

# The Prophets Still Speak

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i> .....	3
Introduction to <i>The Prophets Still Speak</i> .....	4
Session 1. Prophetic Calls .....	5
Session 2. Amos and Micah: Calling for Social Justice .....	11
Session 3. Isaiah of Jerusalem: Calling for Righteous Leaders .....	18
Session 4. Hosea and Jeremiah: Calling for Single-Minded Devotion .....	25
Session 5. Ezekiel and “Second” Isaiah: Calling for Chastened Hope .....	31
Session 6. “Third” Isaiah and Jonah: Calling Forth a Broader Vision .....	37
Suggestions for Further Study.....	44

# Prophetic Calls

## Scripture

**Exodus 3:1–14** Moses' call from God in the burning bush in Midian

**Jeremiah 1:4–10** Jeremiah's story of God's call to him, which began before his birth

**Isaiah 6:1–13** A message the prophet Isaiah is eager to convey, until he finds out what it is

**Jonah 1:1–3; 3:1–5** The story of the prophet Jonah, who unsuccessfully flees from his calling

## Prayer

God of the prophets, you call individuals who are not necessarily gifted, except with conviction. Open us to hear your word to us. When your word is difficult and we fear opposition, give us courage, and grant us success. Amen.

## Introduction

The prophets of the Old Testament spoke urgent words to their contemporaries about the times in which they lived. They wrote about faithfulness, about trust, about doing justice, about international relations, about reasons for hope in suffering and uncertainty. But like great literature, prophetic words written for particular occasions continued to speak from generation to generation. Ancient scribes, perceiving that timely words can also be timeless, assembled the prophetic words, hand-copying them from one generation to the next for two millennia. Early scribes sometimes edited or extended the prophets' words, adding stories or even supplementing with later prophetic messages, creating complex and not always fully congruent books. This scribal activity has given us access to these ancient words. Because of their work, we too can hear through the prophets God's word to us, and learn what it means today "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Who was a prophet? The short answer is that prophets spoke (or wrote) on God's behalf. Beyond this, the question becomes

more complex. The category of “prophets” comprises fifteen books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and twelve shorter books from Hosea to Malachi). The books vary in length, subject, and genre. Some consist of poetic sayings, others of narrative, some of both. They range from sixty-six chapters to a single chapter. They also range from the eighth century B.C. to much later, perhaps the third or second century before Christ.

Not all biblical prophets are recorded in discrete books named after them. The books of Samuel and Kings record the deeds and messages of several prophets, many of whom are not named. Women prophets appear in Scripture as well, though not in their own prophetic books: Moses’ sister Miriam, the judge Deborah, Huldah in Josiah’s time, Isaiah’s own wife, and Noadiah in the time of Nehemiah.

Scripture does not say how most prophets began. It is not evident that “prophetic ministry” was any established career path. The most important prophets seem to have taken roles held today by social critics and commentators, editorializers and essayists who attempt to see and speak larger truths. Only a minority, notably Martin Luther King Jr. and other outspoken public theologians, couch their politics in God language. However, for ancient prophets politics and theology were inseparable.

Some stories tell of a few prophets’ beginnings. These stories may offer insight into the ways Christians too might be called to serve in particular ways. Most of the stories feature dismay at the message or the individual’s ability to convey it. In this session, we will examine four such accounts.

## **Moses at the Burning Bush**

The best-known story of prophetic call involves Moses, who was raised as an Egyptian prince, but who found himself opposing Egyptian slavery and, after a fierce battle of wills against Egypt’s pharaoh, led the Israelite slaves away. His birth and early life are narrated in the second chapter of Exodus amid stories of harsh treatment. After an attempt to help a slave ends in violence, he flees from Egypt. Years later, as a young man of eighty, Moses is tending his father-in-law’s sheep when he sees a bush burning (Exodus 3:1–3). From the bush God speaks, telling Moses that God has seen the Israelites’ suffering and is sending him to bring them out of Egypt. The reluctant Moses raises one objection after another. God does not argue, but continues to instruct. At some points, God accommodates

Moses' pleas, permitting him, for instance, to take his brother Aaron as spokesperson.

At first Moses is no more successful carrying out the divine commission than he had been previously, when following his own sense of wounded justice. He and Aaron meet resistance not only from the pharaoh, who scoffs at his message and pressures the slaves to work harder, but also from Israelites who suffer from Moses' interference. After further confrontations with the pharaoh, accompanied by escalating destruction and a series of plagues culminating in the deaths of the firstborn of every Egyptian family, Moses is able to free the Israelites. Even then, they are pursued by Egypt's army, and reach safety only when the sea parts for them but closes over pursuing soldiers. That decisive event, it turns out, is only the beginning of Moses' tribulations as he leads the people for the next forty years.

Moses is never referred to as a prophet in this account. In fact, God names Moses' brother, Aaron, Moses' prophet (Exodus 7:1), and the narrator calls Moses' sister, Miriam, a prophet (15:20). Only after Moses' death comes the comment "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10).

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## **Jeremiah Called from the Womb**

In view of Moses' struggles, the prophet call does not seem a privilege. While few seek unpopularity, Scripture's faithful prophets seem to attract it as a matter of course. Moses is Israel's first reluctant prophet, but not its last.

It consists not only of prophetic speeches, but also, like Exodus, stories of the prophet's deeds and dealings. Many have noted that Jeremiah's call resembles that of Moses, and that many themes of his book resemble themes in Moses' final speech in Deuteronomy. Scholars suspect a direct connection between the two books.

Whereas Moses brought the people to live in the land that would become Israel, Jeremiah lived at the far end of their time as a nation, after they had settled the land, acquired a king, and experienced some four hundred years of the dynasty of King David of Judah. By Jeremiah's time late in the seventh century B.C., the Assyrian empire

had conquered most of the original lands, and the small city-state that remained, Jerusalem of Judah, was being encroached upon by the next great empire, Babylon. Very little was left of what had once been a small but prosperous independent kingdom. The major political question for Jerusalem's rulers was whether, and how much, to accommodate or to resist Babylonian pressure.

As the book's introduction reveals, Jeremiah prophesies for several decades, from the end of King Josiah's reign until the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 B.C. Through this time, Jeremiah steadily gives the same unwelcome message: Babylon's threat actually comes from God, who is punishing an unjust society. Unlike Moses, who resisted Egypt's empirical power, Jeremiah urges leaders not to resist Babylon, whom God has destined to conquer their land. A nation weakened by its own leadership's ethical lapses does become more vulnerable to external threats. Yet, what makes abstract sense becomes quite offensive when it involves our own land and our own God—as it was to many of Jeremiah's own contemporaries.

In Jeremiah 1:4–10 the prophet describes God's call, originating long before: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (v. 5). Like Moses, Jeremiah objects that he cannot speak. For him it is not because his tongue is slow but because of his youth. Throughout the book, we see a prophet who, like Moses, struggles with his call, because the words he must say are too harsh, and the opposition too vehement. Though his convictions lead him to speak as clearly as anyone could, he frequently complains to God of the difficulty of the message. As the nation is indeed exiled to Babylon, Jeremiah turns from a message of condemnation to one of hope for a future he will not live to see, just as Moses did not live to enter the Promised Land.

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## **Prophetic Vocations and Particular Messages**

It is not clear whether Isaiah's call to speak a message of doom to his fellow Jerusalemites in the eighth century B.C., more than a century before Jeremiah's time, is his first prophetic call or is simply a call to speak a particular message during a segment of his career. The fact

that it does not follow the pattern seen in Moses' and Jeremiah's stories, and the fact that this narrative occurs in chapter 6, after five solid chapters of prophecy, suggest the latter.

Isaiah relates his story as a vision occurring in the year that King Uzziah of Jerusalem dies. Instead of a dead human king, Isaiah sees the living divine king, enthroned in Jerusalem's temple. The vision depicts extravagance and awe, from the smoke that fills the room to the praises of attending seraphs. At first, the prophet is afraid. But one of the seraphs brings him a burning coal with which to touch his lips, purifying him. When he hears God asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (v. 8), he loses all reluctance, and unlike Moses and Jeremiah, eagerly volunteers, saying, "Here I am; send me!"

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But the message God gives is as unwelcome as those given to Moses and Jeremiah. In fact, it is paradoxical: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand" (v. 9), a message designed not to sharpen hearing but to prevent it. Isaiah's response—"How long?"—is probably not a temporal question ("How many years, please?") so much as a plea for mercy, such as the psalmists often made. (See, for example, Psalm 6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 74:9–10; and 90:13.) The devastating final word from God is that this will continue until the land is utterly desolate.

## **Prophetic Reluctance and Divine Grace**

Even when it meant deliverance for his people, Moses was reluctant to speak against the pharaoh. Jeremiah and Isaiah were understandably reluctant to speak against their own people. One more story reinforces the image of reluctant prophets. Here the prophet does not speak to his own people at all, but is told to preach to an enemy nation, calling it to repentance.

In the only prophetic book comprised entirely of narrative, Jonah is told to preach against Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. God says, "Cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). Whereas Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah talked back to God, Jonah simply flees, taking the next boat west. When God dramatically brings him back through a sea storm and

an accommodating fish, and sends him again to Nineveh, Jonah sets out, but his delivery is minimalist in the extreme. He goes one-third of the way into the city, saying, “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown” (3:4). He does not appear to elaborate on his message, or even to reveal its source. Ironically, though, he succeeds more than any other prophet: the Ninevites immediately and sincerely repent, and God forgives them. It is only then that we discover that this was why Jonah fled. Just as other prophets did not wish to speak against their own nation, Jonah did not wish God to extend grace to enemies.

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### **Spiritual Practice**

To what is God calling you today? Is it a welcome message or a difficult one? Clear or indistinct? Spend a few moments mindfully keeping your heart open to the Spirit’s promptings.

### **Questions for Reflection**

When have you felt God’s urging to do something difficult?

What was your response to God’s urging?

In what ways did your reaction to God’s urging evolve over time?