Old Testament Prophets

Who Was a True Prophet?

An Israelite

Called by God

Authorized to speak on God's behalf to individuals (such as a king) or to a group (such as citizens of a city or nation)

What Did They Say?

They could offer detailed instructions on how to handle a specific situation. For example, they might give instructions on the building of the Lord's temple or how to respond militarily to a national threat.

They interpreted what was happening in their age in light of Israel's loyalty to the Mosaic covenant. For example, they linked crop failure, economic instability, and military occupation to covenant disobedience.

They called Israel to repent of covenant disloyalty.

They assured people of the Lord's eternal love for them by directing their attention to the enduring promises made to Abraham and David.

How Did They Say It?

The prophet's message could be delivered in a life's story, like that of Jonah. But more often their message was shared in symbolic actions or oracles (speeches).

Types of Prophetic Oracles

Indictment Oracles

These speeches criticize attitudes and actions like the worship of pagan deities, insincere religious ritual, and social injustice.

Judgment Oracles

These speeches announce the divine response to covenant disloyalty and include things such as crop failure, foreign invasion, and even exile from the promised land.

Instruction Oracles

These speeches are meant to inform and encourage God's people on how to build greater harmony between their lives and the Mosaic covenant.

Salvation Oracles

These forward-looking speeches speak of better days to come, pointing to things like rescue from military occupation, a return to prosperity, return from exile, and the coming of the messiah.

© 2016 Baker Publishing Group. May be reproduced for classroom use only, not for resale.

Types of Psalms

An individual psalm contains a variety of thoughts but often emphasizes one subject more than any of the others. It is that emphatic focus on one subject that leads to the following classification of the psalms.

Type of Psalm	Description	Examples
Confession	Vividly describes feelings of guilt, expresses deep sorrow over personal sins or national failures, which are joined with a plea for God's forgiveness	Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 130
Lament	A moving expression of grief that flows from the experiences of an individual or community. It typically describes the poet's plight, expresses a plea for help, and makes a declaration of trust.	Psalms 3; 12; 39; 123; 142
Hymn of praise	Poetic expression of praise and thanksgiving for divine blessings received by an individual or a community	Psalms 8; 30; 113; 150
Wisdom	Reflection on successful living that offers general advice on how to live with a greater sense of purpose and well-being	Psalms 1; 14; 37; 112
Royal	A celebration of David's dynasty, recognizing that the Lord was in the process of fulfilling the promises made in 2 Samuel 7	Psalms 45; 72; 132
Messianic	Offers a vivid description of the messiah's nature, mission, or coming experiences	Psalms 2; 16; 22; 110
Imprecatory	A call for divine judgment on an individual or community that has actively opposed the advance of God's kingdom, often bringing personal harm to the psalmist in the process	Psalms 35; 109

© 2016 Baker Publishing Group. May be reproduced for classroom use only, not for resale.

Reading Old Testament Poetry

How Is Old Testament Poetry Different from Prose?

The poet uses fewer words and less space but seeks to say more with less by carefully selecting and artfully organizing a handful of words.

The basic unit of communication in Old Testament poetry is the colon rather than the sentence, with two or three bound together in a set.

The declarative sentences of prose, which are efficient at *informing*, give way to a stylized tapestry of words designed to solicit *feeling and reflection.*

The specific event or situation that lies behind the poet's words is often hidden from view, allowing us to move more quickly into the thought world of the poet.

The physical setting of the poem can jump quickly and without warning between heaven and earth.

Time can move forward, backward, and reverse again within poetry.

The poet uses many more literary devices and metaphors than we find in prose.

Guidelines for Reading and Interpreting Old Testament Poetry

Read the poetry of the Old Testament more *slowly* than prose, paying careful attention to every word and turn of phrase.

Read the poetic piece *repeatedly*, carefully weighing the nature and intent of each word and phrase.

Pause between readings to allow time for reflection and for feelings to arise.

Actively *search for the larger idea* that is introduced, developed, and applied within the poetry.

Watch for the emphasis or development of an idea to occur via its strategic manipulation. The idea can be emphasized or matured by

repeating the idea—"I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning" (Ps. 130:6);

contrasting the idea—"For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction" (Ps. 1:6);

expanding the idea—"Blessed is the one who does not *walk in step* with the wicked or *stand* in the way that sinners take or *sit* in the company of mockers" (Ps. 1:1); or

presenting the idea in a metaphor—"That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away" (Ps. 1:3–4).

© 2016 Baker Publishing Group. May be reproduced for classroom use only, not for resale.

Wisdom Literature

Definition

Wisdom is the collection of ideas that directs the thoughts, actions, and attitudes of God's people so that they might achieve greater happiness and success while living on earth.

Location

Individual psalms present these ideas (Pss. 1, 37, 49, 112).

Entire books present these ideas (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs).

Characteristics

Wisdom is anchored in a reverential respect for the Lord.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Prov. 9:10).

Wisdom grows from the conviction that there is a divine order in this created world that can be discovered. This divine order can be discovered by thoughtful observation of and reflection on life.

Wisdom directs both actions and attitudes.

Wisdom is practical, addressing the most basic dimensions of life, including agricultural practices, marriage relationships, friendship, and personal finances.

Wisdom celebrates moral virtues like humility, honesty, and charity.

Wisdom can take the form of a treatise or a proverb, which is a short, memorable declaration about life and living.

"The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old" (Prov. 20:29).

"Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant than pretend to be somebody and have no food" (Prov. 12:9).

Treatises are longer investigations of one or more challenging dimensions of life such as human suffering, the prospering of the wicked, or the meaning of life.

© 2016 Baker Publishing Group. May be reproduced for classroom use only, not for resale.