

Theology essays | old testament



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Did the prophets of the Old Testament predict the future, or did they speak to change to way people were behaving? In essence, were they “ foretellers” or “ forthtellers”?

Introduction

The Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament recounts the history, and specifically the religious history of Israel, from the creation to a few hundred years before the birth of Christ. The Old Testament tells the story of the people of Israel and their relationship with God or Yaweh. It tells how Israel sinned against the God who had given her all that she had because the people were unable to keep to their covenant with God (Lemche, 1995). Within the Old Testament the Prophetic writings either address the specific historical conditions in Israel or they refer to social conditions. This paper will examine the books of the Prophet Amos and of the Prophet Isaiah to assess whether the prophets were foretellers or forthtellers. The paper will begin with a brief sketch of the historical background followed by an explanation of terms with reference to Amos and Isaiah.

Prophets, Foretellers and Forthtellers.

The writings attributed to the prophets Amos and Isaiah date from around the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. They are two of the later prophets and they spoke against the backdrop of the changing political scene which resulted in the exile of Israel, the northern kingdom, after the capture of Samaria in 721 BCE and then to the exile of Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE (Clines, 1990). The central message of these prophets is to do with the exile, either warning of its coming or reflecting on its meaning and calling for the people to repent in order that God might change

his mind. Scholars are of the opinion that the books have been subject to later editing, what is known as redaction, the imposition of something that happened in a different context. It is for this reason that the texts, while having a historical backdrop, and giving some historical facts, should not be regarded as a straightforward historical record. Rather they are a record of God's dealing with his people.

Unlike earlier prophets, these writings say far less about the prophets and more about the words of God that they give and receive (Whybray, 1993). The word prophet is generally accepted to have come from the Hebrew word 'nabi' which means to speak or to utter words. The biblical usage of the word has meant that it has come to be associated with someone who is the *interpreter and mouthpiece of God*. This is made clear in the opening verses of the Book of Amos, a shepherd of Tekoa.

The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up (Amos. 1: 2 NRSV).

In the above verse Amos describes the way in which the Lord speaks through him and verse three then begins with *Thus says the Lord*. First Isaiah begins in much the same way:

Hear o heavens, and listen, o earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me (Isaiah, 1: 2 NRSV).

Here Isaiah is literally proclaiming himself as the mouth piece of the Lord. The word 'nabi' expresses a function, it is what the prophet does, other

words are used to denote what the prophet is, an oracle or a man of vision. Isaiah is known as a major prophet because of the length of the book and Amos a minor prophet because his writings are much shorter. The prophets then, were divine messengers who addressed the people of God. In most cases the messages were not asked for Amos chapter seven tells how God put Amos where he was:

.. and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, " Go, prophesy to my people Israel " (Amos, 7: 15).

The book of Amos begins by introducing the prophet as a shepherd and then goes straight into the message from God as in verse two. Isaiah also begins by introducing the prophet and then proceeds to God's word to the people. Some prophets were sons of prophets and some belonged to a community of prophets under a leader, some were solitary like Amos who did not really count himself a prophet,

Then Amos answered Amaziah, " I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son...and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, " Go, prophesy to my people Israel (Amos, 7: 14-15).

Both Amos and Isaiah spoke out against social injustice and the ways in which the rich people cheated those who were poor. The prophet Amos spoke out against the idolatry of the people, who still strayed after the golden calf idol which had been set up by King Jeroboam the first when the nation was first split into two kingdoms. Amos spoke in the time of Jeroboam the second when Israel was enjoying a time of prosperity (Clines, 1990).

Amos spoke out against the religious and social corruption that he saw

around him. He spoke of Israel's guilt and of their forthcoming punishment in chapter three:

Hear this that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known, of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities (Amos 3: 1-2).

Isaiah wrote in the eighth century BCE, almost two hundred years before the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon (Clines, 1990). He spoke to the people of Judah, and warned them of God's displeasure. They had become complacent and tolerated all kinds of social injustice. When Isaiah wrote the people were reaching the point of no return because of their rejection of God and their constant refusal to give up their corrupt religious practices and their oppression of the poor. Thus, in the opening chapter Isaiah tells the people:

When you stretch out your hands, I will turn my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers I shall not listen; your hands are full of blood. Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isaiah, 1: 15 and 17).

The words of the prophets can be read at a number of levels. They were forthtellers in that they spoke out against injustice and called the people back to God. They were foretellers in that they warned of the judgement and punishment to come if the people continued in their idolatry and their unjust practices. The most famous verse of this nature is to be found in the book of the prophet Amos chapter five:

Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5: 23-24).

Amos is speaking out against the social injustices of his time and saying that God's command was for the people to be just and righteous. It was a verse used by Martin Luther King when he spoke out against the racial injustices in America and headed Black people's struggle for civil rights in the 1960s.

Isaiah also spoke out against injustice and makes use of the image of a vineyard where grapes are pressed, the injustices committed against the people, are, in God's eyes, akin to pressing their faces in the same way that grapes are pressed. Isaiah says in chapter 5:

But the Lord of Hosts is exalted by justice, and the holy God shows himself holy by righteousness (Isaiah, 5: 16)

In this way the prophets were forthtellers because the word means to speak forth, or speak out against the wrong that people were doing and to tell them that what God required of them was to act justly and in this way they could achieve righteousness. The people had forsaken God's Holy Law which had been given to them by Moses and the prophets were called by God to draw the people back. When they were not being idolatrous the people were indulging in empty religious ritual. Amos tells the people how displeased God is with their religious 'nodding':

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I taken no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them (Amos, 5: 21-22).

Amos speaks out against the people's religious practices and tells them it is not religion that God wants from them, but justice. Whenever the prophet speaks forth and tells of God's displeasure he also later reminds them of God's loving and forgiving nature. Although the prophets forthtell God's judgement on an unrepentant people, they also fortell, or speak of God's future blessings if the people mend their ways. Even though God has spoken to the noble women, calling them the *cows of Bashan* (Amos, 4: 1) he provides a way of escape in chapter five.

Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel , with no-one to quench it (Amos, 5: 6).

This is very similar to the message in the first chapter of Isaiah where God speaks against the people. Isaiah forthtells God's displeasure but then says that if they seek God and do justice then God will repent himself of the punishment he is calling down. Clines (1990) maintains that the major job of the prophets was to call the people back to obedience. To do this they spoke out against injustice and corrupt or empty religious practice and warned of the judgement of God if they continued living life that way. Amos particularly has often been called the prophet of doom because of his warnings about the destruction of the way of life of the people and yet he also gives a message of hope. The prophets therefore forthtell in that they speak directly to the situation as they believe God has revealed to them, but they also foretell in that they speak of impending judgement if the people do not return to obedience. The prophets felt that God alone directed the course of history, and that God would punish the people who did not worship him in the right way. Worship applied to all areas of life, from formal worship to

social justice and right relationships. The prophets called the people to repentance. Lemche (1995) maintains that the prophets observe what is going on, that society no longer adhered to the laws underlying the world God created. They then forthtell what is wrong and outline what the consequences will be if they continue.

It is not easy to date exactly when or how the prophetic writings were put together, scholars are generally agreed that the book of Amos is the work of one person, either Amos himself or his scribe. The book of Isaiah on the other hand presents more problems, some scholars accept that it is the work of one person, others state that parts of the book describe events that happened long after the prophet's death and must therefore have been written by a second and even third authors. By and large however these scholars reject the religious belief that God alone directed the course of history and this was perhaps why Isaiah could have been cognisant of future events. Certainly Isaiah lived in turbulent times, Jerusalem was under siege from the Assyrian Sennacherib and Isaiah forthtold God's wrath over the sins of the people. Assyrian will be the means of God punishing the people, in chapter 10 God speaks of Assyria as:

the rod of my anger-the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him and against the people of my wrath I command him to take spoil, and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets (Isaiah, 10: 5-6).

Conclusion

The prophets Amos and Isaiah, forthtold or spoke against the injustices that

<https://assignbuster.com/theology-essays-old-testament/>

they saw. They warned the people that if they did not return to the correct form of worship laid out by Moses and reiterated in the book of the prophet Hosea: that knowledge of God was achieved through doing justice and by pleading the cause of the oppressed. The prophets may have foretold some events but what is most important about the prophetic writings is their forthtelling. The prophets spoke out against the social conditions that they observed and the ways in which people dealt with each other. When they dealt unjustly then God did not want their worship because it was empty. Religion only meant something if its effects could be seen in the pursuit of justice and of just dealings with others. The prophets warned the people that God would punish them if they did not heed his call to repent. They did not just foretell doom, God loved the people, he would forgive them if they returned to him, but if they did not then the prophets warned that only a remnant would be saved.

It is not easy always to separate where the prophets may be speaking of future events or whether this has been altered when the books were edited. What is clear is that the prophets were forthtellers in that from their observation of the social conditions they spoke forth what they believed was God's word to the people.

Bibliography

- Clines, D. Fowl, S. and Porter, S eds. 1990 *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press

- Lemche, N 1995 *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society*
Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press
- Holy Bible 1995 *New Revised Standard Version* Michigan, Zondervan
Publishing House
- Whybray, N 1987 *The Making of the Pentateuch* (JSOT, 53: Sheffield,
Sheffield Academic Press)
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12477a.htm>