

PROPHETS AND PROPHECY

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the most common term for prophet is *nabi'*, a word that can be understood as either “called” or one who “calls.” In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, this becomes *prophetes*, meaning one who speaks on behalf of another. In this sense, prophets are those who speak God’s word to the people and communicate God’s message to the community of faith.

Early biblical prophecy includes figures such as Moses, Deborah, and Abraham. While these figures are not “literary prophets” in the later sense, they point to individuals called by God in a special way and set apart for a particular mission within salvation history. As Israel’s history develops, especially around the time of the monarchy, we see the emergence of what is often described as ecstatic prophecy. This includes accounts of Samuel and groups of prophets, Saul entering into intense emotional or ecstatic states, and Elisha responding to music in prophetic inspiration. The prophet Ezekiel also describes himself as being seized by the “spirit” and the “hand of the Lord,” showing the powerful and often overwhelming experience of the prophetic call. While scholars continue to debate the exact role of ecstatic expression in prophecy, it is clear that the Spirit of God can work both inwardly and outwardly in profound ways.

Classical prophecy emerges in the eighth century BC with figures such as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. These prophets are often referred to as the literary prophets because their messages were preserved in written form and now make up the prophetic books at the end of the Christian Old Testament. They are bold and sometimes confrontational voices who speak God’s word into moments of crisis in Israel’s life.

Walter Brueggemann describes two key dimensions of the prophetic role, especially in the classical prophets. The first is the *criticizing* dimension: naming injustice, confronting sin, and telling the truth about where God’s people stand. The second is the *energizing* dimension: opening up hope, proclaiming what is possible under God’s promise, and pointing toward renewal. The prophet holds together both truth and hope.

Prophecy continues in the New Testament as well. Men and women alike exercise this gift within the early Church. For St. Paul, prophecy is a gift of the Holy Spirit given for the building up of the community. It is not optional, but part of the living structure of the Church’s life.

In the Catholic canon, the prophetic books include: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.