

Session 3: The Early Prophets

C. The Establishment and the Outsider

C3. True and False Prophecy

Activity 3.4

Read Deuteronomy 18:15-end and consider the following questions:

- What is the authority of the prophet seen to be in this passage?
- How were the people of Israel supposed to be able to recognize a true from a false prophet?

Read Jeremiah 26 to 28 and consider the following:

- How did the compilers of this group of stories hope to portray Jeremiah as a true prophet of the Lord?

Jeremiah chapters 26 to 28 are a collection of stories highlighting the problem of false prophecy. 26:1-6 contains a shortened version of Jeremiah's Temple sermon, which can be found in more detail in chapter 7. Here, the focus of the story is on the consequences of the sermon. The priests and prophets band together, take Jeremiah to the officials of Judah, and ask for him to be put to death. As in previous passages, we find prophets as well as priests attached to the Temple.

Jeremiah's reply to the charges is, like Amos before him, to assert that it is the Lord who has sent him to prophesy and to reiterate his call for repentance. But now there is a significant difference from the story of Amos. The officials remember an earlier prophecy of some 100 years earlier, the one recorded in Micah 3:12, also calling for Jerusalem to repent and foretelling the destruction of the city. Micah's words had not come true because the king at the time, Hezekiah, had taken heed of the warning and had repented. Thus, the story locates Jeremiah in the line of true prophets, to whom previous generations had paid attention.

In chapter 27 we move forward to the reign of Zedekiah. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has already taken King Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim, into exile, along with most of his nobles and officials. With Zedekiah tempted to rebel against Babylon, Jeremiah is giving an acted prophecy, whose message is that the country should continue to submit to the Babylonian yoke. Once again, however, he is departing from the 'official line'. The other prophets are foretelling a speedy return from exile and encouraging thoughts of rebellion. Who is right, Jeremiah or the rest of the prophets?

Chapter 28 sets out to answer this question in the most dramatic way possible. Hananiah, a member of the prophetic circle, counters Jeremiah with another acted prophecy, breaking the yoke from Jeremiah's back. Now the issue is well and truly joined. Who will be proved right? Jeremiah's response is threefold. First, he places himself in the line of earlier prophets, like Micah, who, like Jeremiah, had prophesied disaster and called for repentance. Second, he

appeals to the test of fulfillment. If Hananiah's prophecies are proved correct, he will be shown to be a true prophet. If not, not.

In this, Jeremiah is implicitly appealing to the tests for true prophecy set out in Deuteronomy 18: the true prophet will be known by whether or not his predictions come true. Jeremiah's third response also takes up the tests set out in Deuteronomy 18. According to verse 20, the just punishment for a false prophet is death. Even if the community is unable to judge between Hananiah and Jeremiah, God can. Privately, Jeremiah warns his rival of impending judgement and Hananiah duly dies. Thus, in the eyes of the compilers of these stories, whether in the time of the exile or shortly afterwards, Jeremiah is shown to have been a true prophet and one to whom Judah should have given heed.

But how were the people of Jerusalem to have known who to believe? Comparison with earlier prophecies was not conclusive and the test of fulfillment was difficult to make. Micah's prophecy itself had not been fulfilled, and how were the king, his officials and the people to know which of Jeremiah's or Hananiah's predictions was about to come true? Interestingly, Jeremiah himself does not seem to have relied solely on the test of fulfillment. His own answer to the question is found in the oracles on the false prophets collected in chapter 23, and in particular in verses 16-22.

Jeremiah 23:16-22

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They keep saying to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to all who stubbornly follow their own stubborn hearts, they say, 'No calamity shall come upon you.'

For who has stood in the council of the Lord so as to see and to hear his word?

Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it?

Look, the storm of the Lord!

Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.

The anger of the Lord will not turn back
until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind.

In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

I did not send the prophets, yet they ran;
I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied.

But if they had stood in my council,
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
and they would have turned them from their evil way,
and from the evil of their doings.

According to Jeremiah, the difference between himself and the false prophets was not one of outward fulfillment but of inward experience. The visions they speak are the visions of their own minds. He, in contrast, like Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 and Isaiah in Isaiah 6, has stood in the council of the Lord. He has heard the Lord deliberating on his purpose. Thus, there is no clear test to distinguish the false prophet from the true, except, perhaps, for those who themselves are seeking to be guided by the Lord. They, perhaps, will be led by intuition to know who is speaking the truth.