

This situation is happening which God does not like.
He would then outline why the matter was displeasing.
And finally there would be a warning that if the people persisted in the wrong-doing then God would do such and such as a form of punishment.

I am not saying they never predicted future events. Occasionally one does hear of again kings demanding an oracle of a prophet about what is going to happen in the future, but even here in the vast majority of cases there is a moral dimension which governs the outcome of events (ie because the people have done such and such therefore the out come will be ...)

HOW FAR BACK DO PROPHETS GO?

As a straight question very difficult to answer. There is some evidence in the Old Testament. For example, the prophet Elijah shows no surprise that there are 450 prophets of Baal prepared to pitch into battle with him at the contest on Mount Carmel 1 Kings 18. One could argue there were 450 less of them by the end of the day, but in terms of devotees, this would probably have amounted only to a small percentage of the class.

Some very valuable documents called the Ras Shamra Tablets, discovered in the 1930, at the site of ancient Ugarit on the North Syrian coast tell us quite a lot about what life was like in Canaan around the time of the Israelite challenge to the land. The tablets date from about the 14th century BC. They bear witness to prophets who belonged to the ancient cults of Baal Shamem, Asherah and Melkart of Tyre

The diary of Wen Amon, an Egyptian official who travelled into Syria sometime between 1100 - 1050 BC contains references to prophets in ancient Phoenecia.

But by far the best evidence for such people is found in the Mari tablets. These amazing tablets found by Professor Parrot in the 1930s at Tell Hariri, the site of the ancient city of Mari on the banks of the northern Euphrates, date from 18th century BC. They contain numerous references to a group of people who are called apilum - both men and women who seem to function as spokespersons for the gods. At Mari there were different types of prophets. What is interesting though is that the personal names of the prophets never appear in their prophecies, which would seem to indicate that they belonged to a sacral social class, whose names could not be spoken. One of the chief deities of Mari was a god Dagan and he certainly had a large prophetic following.

Lindblom in the introduction to his great work on prophecy concluded that the prophetic phenomena are not peculiar to particular races, peoples, countries or religions. They are to be found everywhere in the religious world and at all stages of religious development. These phenomena, he believes, arose in different regions quite independently. There seems to be no question of one group or nation of people copying the ideas from another. Practices and rituals associated with the oracles received may have been transferred in this way, but the notion that a person might be conscious of receiving messages and experiences from above, experiences which originated in the divine world and from which ordinary men and women were excluded is found in most religions of this period.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF PROPHETS

The Bible is quite a useful source book on prophets. After all there are the three major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, with massive books and the twelve minor prophets just to reassure you that it was an important phenomenon in Israelite life.

But then there are the others.

There is that curious character Balaam in the book of Numbers. he certainly wasn't an Israelite prophet, but he is taken over by Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews and made to bless Israel, much to the annoyance of the King Balak who had specifically hired him to curse them. If you are not familiar with the stories, do read them the narrative parts make excellent reading although the poetic curses and blessings are a bit tedious. They are found in Numbers 22-24. What is curious here is that a prophet such as Balaam could defy a king and apparently get away with doing the opposite of what the king requested him to do.

When talking of early stories about prophets one must not overlook the character of Moses himself. Although it is a later reflection on the Israelite leader Moses, the author of the book of Deuteronomy describes Moses as a prophet. "There has not arisen in Israel a prophet like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. Deut 34:10.

In the book of Samuel we encounter two very different types of prophet.

In 1 Samuel 9 the young Saul, who was later to become the first king of Israel, along with a few friends, were searching for some lost asses. Suddenly one of the young men has the idea that they should go and visit Samuel who is described as a Seer

Now we think that is an important category of prophet.

Seers would have been someone who was blessed with what we tend to call second sight. They could see things that ordinary people could not.

While I would not wish to rule out the belief that these were godly people, I would suggest that some, if not all of their skill was to use their powers of wisdom, knowledge and perception to solve the everyday problems of the ordinary people.

The Seer appears to have been a wise man who was blessed with insight and could give an instant answer to a question or assist in making a decision.

So where is the link, you may say with prophecy.

The link occurs in 1 Samuel 9:9 "Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he said, *come let us go to the Seer*; for he who is now called a prophet was formerly called a Seer.

A totally different sort of prophet is found in the very next chapter.

Saul, having been anointed king by Samuel is just about to set out for home. Samuel in true seer like fashion is describing to Saul all the events that will happen to him on the journey. And at one point he says

After that you shall come to Gibeathelohim. As you come to the city you will meet a band of prophets coming from the high place, with harp, tambourine, flute and lyre before them prophesying. Then the spirit of the Lord will come mightily upon you and you will prophecy with them and be turned into another man.

Quite clearly this is a very different type of prophecy and one which seems to have been a group activity rather than a solitary occupation. We tend to think that these were what we call ecstatic prophets.

A spirit of prophecy would be called up or invoked by the group, who would work themselves up into something of a frenzy, possibly encouraged by the musical instruments listed. At the operative moment, one or more of them would utter an oracle from God.

Ecstatic prophecy I think, was regarded with mild suspicion by Old Testament worthies. In some way its progress is not dissimilar from that of speaking with tongues in the Christian church. In other words it is something that from time to time seems to happen and much as the authorities might not wish to publicise it. It simply refuses to go away.

We know that there were ecstatic prophets in Israel as late as the time of the prophet Elisha.

Once kingship was established in Israel, prophets moved in at the highest level.

King David found himself taken to task by the prophet Nathan over his misdemeanour with Bathsheba.

In an amazing parable in 2 Samuel 12 Nathan weaves a wonderful tale. King David falls for it hook line and sinker and inadvertently condemns his own act of adultery with Bathsheba.

But before that Nathan had directed David not to build a Temple in Jerusalem. 2 Samuel 7. David was told that the building of a temple to the Lord would be carried out by his Son, Solomon.

Here we see a tremendously powerful man who directs and rebukes King David without fear.

That is a very far cry from a man whose only responsibility was to find missing articles.

It could be argued that Nathan was an outstanding personality, but it is equally clear that Nathan was not the only court prophet. One Gad is mentioned in 2 Samuel 23. He brings judgment on David for taking a census among the people. And then there is Ahijah who was a court prophet during the time of the northern king Jeroboam. I can never quite work out whether these court prophets were men of great power and influence or whether they were sort of old retainers who were a constant embarrassment to all concerned.

Ahijah, for example was something of a wild and woolly man. He puts on a new robe and goes out to confront Jeroboam who had aspirations to become king of northern Israel. "Right" he says, "watch this!" and promptly tears his new robe into 12 pieces. You take ten of them. Presumably Jeroboam obliges and Ahijah delivers his prophecy, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, I am about to tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and I will give to you ten tribes."

Naturally if this were to happen to us by the side of the A148 no doubt we would class the bloke as a harmless eccentric. Probably a similar impression passed through the mind of Jeroboam. But the Old Testament records many such acts of a similar nature. In comparison with many, Ahijah's tearing of a new coat is fairly tame. Other acted parables, as we call them, range from Jeremiah breaking large water jars, through unnamed prophets asking to be biffed about the head and one nut case called Zedekiah in 1 Kings 22:11 who made horns of iron and was to be found rushing about the room in order to demonstrate how the kings of Israel and Judah would overcome their enemies.

Once again Hebrew prophets were not the only people with influence at court. I suspect most religions and cults had prophets who were always on hand to offer advice to a man of position and influence. King Ahab, that notorious northern ruler and his infamous wife Jezebel were said to have been accompanied at court by over 450 prophets. Jobs for the boys!

ELIJAH AND ELISHA

Into the middle of all this though come two outstanding characters that we cannot omit from special mention. They belong to this early period of the monarchy and were clearly influential throughout Israel. They are the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

ELIJAH I reckon is just about the most scary man in the Old Testament and I think the Jews generally considered he was as well.

He was a ninth century prophet who was born in a place called Tishbe in Gilead. His work was restricted to northern Israel during the reign of King Ahab and he was a fearsome defender of the faith of the God of Israel. He had something of a dramatic meeting with Ahab 1 Kings 17 at which he announced the imminence of a severe drought as a punishment for Ahab's failure to honour God.

Fearing an onslaught by the wicked king's even wicked wife Jezebel, the prophet made a tactical withdrawal into the wilderness of Transjordan. There he was sustained by ravens who brought him food and he drew his water from the brook called Cherith. When that dried up God commanded him to go to Zarephath between Tyre and Sidon where he would find a widow lady who would look after him. Once there we learn how Elijah performed two miracles for the lady, the first was to provide oil for them during the drought and the other was to restore to life the son of the good lady. Both of these are deeply moving stories, which are told in a wonderful Hebrew style with easily remembered phrases.

Several months later religious affairs in the kingdom reach an all time low for the prophets of the Lord. The wicked Jezebel has been getting rid of the prophets of Jahweh and so Elijah, through the king demands a show down. The contest and contest it was, was held on Mt Carmel. Elijah versus 450 prophets of Baal. The story is a joy to read. There is a wonderful picture of these prophets of Baal limping round their altar, trying to get Baal to send them fire from heaven while Elijah pours semi indecent scorn on their efforts.

When his turn comes, he demands that the sacrifice is soaked in water several times and then he asks God to release fire from heaven. Right on cue it comes. The people rejoice and Elijah slaughters the 450 prophets of Baal as his share of the winnings.

Of course this has repercussions and Elijah has to go into hiding once again from the wrath of Jezebel. As you may remember he travels south as far as Mt Horeb (Sinai to you and I). Here again there is a wonderful poetic passage as Elijah seeks God on the mountain. There is earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, there was wind etc etc. and it is only in the still small voice of calm that Elijah hears the voice of God.

I could go on to say much more about this character, how for instance at the end of his life he ascended into heaven in a chariot of fire before the amazed and ever hopeful Elisha. Maybe it was this episode which captured the Jewish imagination. But for the Jews of the New Testament era Elijah was a figure not simply of the past, but of the future. The penultimate verse of the last book of the Old Testament triggered off the Elijah

speculation. The prophet Malachi ends his work with the words “Behold I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes...”

I suspect from your New Testament study that you remember that John the Baptist was compared with this returning figure. John comes “in the spirit and power of Elijah”.

Jesus also refers to John as an Elijah type of person when he is speaking about his own death immediately after the Transfiguration.

In the Transfiguration itself Jesus was seen talking with Moses and Elijah on the mountain.

All of this is quite substantial, but add to it the fact that as late as 260 AD Jews were writing books which showed that Elijah would return. This is part of the message of the so-called Apocalypse of Elijah. A book which was greatly influenced by Coptic Christian speculation.

Nevertheless Jews at Passover to this day pour out drink in Elijah’s cup and a place is reserved for the so-called unexpected guest at the Passover Seder.

Elisha in some ways is quite a similar character and many of the stories about him are probably duplicates of the Elijah legend.

With these two men Israelite prophecy achieved a strength, a dignity and a respect which we don’t really find anywhere else in the Old Testament. The stories about the two prophets are beautifully written, some I find compelling and moving. Read sometime the fascinating account of the restoring to life of the Shunamite’s son. in 2 Kings 4. This was a powerful man who feared nothing and challenged God even on issues of life and death. Read the somewhat amusing account of the healing of Naaman’s leprosy. Note the pride of Naaman, who struggles with his understandable pride and the foolishness of Gehazi who tries to make a quick bob or two.

They are brilliant.

From here we need to consider the prophets who have books, either written by them or about them in the Old Testament.

When I looked at this task I had to decide how to approach the problem.

Basically we have three major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and a further twelve minor prophets Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

Not, you will notice Daniel. His work is not one of prophecy. It may be a development of prophecy, but we would official classify that as Apocalyptic literature. More about him later.

What I could do is to deal with them systematically and bash through Isaiah then Jeremiah, then Ezekiel and if you recovered from that head out into the twelve minor prophets either before you went to sleep or before it went so dark that you could no longer see.

What I have devised is a chart to show where the prophets actually fit into the scheme of history and we ought to look at a few odd features about some of them. Adequate descriptions of the work of each prophet for the educated inquirer are given in the book which I think you have, “Living World of the Old Testament”. If that isn’t to your liking then there are Bible commentaries available for an in-depth study.

Looking for a moment at that chart. It is constructed chronologically - early prophets Amos and Hosea these two gents were operating in Northern Israel around the city of Samaria and they predate the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians in 731 BC. So these are eight-century prophets who were, to a large extent warning the king and people of the 10 northern tribes. Watch out you are being displeasing to God and there will be a judgement. That judgement of course was interpreted as defeat for the kingdom at the hands of a foreign power.

Then comes Isaiah of Jerusalem and Micah, who also belong to the eighth century BC. followed by a whole host of prophets centred on Jerusalem, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Nahum and Habakkuk. who were operating in the 7th century BC they were performing a similar task in the southern tribe of Judah, which escaped the invasion of the Assyrians and so remained an independent kingdom with a Hebrew ruler in Jerusalem.

But these prophets were also saying to the people

- a) You are being displeasing and sinful before God by worshipping foreign deities
- b) Look what happened to you fellow countrymen in the north.

Well there's none so deaf as those who don't want to hear. The words of these prophets had little or no effect

Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians in the year 587 and the Temple (that is Solomon's Temple was destroyed)

That was not however the end of the prophetic input.

Immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem we have

Ezekiel A wonderful visionary prophet who seems to have ministered to the people who remained behind in the land of Israel and also had words and images of comfort for the Exiles who had been carted off to Babylon. One of the things we are not sure about is exactly where Ezekiel worked. Was it Jerusalem or Babylon? He seems to move freely between the two in ecstatic trances.

But also we have Obadiah terribly short

And towards the end of the stay made by the people in Babylon another prophet who we also know as Isaiah who looked forward to a time when the people of Israel would return to their own land again

The final group on our table are Haggai and Zechariah two prophets of the post-exilic period who sponsored and encouraged the people to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Joel and Malachi whose words transcend the immediate and look towards the ideal future towards the coming of a Messiah figure of one sort or another.

That is a terrible generalisation but I hope it makes some sense of what I feel is a daunting list of names.

Now to problems and points of interest.

The first I want to tackle is who were these men and what caused them to be prophets.

Let's look first at Amos.

We know very little about most of his life. We are told that he came from a village a few miles south of Jerusalem called Tekoa and that he was active during the reigns of King Uzziah of Jerusalem and Jeroboam II of Israel. So we are looking at a time of around 750BC. While we don't actually hear about the call of Amos, we do know that he was commanded by God to go to the north and warn the king and people of the region around Samaria that they were terrible sinners and that God's judgement would fall upon them. He went to the Royal temple at Bethel. There follows six hefty chapters of Woe to this and woe to that, including woe to Jeroboam the king who will die by the sword.

Now a priest of Bethel, on Amaziah has clearly had enough of all this and says "O seer, stop prophesying, go back to you own land and prophesy there, for this is the king's sanctuary!

Amos replies "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son
I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees"

Clearly in Amos' mind there was something undesirable about the label of being a prophet.

I take him to be saying I didn't want this job in the first place, but I am compelled to utter these words by God.

This theme of reluctance in one for or another is common to quite a number of prophets

Isaiah of Jerusalem, that is the first person who is listed as Isaiah, whose call is narrated in chapter 6 of that magnificent book, a call incidentally we can date fairly accurately in the year 742BC, was also a reluctant prophet.

Isaiah is in the temple. Clearly he has associations with the priesthood. He experiences a vision of God in his heavenly glory. He sees the Lord sitting upon a throne and surrounded by the cherubim. They are crying *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord*.

Woe is me, he says! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips.

It is only when he is ritually cleansed that Isaiah accepts the challenge of the task before him.

A somewhat similar experience is seen in the call of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is of course much later than Isaiah around the year 626 BC and the political situation in Jerusalem had become much more acute. You didn't have to be a genius or a visionary to know that in political terms the nation was living on borrowed time. The might have survived the onslaughts of the Syrian and the Assyrians, but even stronger nations were in the offing and in religious terms the nation was doing itself no favours by neglecting their worship of Yahweh in favour of foreign gods.

So when Jeremiah gets the word from God

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

and before you were born I consecrated you.

He isn't desperately impressed by this honour

Ah Lord God, behold I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.

God quite clearly is having none of that

Jeremiah quite frankly has a rotten time of it. He knows the people are not going to listen to him, he is humiliated, beaten up, put in prison, thrown in a pit and suffers from severe depression.

Not a great deal of job satisfaction for poor old Jeremiah.

We could go on here and look at Ezekiel, who seems to all intents and purposes to have the job well under control. His call can only be described as an ecstatic vision in which he sees Yahweh seated upon a lofty throne in dazzling radiance. The holy God, whom Israel had once worshipped in Jerusalem, had come to the people in exile.

Initially he is overwhelmed by that which separates God from man.

He is raised to his feet and warned that he was to speak to a nation of rebels, a people impudent and stubborn who had revolted against God.

Well I ask you, would you apply for the job?

Perhaps in a similar show of despair Ezekiel is said to have sat overwhelmed on the ground for seven days among the exiles.

The one that I can really identify with, the one who stands out from all the rest is the odd man out in the bunch of prophets and that is Jonah.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah saying "Arise and go to Nineveh that great city and cry against it."

And Jonah says "Not me Lord" - grabs himself a ship and sails off in the other direction.

It's what we call in the trade the old two-finger treatment.

Jonah is the most reluctant, grumpy bad tempered prophet in the whole of the Old Testament. He is also the only one who has no mission to Israel or Judah, for Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. Even when things seem to be falling into place and the people are heeding what Jonah says to them, he is dissatisfied.

One of the questions I get asked sometimes, especially by younger children is about Jonah's whale. This is a fascinating question and can lead to what I think is a fundamental aspect of Hebrew psychology. So if you are stuck for a question at the end go for the whale!

Can I also point out one other oddity to you.

Hosea

I mentioned earlier on acted parables in connection with Ahijah, Jeremiah and Zedekiah. Perhaps the most pointed of these was in the life of Hosea. The man seems to have lived in northern Israel and was operational around the time of Jeroboam's death in 746 BC.

Hosea, like Amos was a prophet of doom, but in a compelling episode, recorded in the first three chapters of his book, he tells of his marriage with a prostitute called Gomer.

Hosea was not giving us biographical data. The episode is a parable about the failure of the relationship which had existed between God and the nation.

They had acted like a prostitute they had been unfaithful in their allegiance to Yahweh and had pursued foreign gods.

Even the children of Hosea's union with Gomer have significant names

Jezreel Where the king Jehu had carried out a terrible blood purge.

The second, a daughter was called "Not pitied"

And the third a son was given the name "Not my people"

Despite this tremendous unhappiness in the life of the prophet, which had of course come about at the command of the Lord, his poetry is among some of the most moving in the whole of the Old Testament. It speaks so clearly of the human emotions, husband and wife, father and son.

Sharp-eyed St Matthew in the New Testament selected that unforgettable verse from chapter 11

"When Israel was a child, then I loved him and out of Egypt have I called my son"

In a way you have to read the rest of that chapter to really get the feel of this father bereft of his son.

How can I give you up, Oh Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

I will not execute my fierce anger.

I will not again destroy

For I am God and not man

The holy one in your midst.

We must move and look towards the New Testament.

We are very used to seeing Old Testament quotations used as proof texts to show how some action of Jesus was foreseen in the Old Testament.

There is a great danger here and that is that we could wind up with a severe difference of opinion between us about the relevance of the Old Testament scriptures to Jesus.

In order to diffuse what might be a sticking point let me demonstrate a simple experiment.

Imagine for a moment a slide projector.

It projects an image on to a screen. Once you switch on the projector bulb you have to live with the consequences of what you have put in the machine.

If the slide is upside down or back to front you may face ridicule. No amount of turning the screen the other way up will rectify your fault. It is clearly there for all to see. You cannot recall it

That was true about Hebrew prophecy. Once a prophet had uttered a word it could not be recalled any more than an arrow launched from a bow could be recalled. You were stuck with it.

Now let's turn to the image on the screen.

If the screen is placed close to the projector the image is small and very sharply defined.

Let us now replace that screen with a clear perspective screen. It still contains an image but it allows the picture to travel through and to land on another screen further back.

You can say something about that image.

- A) It will be larger and
- B) Less well defined.

The operation can be repeated a third time. You can insert two perspective screens and still wind up with a third image even further back.

You can say something about that image:-

- A) It will be larger than ever
- B) Will probably be blurred.

That is how Hebrew prophecy operated.

The word was spoken by a prophet and there would probably have been a precise, clearly defined historical situation to which that prophesy would have been addressed. It would have been no more than a few years hence and would probably have been fulfilled in the prophet's lifetime.

But the Jews had a belief that words spoken by a prophet had eternal significance and we sometimes find that prophecies were reapplied many years after the death of the prophet on a national scale.

Some might even achieve a third understanding and receive international recognition.

Notice as the size and implication of the prophecy increases, so the precise details become more and more blurred.

The prophecy spoken by Isaiah of Jerusalem about a virgin being with child and bringing forth a son who would be called Emmanuel originally referred to a particular historical set of circumstances around the year 705 when Jerusalem was being harassed by armies from the Syro Ephraimite alliance. This in time was reinterpreted to have Messianic significance for the nation as a whole. Finally it was the Christians who saw in the birth of Jesus yet another fulfilment of the words of the prophet.

Christians were only following a practice that was employed by Hebrew scholars in finding in the Old Testament meaningful links with the personality of Jesus.

HE END OF ALL THINGS IS AT HAND

Prophecy didn't die out. I think it was forced out.

We have looked this morning at a number of aspects of prophecy and a number of notable or notorious men who offered themselves, albeit at times reluctantly in the service of the Lord.

For every prophet that we hear or read about there must have been hundreds who are not mentioned or whose works have been forcibly suppressed.

Why?

The optimists and defenders of the faith would say, because they were false prophets and did not speak the word of the Lord.

The critics would say - because they got it wrong!

Their task was not helped by the fact that even the Old Testament admits that at times God puts into the mouth of the prophets a lying spirit. That seems so unfair and so unhelpful.

And while we might shrug it off and say well that is in the depth and the mystery of God, the people who were having to cope with this phenomenon on a daily basis said. "It is just too unreliable".

When the only way to tell the distinction between a prophet who was really a prophet of the Lord and a prophet who was not, was to wait and see if the action spoken about happened. This was far too difficult a prospect for those men and women who returned to the land of Israel after the Exile.

The rabbis literally said, "We have had enough...no more prophecy."

And that was it prophecy ceased to be a guiding force in the life of the nation. Instead they concentrated their efforts on that which could be seen and read and learnt. The people guided by the spirit, became the people guided by the book.

But of course you can't just knock it out. It had to re-appear in some other form. And perhaps one day we should look at that.