tense rivalry. The kingdom of Israel lasted until 722 BCE when it was absorbed into the Assyrian empire as provinces and ceased to exist as a political entity. The kingdom of Judah lasted until



King David

587 BCE when it was conquered by the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem was burnt, the Temple destroyed, and the last Davidic king was taken into exile in Babylon. The southern kingdom too ceased to exist as a political entity.

## Prophets and kings

It is important to sketch out this brief history of monarchy in Israel to better understand the emergence of the prophetic movement since the prophets were in frequent confrontation with the kings. Their relationship was often tense and abrasive. Prophecy was, by its very nature, a charismatic phenomenon. It was not institutional and did not operate on a succession basis, but derived its authority

from the prophet's call by God and not from political power. Monarchy, on the other hand, was an institution sanctioned by God and based on power and succession. Such forces inevitably were in conflict. Prophets were not opposed to monarchy as such. Rather, the prophets tended to criticise the kings for their failure to establish justice and righteousness in the kingdom, seen as the primary duty of kings (see *Jeremiah* 22:13-19), while the kings tended to see prophets as trouble-makers (see *1 Kings* 18:16-19). This fraught relationship between prophet and king provided much of the energy for prophetic activity. To understand the prophetic movement and to understand each prophet we need to see the tense relationship between prophecy and monarchy in general and the relationship between an individual prophet and king in particular at any given time.

## The emergence of prophecy

Prophecy in Israel did not simply come from nowhere or fall down from heaven. It emerged at a particular time in history and endured centre stage for several centuries because two key factors came together powerfully in Israel's history: the significant socio-economic change brought about by the shift from an agricultural and subsistence based economy to a more commercial and mercantile economy and the consequent impact on a poor population; and secondly, the aggressive expansion into Israel's territory by its superpower neighbours in the north. We can briefly examine each of these two key factors.



### KINGS OF THE UNITED ISRAEL

Saul 1020-1000 BCE (approx.)

David 1000-961 BCE (approx.)

Solomon 961-922 BCE (approx.)

Division of the kingdom with the death of Solomon

KINGDOM OF ISRAEL (922-722/721 BCE) Northern Kingdom (Samaria)		PROPHETS	KINGDOM OF JUDAH (922-587 BCE) Southern Kingdom (Jerusalem)	
Jeroboam I	922-901		Rehoboam	922-915
Omri	876-869		Jehoshaphat	873-849
Ahab	869-850	Elijah	Joash	837-800
Jehoram	849-842	Elisha	Amaziah	800-783
Jehu	842-815			
Jeroboam II	786-746	Amos	Uzziah	783-742
		Hosea		
Hoshea	732-724	Isaiah	Ahaz	732-715
		Micah		

### Fall of the Kingdom of Israel and its incorporation into the Assyrian empire 722/721 BCE.

	Isaiah	Hezekiah	715-686
		Manasseh	686-642
	Zephaniah	Jehoshaphat	873-849
	Jeremiah	Josiah	640-609
	Nahum	Jehoahaz	609
	Habakkuk	Jehoiakim	609-598
		Jehoiachin	597
	Ezekiel	Zedekiah	597-587

First Babylonian siege of Jerusalem 597 BCE

Second Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, capture and destruction of the city 588-587 BCE

Babylonian exile 587/6-539 BCE

left: timeline of reigns of kings and key prophets



## Social and economic changes

The changes in the socio-economic profile of the state were largely set in train by the policies of Solomon and his successors. While some benefited from the new wealth, many did not. These changes effectively introduced a structural violence into society: a new moneyed class able to use the laws of credit and property inheritance to their financial interest, and a new underclass who were ruthlessly exploited and

denied their rights in credit arrangements, property ownership and inheritance, and representation before the law. Effectively, there was no solidarity. The poor became chattel, to be bought and sold (see *Amos* 2:6-8). We can take a good example from Israel's history of how monarchy and prophecy clashed in the emergence of this new society. Jeroboam II was king in Israel (northern kingdom) for some forty years (786-746 BCE). His counterpart in Judah (southern kingdom) was Uzziah who also reigned for these forty years (783-742 BCE).

For both kingdoms these were times of ostensible wealth, security and peace. However, as the prophet **Amos** persistently pointed out: this wealth was being achieved at considerable social cost to a hidden and voiceless underclass. The question was: at what social cost has this prosperity been achieved? Amos, as God's champion, spoke up for the poor. **Hosea**, as his contemporary, had a similar message. God does indeed have favourites and is on the side of the poor.







## *Dealing with superpowers*

**T**he second key factor for the emergence of the prophetic movement in Israel in the eighth century was the considerable political instability brought about by the aggressive expansionist policies of the Assyrian empire to the north firstly and then by the Babylonian empire as their successors. Over several hundred years from the times of **Amos** and **Hosea** to the times of **Jeremiah** and **Ezekiel** the small petty kingdoms of Israel and Judah endured persistent political and strategic instability at the hands of their superpower neighbours. The only way to survive was to enter into strategic alliance as a vassal state. The prophets were not opposed to the necessity of such alliance making; rather, their concern was that God was being persistently left out of the equation. Prophets like Amos and Hosea were making the point that God as the sovereign lord of history was at work in history to bring about the divine purposes. The appearance of the Assyrians at the city gates was not just simply a strategic occurrence; God had brought the Assyrians to the gates as the instruments of divine justice! Again, we can take an example from Israel's history to illustrate this key factor facilitating the rise of prophecy. **Isaiah** was prophet in Jerusalem during the reigns of Ahaz (732-715 BCE) and Hezekiah (715-686 BCE) at a time when Assyria was menacing the kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom was absorbed into the Assyrian empire at this time (722 BCE). Isaiah urged Ahaz to have faith in God's promises (see *Isaiah* 7:1-9) when his kingdom

was under threat. Ahaz preferred to hedge his bets. Isaiah was inviting him to carefully discern the divine purposes in these threatened times. Similarly, a century later, Jeremiah urged the last Davidic king in Judah, Zedekiah (597-587 BCE), to listen to the voice of the Lord in dire times of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem

justice in the kingdom, especially for the poor. Thirdly, the prophets often criticised the official religious cult as being an obstacle to faith rather than promoting faith. The prophets were not anti-religion or anti-cult but rather critical of the compromises cult had made to gain power and wealth. Amos was savage in his

*Prophecy then emerged in times of political uncertainty as a clear and alternate voice to military power.*

and have faith (see *Jeremiah* 38:14-26). However, political expediency or cowardice prevailed and the city was destroyed (587-586 BCE). Prophecy then emerged in times of political uncertainty as a clear and alternate voice to military power.

## *The message of the prophets*

**T**he message of the prophets could be summarised under several key points. Firstly, given the socio-economic changes to Israelite society and the emergence of the new rich commercial class, there was no sense of solidarity with the marginalised. The new society had created a vast number of hidden poor who had no voice. These persons were being ignored. Secondly, the kings of Israel and Judah relied unduly on political alliances and strategic arrangements to survive politically. The prophets challenged the kings to have faith in God as the lord of history. Further, these same kings were failing in their essential duty of establishing

criticism of the cult of his day (*Amos* 4:4-5). We could say then that the prophets offered a complete challenge to their societies: political, social and religious aspects. However, they were not revolutionaries or social reformers. The prophet's task was to see clearly (from God's perspective) what needed to be done; they left the task of renewal or reform to others. Prophets were involved in the present, rather than the future. They were more interested in bringing God's word to their contemporaries than in predicting the future. They wanted people to see what was really going on, beyond surface appearances. For the prophets a people that has no idea of its present has no future. Hosea expressed the matter well: "a people without understanding comes to ruin" (4:14).



## CHAPTER ONE

# Israel's Prophets

### *Who were the prophets?*

In considering the question, who were the prophets in Israel, we could make several key general statements, before looking at the specific features that characterised the prophet. The phenomenon of prophecy emerged in Israel around the eighth century before Christ with the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and remained a potent force in Israel's life well into the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century and afterwards. Prophecy then was a key phenomenon in Israel's life over several centuries. We also note that prophecy was directly related to the institution of monarchy. The prophets tended to be trenchant critics of the kings mainly because of the failure of these rulers to bring about social justice in society. While prophets were respected, or at least tolerated, the relationship between prophets and kings was usually a tense one.

The prophets were divinely in-

spired in their messages. Kings could not claim the same divine inspiration. The problem with prophecy was that

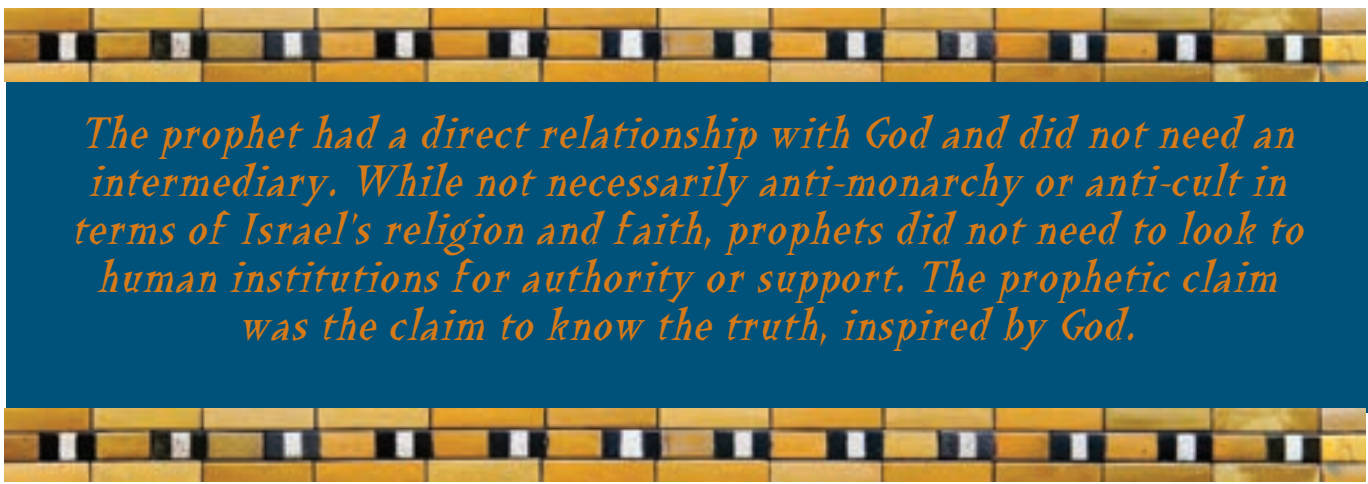
*Surely  
the Lord God does  
nothing, without  
revealing his secret to  
his servants the prophets.  
The lion has roared;  
who will not fear?  
The Lord God has  
spoken; who can but  
prophesy?*

*Amos 3: 7-8*

prophets did not claim or need the authority of any human institution, whether monarchy or religious cult, to validate their message. The proph-

et had a direct relationship with God and did not need an intermediary. While not necessarily anti-monarchy or anti-cult in terms of Israel's religion and faith, prophets did not need to look to human institutions for authority or support. The prophetic claim was the claim to know the truth, inspired by God. While the prophet was sure of the source or origin of his inspiration and (generally) sure of his message, the problem for the prophet was to convince his target audience that his was indeed an authentic message from the Lord. Prophecy as a charismatic phenomenon oftentimes found itself in conflict with institutional authority, whether political or religious, precisely because its claim to the truth lay outside the validating processes of human authority.

So, who were these fascinating individuals, the prophets of Israel, and how could we begin to outline the key and essential features which marked this person as "a prophet". We could say a prophet in Israel was a person characterised by the following features:



*The prophet had a direct relationship with God and did not need an intermediary. While not necessarily anti-monarchy or anti-cult in terms of Israel's religion and faith, prophets did not need to look to human institutions for authority or support. The prophetic claim was the claim to know the truth, inspired by God.*



## Features of a prophet

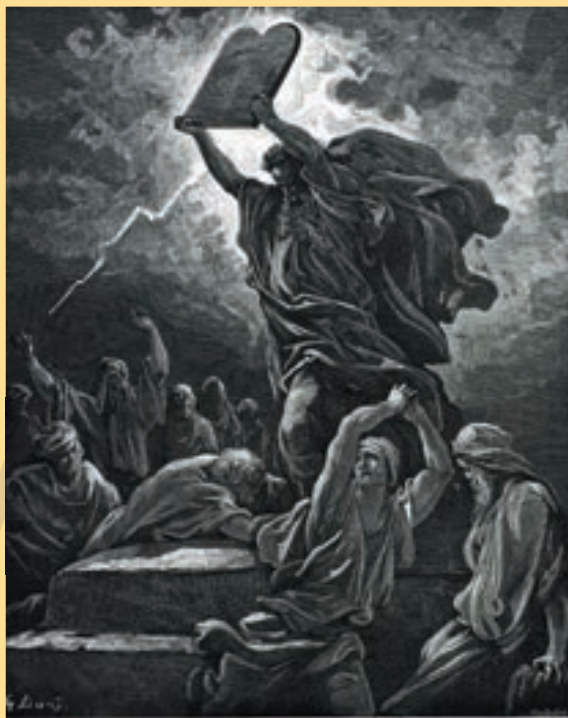
☞ **SOMEONE WHO WAS CALLED AND COMMISSIONED BY GOD.** This divine commissioning was a basic sign of authenticity. We find several call narratives in the prophetic books (*Jeremiah 1, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1-3*). The call narrative validated the community's belief that this person was called by God. The prophet is a person who has received and delivered a message from the Lord.

☞ **THE PROPHET WAS MODELLED AFTER THE ROLE OF MOSES.** In the *Book of Deuteronomy* there are two key passages (18:15; 34:10-12) which speak of the unique position and authority of Moses. He is presented as the archetypal prophet. All prophets must be modelled after Moses.

☞ **LIKE MOSES, THE PROPHET WAS FUNDAMENTALLY AN INTERCESSOR.** The key role or task of Moses as described in the *Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy* was to be an intercessor before God on behalf of the people. Moses was a very successful intercessor. This same task of intercession was a key one for the prophets (*Jeremiah 42:1-6*).

☞ **THE PROPHETS WERE PERSONS OF A HEART-FELT TRUST IN THE LORD AND PERSONS OF MORAL-EARNESTNESS (MCKANE).** The prophets were persons who had a strong, personal relationship with the Lord, persons whom, in our culture, we might describe as saints. Trust and fidelity were key in this relationship. They were also persons of a finely-tuned conscience, of moral sensibility. They clearly identified right from wrong (in a society which tended to cloud or merge these distinctions) and had a passion for justice.

☞ **THE PROPHETS WERE INSPIRED AND CHARISMATIC INDIVIDUALS.** Because their authority came directly from their personal relationship with God, the prophets had no need for the validation or approval of human authority. Indeed, true prophets oftentimes found themselves in conflict with hereditary monarchy and religious cult. Prophets were exceptional individuals.



☞ **EVERY PROPHET CAME FROM A SPECIFIC SOCIAL AND GEO-POLITICAL CONTEXT.** While prophecy had an identifiable form and characteristics, there was no such thing as one size fits all. Each prophet needs to be situated and read within the particular circumstances of his ministry, the prevailing social and religious issues of the time, and the wider geo-political context of the Ancient Near East. To give one illustration: Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries (whether they met or knew each other is another interesting question) and both were prophets at the time of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian armies in 587 BCE and the subsequent exile. The nature of their

message and the immediate circumstances which shaped their respective ministries, however, were not necessarily the same.

☞ **PROPHETS WERE CONCERNED WITH EXHORTATION, RATHER THAN PREDICTION, WITH THE PRESENT, RATHER THAN THE FUTURE.** Prophecy was not about foretelling the future. Some prophets did engage in foretelling the future, with varied success.

Prophets were more interested in exhorting their audience to a change of heart and a change of lifestyle now rather than predicting the future. Prophets were focussed on the present, rather than the future.

☞ **PROPHETS WERE PERSONS OF VITAL, EMOTIONAL PREACHING (BLENKINSOPP).** Prophecy involved public performance. The prophet was required to speak and to act in public. Prophecy was not for the faint hearted or the introverted. The prophet had to deliver his message or act out a pantomime in a public square or at the city gate. The prophet, then, had to convince his target audience of the authenticity of his message and the need for them to act on that message. Prophets had to be good salesmen!

☞ **PROPHETS WERE PREACHERS OF REPENTANCE.** Prophecy worked on the basis that the prophet had an authentic insight into the true nature of his own society. The prophet's task was to expose the (hidden) underbelly of his society, the ways in which prosperity and peace may have been achieved at the social cost of poorer members of society. The prophet was a person with a keen vision, who could see things as they really were. His task was to call people to repentance. Outward prosperity and wealth were not true indicators of divine favour nor indicators that everything was well with society.