

What was a prophet in the Old Testament?

A prophet in the Old Testament was someone who was used by God to communicate His message to the world. Prophets were also called “seers” because they could “see,” spiritually speaking, as God gave them insight (1 Samuel 9:9). The prophets can be divided into the “writing prophets” such as Isaiah, Daniel, Amos, and Malachi; and the “non-writing prophets” such as Ahijah (1 Kings 11:29), Micaiah (2 Chronicles 18:7), and Elisha (1 Kings 19:16). There are also some anonymous prophets in the Old Testament, such as the unnamed prophet in Judges 6:7-10.

The prophets came from a variety of backgrounds, spoke to different audiences, possessed unique styles, and used assorted methods. Most of the Old Testament prophets’ messages concerned the people of Israel; if other nations were mentioned in the oracles, it was usually in connection to those nations’ dealings with Israel. Most prophets of God were men, but the Old Testament also mentions prophetesses such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20, ESV), Deborah (Judges 4:4, ESV), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14, ESV). All prophets shared some characteristics that made their ministries “prophetic.”

A prophet was called by God to be a prophet. Isaiah and Ezekiel were given visions of God’s glory (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1). God told Jeremiah that he had been picked out prior even to his birth: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, / before you were born I set you apart; / I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). A common description of the source of the message is that “the word of the Lord came” to the prophet (Jeremiah 1:2; Ezekiel 1:3; Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1). Another description is that the prophet received an “oracle,” that is, a special revelation from God (Isaiah 13:1; Habakkuk 1:1; Numbers 24:16, ESV).

A prophet was required to deliver God's message accurately. The prophet Micaiah put it well: "As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell [the king] only what the Lord tells me" (1 Kings 22:14). Those who, like Jeremiah, tried to keep silent found they could not (Jeremiah 20:9). Those who, like Jonah, tried to avoid their responsibility were corrected (Jonah 1:3-4). Others, like the unnamed prophet from Judah who directly disobeyed the divine command, lost their lives (1 Kings 13:15-24).

A prophet sometimes had a unique appearance. Elijah was known for wearing "a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:8). Elijah's mantle that he left for Elisha was also seen as a symbol of the prophetic office (2 Kings 2:13-14). God told Ezekiel to shave his head and beard (Ezekiel 5:1). Other prophets were set apart in other ways: Jeremiah, for example, was told he could not marry (Jeremiah 16:2); Hosea was told to marry a prostitute (Hosea 1:2). All prophets were recognized as those through whom God spoke (even if their message was not welcome).

A prophet often led a hard life. Isaiah was sent to a people "ever hearing, but never understanding" (Isaiah 6:9), and (according to tradition) he was eventually murdered for his efforts. Ezekiel ministered to "a rebellious people" (Ezekiel 12:2). The queen of Israel sought to take Elijah's life (1 Kings 19:2). Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern, where he "sank down into the mud" (Jeremiah 38:6). Jesus spoke of Jerusalem as those "who kill the prophets and stone those sent" to them (Luke 13:34), and, speaking to the Jewish leaders of his day, Stephen asked this condemning question: "Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute?" (Acts 7:52).

Often, a prophet in the Old Testament predicted the future. Sometimes, the prophecies

concerned events that were soon to happen; for example, Joseph predicted seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine in Egypt, events that occurred within the next fourteen years (Genesis 41:25-36). Many other prophets foresaw things in the distant future; for example, many of Daniel's and Zechariah's prophecies concern the second coming of Christ and other end-times events (Daniel 12:1; Zechariah 12:10).

The Old Testament also mentions false prophets. These were liars who claimed to speak for God but were intent upon deceiving the people or serving their own interests. Ahab had nearly four hundred such false prophets in his employ (1 Kings 22:6, 23). Nehemiah's work was opposed by several false prophets and one false prophetess (Nehemiah 6:14). The test of a prophet was 100 percent accuracy in what he said (Deuteronomy 18:22). If a prophet's predictions did not come true, then he could not have been speaking for God, since God never lies (Numbers 23:19).

The role of Old Testament prophet reached its consummation in the person of John the Baptist, who was predicted in Malachi 4:5 (cf. Luke 7:26-27); and in Jesus Christ, who was the Prophet "like Moses" predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15 (cf. Acts 3:22).