

hindering us from giving ourselves to him completely. Such self-emptying is a condition for *clinging to God*. Our vocation really is to cling to God, to live and dwell in him.<sup>3</sup>

Nothing finite can satisfy us in the end. Our true satisfaction lies in God. So what we seem to lose by letting go of exaggerated attachments to people and things we gain by finding God and attaching ourselves to him unconditionally. We gain our true self by dying to our false self, and this results in a boost for our confidence in God's providence. It results in the conviction that there is no need to be afraid, since we truly lack nothing.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1718-1723.

<sup>2</sup> See Philip St. Romain, *Handbook for Spiritual Growth: A Guide for Catholics* (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 1993), pp. 29-32.

<sup>3</sup> See Augustine, *Confessions*, book 10, chapters 27-29.

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## Reading and Understanding the Prophets

Almost everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, has heard of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Some have even heard of Amos, Hosea, and Micah. Fewer would recognize the names Obadiah, Nahum, or Haggai. What all these names have in common is that they designate particular individuals known as prophets whose writings or preaching are contained in the Jewish Hebrew Bible or the Old or First Testament of the Christian Bible. Roman Catholics get to hear passages from some of these prophets read periodically at Sunday Mass, but seldom does the homily focus on this material. When I give retreats to groups of the laity, religious, and clergy, I sometimes ask how many have ever read an entire book of any of the biblical prophets. Few if any hands go up. Nevertheless, a popular understanding of the role and func-

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tion of the prophets is that they predicted the future. More specifically, a good number of Christians believe that the primary purpose of the biblical prophets was to predict the future birth and activity of Jesus.

The next several *Scripture Scope* columns are going to be dedicated to the biblical prophets because they play such an important role in the Bible and because they are so poorly understood especially by Christian believers. We begin our considerations with a quote from Marvin Sweeney's helpful book *The Prophetic Literature*. "Although many think of prophets as persons who predict the future, prophets are concerned primarily with the events and circumstances of their own times and with influencing people within their own societies" (p. 23). Sweeney goes on to say that some prophets do indeed speak of potential future events, but their purpose is not to predict exactly how that future will unfold. Their purpose is to persuade their contemporaries to adopt a specific course of action or attitude that they think best represents the will of God and the best interests of the people. One less-than-elegant but at the same time rather accurate image for a prophet is that of a "megaphone" for God's word. In other words, a biblical prophet is a person called to amplify the word of God for the people. What is important to understand is that the prophet never proclaimed his own personal word or opinion. Prophetic speech was always the word of God amplified through the words of a particular prophet. At times this could cause serious tension for the prophet because he knew that the word of God he was mandated to proclaim would have serious and often dangerous repercussions for himself. Jeremiah experienced this so much that he complained directly to God about it, but to no avail.

Prophets and prophecy were not limited to the history and experience of Israel. Prophets existed in various forms before the time of Israel in various parts of the ancient Near East and beyond. The ongoing examination of this more extensive phenomenon of prophecy has helped scholars to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Israelite prophecy in its various forms. One characteristic that prophecy seemed to contain, no matter where it was found or under what form, was that of "intermediary." Certainly the biblical prophet was always located somewhere between God and humankind. Prophetic writing, speech, and action were always meant to communicate the will of God in some way. Nevertheless, this mission of the prophet as depicted in the Bible was expressed in a diversity of roles. These roles are determined largely by the various labels or titles used to describe individual prophets. Most scholars point to the four such titles that are found in the Bible itself. The Hebrew titles are all different, but sometimes the English translations do not make this clear. These titles are: (1) *hozeh* (seer), (2) *roeh* (diviner), (3) is *ha elohim* (man of God), and (4) *nabi* (prophet). The first title, *hozeh*, seems to refer to someone who receives and reports visions. The second title, *roeh*, is used primarily of Samuel and emphasizes his capacity to see or perceive God speaking to him in the sanctuary. The third title, is *ha elohim*, is found most of all in stories about Elijah and Elisha, who were both considered "holy men." The fourth title, *nabi*, is the most frequently used term to designate a prophet. Scholars still argue over the precise meaning of the term, but most likely it indicates someone called to a certain task. The English word, prophet, comes the Greek term, *prophetes*, which translates literally as "one who speaks forth."

We know that prophets were not present through all periods of Israel's history. A basic timeframe for prophecy in Israel is 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. Generally speaking, prophets began to appear in Israel at about the same time she (?) began the transition from loose tribal affiliation to organized monarchy. In other words, when the king appeared, the prophet appeared. Almost from the very beginning, a tension developed between the king and the prophet. The tension was over the limits of kingship. In surrounding nations, the kings were often viewed as gods, but that was not to be in Israel because they already had a God, Yahweh, and no one else could make that claim. The prophet confronted the king whenever the king overstepped his boundaries and refused to do the will of God. These confrontations could be harsh and often focused on Israel's failures in social justice, political responsibility, and monotheistic worship (religious idolatry). When the southern kingdom of Judah was destroyed (ca. 486 B.C.) and was no longer an independent state with a king, the presence of prophets also ceased. The exact reason why prophecy ceased in Israel is still much debated. What does seem to be true, however, is that there was a strong connection between Israel's existence as a monarchy and the presence of prophets in her midst.

How did a person get to be a prophet in ancient Israel? There were no schools where such skills were taught, and there were no such things as prophetic families into which the future prophet was born. Some prophets, however, were also priests: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah all belonged to priestly families. The biblical prophets were people who in some way or other experienced a call from God to be God's intermediaries through proclaiming the divine mes-

sage. Only a few have recorded their calls, the most famous being Jeremiah 1, Isaiah 6, and Ezekiel 1. Most of the prophets worked in urban settings, and a good number of them were well educated and sophisticated. Since there were no official credentials whereby one could be declared a certified prophet, the authenticity of these people was largely gauged by the credibility of their message. Those who felt that they were being confronted by a prophet would try to discredit both the prophet's person and his message. Those who felt that their cause was being championed by a prophet would accept such an intermediary as authentically proclaiming the will of God. Ultimately it was history's looking back over Israel's long and complicated past that determined who really spoke in the name of God and who did not. The prophetic literature of the Bible is literature that attests to or grows out of the activity of Israel's prophets. The prophets themselves produced much of this literature, but not all of it. In the prophetic books of the Bible, there is also found literature about the prophets which was produced by someone who was not known as a prophet. The prophetic literature as we have it today in our Bibles is the result of a long process of collecting and editing. Much of it is in poetry, but some of it is in prose narrative. Either way, this literature is some of the most profound material found in the entire Bible. In future Scripture Scope columns, we will look at the major prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and a sampling of others.

#### Recommended Resources

- David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.