

Session 3: The Early Prophets

C. The Establishment and the Outsider

Some of the incidents we have met in this session portray "the prophets" as establishment figures, employed by the court to give (favourable) oracles when the king looks for guidance. In others, however, the prophet is a figure of opposition, speaking on behalf of Yahweh to criticize the king, his nobility and government for policies which ran counter to Yahweh's laws.

Usually the opposition prophet operated alone, while the establishment prophet was one of a group, though as we have seen, this distinction need not hold invariably. Among the opposition prophets, we have seen Elijah, the greatest of all, the man who was remembered as representative of all the prophets (see, for example the story of the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:1-3, Mark 9:2-4 or Luke 9:28-30). Micaiah, son of Imlah, was another of those who stood against the king, and we have seen that Hosea was also a prophet of opposition.

C1. Amos at Bethel

Another older contemporary of Hosea was Amos. Amos 7:10-end gives us a fascinating glimpse of the prophet in action.

Amos 7:10-end

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said,

"Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land." '

And Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.'

Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

'Now therefore hear the word of the Lord.

You say, "Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac."

Therefore, thus says the Lord:

"Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,
and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land,
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land." '

Amos goes to Bethel to give his message because it was one of the two major shrines of the nation of Israel, the other being at Dan in the far north (see 1 Kings 12:26-30). At a royal shrine like Bethel, there would have been a group of shrine prophets, who would have been "on the establishment", there to give oracles to the worshippers who came to enquire of the Lord. These would have been under the direction of Amaziah, the priest in charge of the shrine. In this incident, Amaziah appears to be treating Amos as if he is a would-be prophet looking for a job. He calls him "seer", evidence of the change in usage in progress, but his message is, "You're not the kind of prophet we want here. Why don't you go to Judah and try your luck there?"

Amos's reply is to disavow the title of prophet. This is because he was not brought up to be a prophet; rather, he is an agricultural worker. But most important, he does not aspire to be a professional prophet. He has come to give a message which he has received from Yahweh. His sense of calling is quite independent from that of the professional shrine prophets.

He then goes on to condemn Amaziah in classic prophetic form. First comes the condemnation: "You have said ...", then the Lord's reply: "Therefore, thus says the Lord." His words reiterate the prediction of the destruction and exile of Israel and apply them specifically to Amaziah and his family. Throughout, Amos speaks in the first person, as a messenger of the Lord.

C2. Jeremiah at Jerusalem

Jeremiah 20:1-6

Now the priest Pashhur son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. Then Pashhur struck the prophet Jeremiah, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the Lord. The next morning when Pashhur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, The Lord has named you not Pashhur but 'Terror-all-around.' For thus says the Lord: I am making you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; and they shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon; he shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall kill them with the sword. I will give all the wealth of this city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them, and seize them, and carry them to Babylon. And you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house, shall go into captivity, and to Babylon you shall go; there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely.

A century or more later, Jeremiah encounters the same kind of opposition from the priest at a royal shrine. This time the shrine is Jerusalem and the priest Passhur, who is described as "chief officer". Like Amaziah, Passhur appears to be in charge of Temple discipline and puts Jeremiah in the stocks for threatening public order with his predictions. Again, Jeremiah's response is to apply his prediction specifically to Passhur.

Jeremiah 29:24-end

To Shemaiah of Nehelam you shall say: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: In your own name you sent a letter to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, and to all the priests, saying, The Lord himself has made you priest instead of the priest Jehoiada, so that there may be officers in the house of the Lord to control any madman who plays the prophet, to put him in the stocks and the collar. So now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who plays the prophet for you? For he has actually sent to us in Babylon, saying, 'It will be a long time; build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat what they produce.'

The priest Zephaniah read this letter in the hearing of the prophet Jeremiah. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: Send to all the exiles, saying, Thus says the Lord concerning Shemaiah of Nehelam: Because Shemaiah has prophesied to you, though I did not send him, and has led you to trust in a lie, therefore thus says the Lord: I am going to punish Shemaiah of Nehelam and his descendants; he shall not have anyone living among this people to see the good that I am going to do to my people, says the Lord, for he has spoken rebellion against the Lord.

The story behind this passage is that Jeremiah has sent a message to the first batch of exiles in Babylon, those who were carried away after Nebuchadnezzar's first attack in 597 B.C. In the letter, he told them to settle down, build houses, plant vineyards and raise children because they and their families were to be in exile for seventy years. His message is in direct contradiction to that of other prophets, who were telling the exiles that they would soon be returning home. Shemaiah, one of the exiles, has written to the priest Zephaniah to ask him why he has not disciplined Jeremiah. Here, as in the story of Jehu's rebellion, the prophet is known as a "madman" and, like Amaziah and Passhur, Zephaniah is expected to have authority to discipline them.