

Illustrate the main characteristics of the work of the prophets first in the ninth century and then in the eighth century. Show how prophecy developed in this period.

This essay will contend that, although we are limited to examination of but a few examples, we have sufficient evidence to conclude that prophecy changed significantly from the ninth to the eighth century BC. The change that occurred was partly a process of evolution, in that certain changes were linked to earlier forms of prophecy; however, there were certain discontinuities where distinct characteristics of the institution of prophecy emerged for the first time. The development of prophecy during this latter period, then, was novel in certain regards, and these will be described in the context of the work of several prophets¹ and, in particular, by consideration of their message, their media and their conduct.

Conduct

The prophets of the ninth century BC – and here we are chiefly concerned with Elijah and Elisha – exhibited certain religious, social and behavioural characteristics. As prophets they worked powerful miracles, such as Elijah's reviving a dead boy (1 Kings 17:17-24) and Elisha's doing likewise (2 Kings 4:32-37), as well as miracles controlling nature, offering healing and revealed elements of the spiritual realms. Elijah is depicted as a predominantly solitary figure, but there are several references to the communal lives of early prophets, with a "head" or "master" prophet and a number of disciples who may have been minor prophets themselves (2 Kings 4:38, 2 Kings 6:1). We also know of prophets of the royal court and those under the king's patronage, such as the 400 prophets summoned by the king of Israel in 1 Kings 22:6. At this time prophets are known to have used music and dance to enter ecstatic trances,² and some have described Elijah as one such ecstatic.³ A further feature of Elijah and Elisha is that they were very influential upon the kings of their time, with Elisha in particular acting as king's counsellor and advising the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom;

¹ We follow Metzger and Coogan's definition of prophets as "men or women believed to be recipients through audition, vision, or dream of divine messages that they passed on to others by means of speech or symbolic action" (1993, p.620) and note that this took the form of "foretelling the future [but also that] they forth-told... God's word." (Packer & Williams 1999, p.165).

² 1 Samuel 10:5-13 describes a musical procession of prophets prophesying, and Elisha on at least one occasion used music to ready himself for receiving God's message (2 Kings 3:15-19) – Wade (1951), p.381.

indeed, Elisha could be further described as a kingmaker, since it was he who indicated that Hazael and Jehu would become kings of Aram and Israel respectively.⁴

In the eighth century, prophets such as Hosea, Amos, Isaiah and Micah emerged, with different characteristics to the earlier prophets. For example, they were less politically influential, although Isaiah did have access to the royal court.⁵ It seems that a professional class of court prophets was established by this time, but that these were yes-men or, to quote Bright, “timeservers [who had] capitulated completely to the existing order.”⁶ Although the eighth-century prophets certainly had spiritual experiences, they did not prophesy in a state of ecstasy and neither were they miracle-workers. As we shall see, they relied more on argument, reasoning and preaching.

Media

The media through which the prophets of the ninth- and eighth-centuries expressed themselves were socially and culturally determined; that is to say that although the prophets communicated a *message* originating outside of contemporary society, the *means* in which they communicated were very much tied to that society. As such it is no surprise that there are no records or oracles directly attributable to Elijah or Elisha, since written records were scarce and these prophets were not necessarily literate. By the eighth century, however, literacy was more widespread and we have books in the Bible attributed to Hosea, Amos, Isaiah and Micah and written from a personal perspective, e.g. “the words of Amos...” (Amos 1:1) and Isaiah’s commission beginning with “I saw the Lord seated on a throne...” (Isaiah 6:1).

These books of the prophets contain fewer stories – whether historical or legendary – than the earlier Old Testament books which inform us about Elijah and Elisha. Instead they are Spirit-

³ Drane (1987), p.116 says “in some ways, he [Elijah] is a member of that line of ecstasies...”

⁴ 2 Kings 8:13, 2 Kings 9:1-13.

⁵ Indeed, Jewish tradition has it that Isaiah was of royal birth (Packer & Williams, p.162 and Dillard & Longman (1995), p.276).

⁶ Bright (1981), p.261.

inspired⁷ sermons, oracles and illustrations, recorded from, or by, the prophets themselves; at this point in history, “the word of God received and transmitted by the prophet now assumes primary importance.”⁸ The eighth-century prophets, starting with Amos, were writers (or at least verbal dictators), and they passed on their works to their followers.⁹ They were also preachers to large numbers of people, and this stands in contrast to the solitary, courtly or small-audience revelations given by Elijah and Elisha some 50 to 150 years earlier.

Message

In this third area we see a great deal of continuity, as the eighth-century prophets built on the theology, teaching and instructions of their predecessors.¹⁰ However, we also see the emergence of new ideas, shocking in their novelty and deeply profound in their implications for the Jews and their beliefs. These ideas were “uttered in more reasoned and intellectual terms”¹¹ than we understand to be the case for Elijah and Elisha.

Firstly, we see the development of a train of thought that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, was God beyond Israel, i.e. that He was omnipresent and unique as a deity, with claims of universal sovereignty. This theological viewpoint had been expressed by Elijah (who claimed that God was active in Phoenicia) but it was later prophets such as Amos who took it to its logical, monotheistic conclusion.

Secondly, a new message of judgement was preached and prophesied: that the Israelites had not lived up to God’s demands and expectations and would be held account, being guilty of syncretistic and sometimes Baalite behaviour. The belief of the moral inadequacy of the Jewish people was now associated with the “Day of the Lord (Yahweh)” which had previously been foretold and which is first reinterpreted in Amos, whereby “the day of the Lord... will be

⁷ Standard notations were used, such as “the word of the Lord came to...”, see Hosea 1:1, 3:1, 4:1, Isaiah 2:1, Amos 1:1 etc. which point to the purported divine origin of the words recorded.

⁸ Metzger & Coogan (1993), p.621.

⁹ See Isaiah 8:16-17 and 30:8.

¹⁰ Von Rad (1968) p.148 agrees that “the [eighth-century] prophets most decidedly took as their starting-point the old traditions of Yahwism.”

darkness, not light... pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness.”¹² The Israelites were now informed that their history was one of failure,¹³ and this was indeed a radical reinterpretation for God’s “chosen people”. The concept that a new covenant would be necessary has its origins in this period, from eighth-century prophets such as Hosea, who speaks of the suffering of God through the analogy of his own marriage to Gomer – which was broken and then restored.¹⁴ As a further challenge to traditional Jewish belief, it was now being suggested that God Himself brought punishment upon the Israelites (whether He used natural disasters,¹⁵ foreign powers¹⁶ or other means), despite His selection of them as His chosen people.

Thirdly, an increasing emphasis was placed on the need for social justice, which the eighth-century prophets communicated as a desire and instruction from God. In a broad sense, the ninth-century prophets were political activists, and their eighth-century successors were social activists, if such a dichotomy is permissible. In part this urging towards social justice was necessary since Israel and Judah, in the decades after 785BC, were experiencing near-unprecedented wealth, which was not being spread justly throughout society:

“Israel’s prosperity... benefited the ruling class and gave them arrogant self-confidence. As a result of long [and successful] wars, and the turning of an originally desert economy into one based on city life, without the necessary social adjustments, wealth had become unevenly distributed.”¹⁷

The call for social justice is radical and touches on many areas: Isaiah and Micah both condemn landholders who have dispossessed the poor,¹⁸ and other targets for criticism

¹¹ Grant (1984), p.126.

¹² Amos 5:18,20.

¹³ Von Rad (1968) p.150 has the Jews’ history announced by the prophets as “one great failure.”

¹⁴ Hosea 1-3.

¹⁵ Wade (1951) p.400 observes that “in the frequent calamities of earthquake, drought and war the prophets of the eighth century saw the agencies of the Divine judgment.”

¹⁶ According to Metzger & Coogan (1993), p.291, “conquest by Assyria is identified as punishment by God” and Packer & Williams (1999) interpret Isaiah 1:4-9 to infer that political oppression of Israel and Judah was a sign of His displeasure (p. 161).

¹⁷ Lowther Clarke (1952), p.597.

¹⁸ Isaiah 3:13-15, 5:8 and Micah 2:1-2.

include judges who were corrupt;¹⁹ bribable prophets;²⁰ and oppressors of the underprivileged.²¹

This desire for an end to social injustice was only part of the moralistic message of eighth-century prophets. Like prophets of the previous century, they were concerned by immoral behaviour²² and with the increasing observance of other religions, notably Baalism. They were also disturbed that adherence to Old Testament law had become ritualistic and meaningless, often seen as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end. With this in mind Amos conveys God's word with extraordinary power, and reinforces the call for social justice:

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them... Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"²³

Conclusion

Whilst we may note Drane's objection that the prophets were "so diverse that perhaps we need to speak individually of particular prophets rather than trying to speak of them all in one breath,"²⁴ it is possible to find a level of generalisation which is both appropriate and meaningful. In this short essay we have seen that in three areas – message, media and conduct – the work of the eighth-century prophets built upon, but certainly differed significantly from, that of their ninth-century predecessors. Prophecy, then, can be said to have developed meaningfully both in practice and theologically. In practice it developed into a more reasoned, written discourse aimed at society in general; whilst theologically it developed into a more explicit understanding of the nature of God, His desire for justice, and His relationship with the

¹⁹ Isaiah 5:22-23, 10:1-2 and Amos 5:7,12.

²⁰ Micah 3: 5-11.

²¹ Isaiah 3:13-15 and Amos 2:7, 5:11-12, 8:4.

²² Examples include sexual immorality (Hosea 7:4), idolatry (Hosea 8:4-6), slave trading (Amos 2:6, 8:5), not observing the Sabbath (Amos 8:5), drunkenness (Isaiah 5:11,22 and 28:7-8) and dishonest trading and theft (Amos 8:5, Hosea 4:2, 12:7).

²³ Amos 5:21-24.

²⁴ Drane (1987), p.154.

Jews. The style of Elijah and Elisha had been replaced, with the end of ecstatic practices in the mainstream institution of the prophets, and much less forceful political interventionism, to be replaced by greater prominence of social justice, a call for action-based faith, and an awareness that the Jews were facing a judgemental Day of the Lord as a result of their unfaithfulness.

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