



## **DID THEY *REALLY*TALK TO GOD? TEACHING THE PROPHETS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

By Corrine Carvalho

I love the prophetic books of the Old Testament. I find them artistically complex and conceptually rich. But I also know that my reaction to them is rare. More often contemporary readers (A) don't understand them; (B) understand them but dislike their ideology; or (C) love them for the wrong reasons. I would aver that these challenges are especially relevant for those who teach about the Bible.

There are many stumbling blocks to appreciating prophetic material. Let me name a few:

- The word "prophet" today means something distinct from what it meant in the ancient world. Therefore, when teachers try to find contemporary parallels to the biblical prophets, they often end up skewing the ancient witness;
- The prophetic collections, such as the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, do not contain historical context or reveal their path from spoken word to written text. This makes it difficult to interpret cultural references within a prophetic book, or to read a prophetic book from "cover to cover;"
- The language of the oracles, or the individual messages that the prophets deliver, is difficult to understand, since the prophets used various forms of oral speech, especially poetry;
- The biblical texts presume an audience receptive to the prophetic claim that they communicate with God;
- Biblical texts often describe prophetic activities that have negative connotations in our society, including "frenzies," spirit possession, and use of divination;
- The belief system behind of many of the oracles is often problematic, as it seems to support things such as religious violence, cultural intolerance, and sexism.

The result is that students must learn material that they might find either implausible or at best distasteful.

Teaching prophetic texts requires instructors to be particularly clear about their own learning objectives. When teaching a narrative text, it seems obvious that students should understand the plotline. When presenting the psalms, students should be required to analyze different types of psalms. When teaching prophetic literature, however, teachers need to decide whether to present only narratives about the prophets (such as the Elijah cycle) or whether to cover prophetic collections. If the focus is on the latter, does one present a whole book, like the book of Amos, or parts of some of the more influential books, like Isaiah? These curricular decisions depend on course goals.

These challenges are not theological ones, but stem from the cultural gap between ancient and modern notions of prophecy that the artful teacher must bridge. I have found that it is best to be explicit with students about the difficulties they might face. Below I outline four common roadblocks to the prophets and suggest teaching strategies to address them.

## NEVER INVITE A PROPHET TO DINNER

We live in a culture that is particularly hostile to prophetic claims. In fact, if I met someone at a dinner party who claimed that they heard voices and talked to God, I would be sure not to make them my Facebook friend. In the ancient world a prophet was someone who was a spokesperson (or intermediary) for the divine realm. They did not predict the future—except insofar as what a god decrees usually happens—nor were they primarily social revolutionaries. Instead, the Bible claims that these men and women had a direct message from God that they were required to communicate to the community.

Prophecy was not unique to Israel. It was common throughout the countries located in the Fertile Crescent. In Mesopotamia, for instance, kings regularly consulted prophets when making decisions of national importance. The biblical texts hint at a variety of ways that prophets received oracles. Sometimes they heard a voice (Deut 18:15-19). Some saw visions (Ezekiel 1 and Amos 7) or had dreams (Daniel 7). Others were possessed by spirits (1 Samuel 10:10-11 and 1 Kings 22:19-23). Israelite priests could also cast sacred lots, called the Urim and the Thumim, for decisions of national importance.

Today's society has little tolerance for such claims. I ask my students how they would react to a friend who said they heard voices claiming to be God? For many students, they cannot imagine a society where such claims are plausible. In order to help that imagination, teachers can introduce them to other cultures tolerant of prophetic claims, such as Native American tribes, or some Pentecostal Christian groups.

These parallels help students move to the next question, which is, how did prophetic claims function within the larger society? Students can understand that an ancient society could believe that God (or the gods) would want to communicate with the country that it guides especially through the king that served by divine right. Prophecy is just another mechanism for that to take place.

## BLAH, BLAH, BLAH: THEY JUST GO ON AND ON

The majority of oracles can sound like a rant aimed at “sinners. The books are so difficult to understand, that when I ask my students what they got out of the reading they often say, “He just went on and on about how bad we are all. It all just sounded the same!” When I respond to them, “This is what the prophets used to sound like to me: ‘Blah, blah, blah, you’re bad! Blah, blah, blah, you’re all going to die!’” there is often a visible look of relief on their faces.

My primary goal is to give students tools for understanding a prophetic collection.

I have my students start with some prophetic narratives so that they get a “picture” of where and how prophets spoke. The narrative settings also demonstrate that prophetic messages were directed at specific historical circumstances: war, famine, cultural threats, etc. The prophetic collections, however, usually do not preserve the historical situation that prompted a given prophecy. They might mention a particular king, but they presume that the audience knew what events happened during that king's reign.

The collections themselves have few rhetorical markers to signal the beginning or end of a particular oracle. The prophetic speeches—originally sometimes short poetic lines—were rarely collected and set down in chronological order. This can give the impression that the prophet rambled on and on. In addition, most collections include oracles by later prophets who

apparently channeled the spirit of the original prophet. The stories of Elijah's spirit moving into Elisha (2 Kings 2) or the presumption that a medium could call up the spirit of the deceased Samuel (1 Samuel 28) show that Israelites felt a great prophet's spirit could pass to or through a living prophet.

To help students identify some of the unique markers of prophetic literature, I introduce them to the major "forms" of prophetic speech (e.g. the messenger formula, the woe oracle, etc.). I also give them a "cheat sheet" of common metaphors (see bibliography and related links). I then place them in groups and give each group a specific oracle to analyze using a series of questions:

- Are there any prophetic forms?
- Is it an oracle of condemnation or salvation?
- Which person or group is being condemned or saved?
- Why are they being condemned or saved?
- What is the form of the punishment or what does salvation look like?
- What is the image of God in the text (warrior, king, nurturer, judge, etc.)?

Once students have done this successfully as a group, they are then more confident about reading the text on their own.

## SHOCK VALUE

Once students get to the actual content of prophetic speech, they are then able to experience the powerful rhetoric of these oral performances. And for some of them, this rhetoric can make them feel uncomfortable. Many students who accept the truth claims of the Bible have tended to read the prophetic "predictions" literally. If it says God will destroy all of Israel, then that must be what it means. For high school students in particular who tend to be rather literal readers, it can be difficult to help them to develop a reading strategy proper to prophecy.

With my college-age students I talk about the rhetoric of persuasion. I ask them to identify the things that people do when they are trying to persuade an audience to change their behavior. Usually they see that people tend to use hyperbole ("if you don't change, everything will be ruined"), or they do things to get people to notice them.

This is an important element of ancient prophecy: a prophet is only a prophet if society deems him or her so. Many biblical texts attest to the fact that "false prophecy" was also an issue: not everyone who claimed to be a prophet was deemed to be one by the community. But even before this judgment could be made, prophets had to be heard by a large audience. The prophets whose words were collected into books were the most influential prophets of their day. It is not surprising, then, that their rhetoric was innovative, distinct, and, at times, deliberately shocking.

Fortunately, contemporary high school students can relate to the popularity of artists who convey social messages through artistry meant to unsettle the audience. Lady Gaga's outfits are part of her message of tolerance for sexual and social difference. Eminem's embodiment of a violent white male raises awareness about domestic violence. Although these artists do not claim to be delivering messages from God, their popularity shows how shocking or disturbing images can serve a positive social function.

## CONCLUSION

Teaching the prophets in a survey about the Old Testament poses many challenges, but the gifted teacher will be able to negotiate those by focusing on some simple goals. My goals are:

- Giving students tools to break down and understand aspects of the prophetic books;
- Developing a sense of how prophets functioned within ancient societies;
- Enhancing reading skills appropriate to non-literal texts, such as poetry and hyperbole.

These goals support the overall learning objectives for high school students, preparing them to encounter cultures different from their own through analysis and appreciation, while also expanding their reading skills through engaging world literature.

**Corrine Carvalho** is Professor in the Theology Department at St. Thomas University, MN.

For further reading see:

Corrine L. Carvalho, *Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament*, 2nd edition. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2010.

Joan E. Cook, *Hear O Heavens and Listen O Earth: An Introduction to the Prophets*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006.

Victor H. Matthews, *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001.

Marvin Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature*. Interpreting Biblical Texts. Nashville: Abingdon, 2005.