



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES IV

THE PROPHETS AND REVELATION

Lesson 1 Commentary Prophets and Revelation
Lesson 2 Questions Joshua and Judges

GOD SPEAKS TO HIS PEOPLE

The word of the Lord came to me, saying,
 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.

INTRODUCTION

As we read and ponder the words of the prophets this year, we will be moved by their courage in standing up for what is right, and by their anguish at their leaders' (and their culture's) values. The prophets themselves viewed their people through the eyes of a compelling truth coming from God. They were called to witness to God's challenge to change.

These ordinary persons in their ordinary occupations and experiences were priests (Isaiah) or shepherds and vine-dressers (Amos), wronged husbands with unfaithful wives (Hosea). Approached by God in an unforgettable encounter, they saw their times and their culture as God did. The light of reality—divine light—burst upon the life lived in their palaces, cities, and country, light that touched off a tumultuous response in them. From then on, they felt an unrelenting need to cry out against the dark and evil areas of court life, against the cities' blind following of economic

and political gain, against their leaders' trust in pagan nations' help and a frightening lack of recourse to Yahweh, the great Leader of all.

They saw all these values as false gods that weakened Yahweh's leadership of the Chosen People. As we go through these scriptures of the prophets, note what they cried as spokesmen for God, what anguished them, what kind of God they reveal—the God who cared about His people and knew what was going to happen to them. For God showed these men disaster and correctives that follow sinful deeds. God's love gave warning beforehand to His Chosen People. We, too, are His chosen people. We are the ones who are challenged this year to look critically at our society, at our lives in the light of God's Word.

I. ROLE OF THE PROPHET

A. God's First Calls. It is fitting that we look first at the father of the Israelites, Abraham, who first heard God's word to them. God ap-

peared and said: "I shall give this country to your descendants" (Genesis 12:7).

This can be called the first prophecy given the Israelites, for Abraham and his son Isaac passed this word down the generations until the great leader Moses received these words from God: "Tell the Israelites: Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. I shall bring you out of the misery of Egypt to the country of the Canaanites (Exodus 3:16-17). Like grapes in the wilderness I found Israel; Like the first fruit on the fig tree, In its first season I saw your fathers...When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 9:10; 11:1).

Both Abraham and Moses can be called prophets; let us see the meaning of this word, this role in the Bible.

B. Meaning of the Word. The word prophet comes from the Greek word *prophetes*, one who speaks for another. The Hebrew is *nebi* or *nabi*. God's words quoted above to Moses explain very well the meaning of "prophet." "Tell the Israelites" there is a message from God to the people; "The God of Abraham...has sent me to you"—one is sent by God to give others a message. Moses himself begged off: "I am no speaker!" So God appoints his brother Aaron to be spokesperson for God's spokesperson! We will see others who did the same. Later, Moses developed a real readiness to speak to the people, as we see in studying the Pentateuch.

C. The Call of a Prophet. The prophet has an immediate experience of God. He is one to whom the holiness and the will of God has been revealed; one who contemplates the present in its future, through the eyes of God; one sent to bring the people back to obedience and love of God.

A true prophet is fully aware that he or she is a mouthpiece. The word of God came to him; he must pass it on. A prophet is sensitive to evil; he

sees great offenses to God and reacts, responds to them. He is stirred, compelled to speak. He will often live in loneliness and misery, be treated with callousness and mistreated by authority, yet what happened in him is what is important to him. He has a sense of being overpowered (Amos 3:8). As we meet the prophets of Israel, we will see this happen and hopefully, we shall be better listeners than their first hearers.

"We possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable. You will do well to be attentive to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Know this first of all, that there is no prophecy of scripture that is a matter of personal interpretation, for no prophet ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by the Holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God" (2 Peter 1:19-21).

D. Aim of Prophecy. Prophecy is not used to foretell the future as in a timetable. It relates to the future only by its relationship to the present. "This will come if you..." God's will is not being done, not being lived. He sends a prophet in hopes of saving those who so need it.

E. Origin and Types.

1. Prophecy in Israel probably began through Moses in the Exodus. The book of Deuteronomy has some of Moses' last instructions, in which he mentions prophecy, already known by the people: "These nations whom you are going to dispossess have listened to soothsayers and mediums, but Yahweh your God does not permit you to do this... Anyone who refuses to listen to my words... spoken in my name, will have to render an account to me..." "You may be wondering, 'How are we to tell that a prophet does not come from Yahweh?' When a prophet speaks in the name of Yahweh and the thing does not happen and the word is not fulfilled, then it has not been said by Yahweh" (Deuteronomy 18:14, 19-22).

In the New Testament the letter from James tells us, “As your models in suffering hardships and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (James 5:10).

2. Types

a. Also mentioned in the Bible are “seers,” “ecstatic prophets” and “cult prophets.” Seer is another name for prophet. David is mentioned consulting “his seer, Gad.”

b. Ecstatic prophets were common in the whole Eastern cultures. This type seemed to result from intense emotion, heightened by music, dance, and singing, especially in bands of prophets. We shall see both ecstatic prophets and bands (guilds) of them this year.

Some of the biblical prophets are said to “have the Spirit of Yahweh (ruah) fall upon the person so that he was an instrument of the divine will: “possessed by God’s Spirit” (Numbers 11:24-29). A kind of behavior resulted that gave witness, usually, that the prophet was “prophesying.” In this case, it probably meant an emotion, a reaction, to a deep experience of God. Christian saints also have ecstatic reactions to close contact with God. It is suspect when other signs in a person’s life do not give witness to a close contact with God, or to a balanced personality. Some scholars think prophetic behavior such as this was learned from Canaan’s Baal religion (god of storm and fertility). Though it may have been borrowed and be suspect it was also transformed at times into true prophecy.

c. Cult Prophets. These were attached to a shrine such as Bethel or Gilgal (2 Kings 2:3-4). They led prayer, especially intercessory prayer, conducted services, served the shrine, etc. Women were not excluded in these. One of the stories in 2 Kings (4:1-7) includes the widow of a guild prophet. There were also the earlier prophetesses Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21), Deborah

(Judges 4:4), and in King Josiah’s day, the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20).

Scholars increasingly realize the great influence shrines and bands of guilds of prophets had upon Israelite tradition and religion.

d. Individual Prophets. These were specially called to give God’s messages. Some were non-writing prophets: Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, Micaiah, and others. The writing prophets are in two groups: Major—their writings are longest, and Minor—twelve of them with shorter writings. We will touch on all these prophets this year, giving more time and study to the Major and Minor prophets. As we do, we will bring in the history of their times.

e. Apocalyptic Literature. Apocalyptic literature uses the theme of God’s revelation concerning the end-time to give hope to persecuted believers. Some of this is in the Old Testament and we will note it there. At the end of our year we have reserved several lessons for the Apocalypse (or Revelation) of John, which is in the same style as the book of Daniel, and part of Isaiah. This type is intended to be understood by the readers of that time, to give them courage and reminders of the promises of God. We today need quite a bit of help in discerning these messages, and self-appointed interpreters abound, many of them quite unfit for it. We will see the traditional Catholic interpretation as it has developed in the Church. It is indeed encouraging and strengthening.

II. THE PROPHETS’ IMPORTANCE TO ISRAEL

A. Furthered Divine Revelation. The Israelites saw that their God was a caring God and that He continued to teach them through the prophets. They learned from these what their God was like, what He blessed and what He expected;

how He reacted to unfaithfulness and to commitment.

B. Kept the Nation Faithful to Yahweh. Strengthened and Furthered Monotheism

The Israelites, in the midst of worship of many pagan gods, were taught again and again that their God was the one and only God. They learned early and late that He is judge of the smallest nations as well as great empires; that these are used as instruments and weapons as He guides history, especially His Chosen People. Their God is the Master of all creation, all nations.

C. Taught a Transcendent God. God is holy; infinitely above the children of men. Yet He is near, He is kind to the lowliest. Hosea even shows Yahweh as wedding Israel to Himself in a great love, a forgiving love.

III. IMPORTANCE OF THE PROPHETS TO ALL RELIGIONS

Prophetic literature is a gift to all religions sharing the Bible: Jewish, Catholic (Roman, Orthodox), Anglican, Protestant, Moslem.

All of these religions, regrettably, have differing Bibles hence the inclusion and exclusion of parts of the books or complete books, among them some prophetic writings. This happened first in the division of God's people into Jews and Christians. The Christian Bible includes the New Testament, which is not in the Jewish Scriptures. The second difference came in the division of the Protestant Christians apart from the "Mother Church." Luther's translation followed the list drawn up in 90 A.D. at Jamnia in Palestine by Pharisee scholars. The Septuagint, a Greek translation of traditional Jewish scriptures, included books that were composed by Greek-speaking Jews and was considered inspired. This version was the one Jesus and the apostles knew, since they lived in an empire in which the written language was Greek. The New Testament was all composed in Greek. The 90 A.D. Pharisees took

out of the Scriptures as then known, any book written in Greek, due to an exaggerated concern for the Hebrew language. This is the scripture that Martin Luther translated into the German of his day. This list removed any book written in Greek by Hebrew for Hebrews. The Christian Bible up to Luther's time is still the Catholic Bible Canon, collected and approved by the Church in the 370's.

It is pertinent here to realize that writings of the Apostles were in Greek, that many "gospels" and other writings claimed to be on a par with the apostolic gospels. After the Christian religion was given freedom to publicly exist, the bishop of Rome asked all bishops to collect any of these writings in their area. A council of these bishops drew up the list as we have it, setting aside those with a mixture of doubtful truth and fact, and keeping those decided by "us and the Holy Spirit" as Jesus promised. The others are still preserved as apocrypha books such as the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, etc. but they are pretty fanciful spots!

IV. IMPORTANCE OF THE PROPHETS TO US

A prophet said NO to his society, he was one who condemned false values, assumptions, and habits; one who pointed out complacency, and the syncretism of the time which saw all religions of equal value, and tolerated all. A prophet was compelled often to proclaim the opposite of what his heart expected.

God's objective in sending prophets was to reconcile man to God. In His way was man's false sense of sovereignty, his abuse of freedom, his aggressive, sprawling pride that resented God's involvement in history.

As we read over the above paragraphs, we ask ourselves: Do I say NO to false values, complacency, damaging tolerance? Do I recognize and combat wrongs crying out to God's justice?

Prophets of Israel urged response then, for the present of their times made their future, as we shall see this year. So the freedom of our decision to respond affects our future; the group response creates a national future. God is still speaking to us through men or women who decry unjust practices and bring about changes: Gandhi's efforts in India, Martin Luther King's in the South, Mother Theresa's in poor nations. God teaches us through disasters in times that flaunt His teachings. Do we recognize God's freedom to send signs to His world today, such as the plagues of Egypt, the Babylonian captivity?

Thus says the Lord, Seek me and live... Seek good, and not evil, Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the land (Amos 5:4;15).

V. APPLICATION

Are we sensitive to the evil of our times? Do we respond in some way? How can we be a prophet for our generation? Can we discern true from false prophets? As you study the prophets this year, find a model for yourself, to find a sense of mission like the biblical prophets.

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 2
Joshua and Judges

Day 1 Read the Notes.

- a. What was new to you?

- b. What values of our society today are “false gods”?

Day 2 The Lord promised land that he had chosen for the Israelites, but they had to win it from their enemies.

- a. Compare this with Christian life.

- b. Read Joshua 2:1-24; 3:1, 7-17; 4:10-24; Matthew 1:5. What enlightened or helped you?

Day 3 Read Joshua 5:1, 10-12 and 6:1-25.

- a. What lesson do you learn from the story of Jericho’s capture?

- b. Read Joshua 8:30-35; 10:38-43; 11:23. Compare the worship in Joshua 8:30-35 to our Sunday worship.

- c. Read Joshua 14:1-5; 19:49-51. On the map given you, locate the tribes given land east of the Jordan, and those west of it. Was it already under their control?

Day 4 Read Joshua 23 and 24.

- a. What reasons did Joshua give for not marrying with pagan tribes?
- b. Read Judges 2:6-23; 3:1, 4-6. What caused the Israelites to do evil?
- c. How did God show His faithfulness?

Day 5 Judges 3 gives brief memories of the first three judges.

- a. Then we come to a distinctive judge: a prophetess and a woman who has two chapters. Read Judges 4:1-10, 15-24. What did you learn from it?
- b. Read some or all of Deborah's Cantic (song). It rates as the best example of early Hebrew poetry. Choose a quote that you like and tell what it says to you.
- c. Read Judges 6:1, 7-40 about Gideon. What does this passage teach you?

Day 6 Read Ruth, the story of a Moabite woman.

- a. What relation was she to King David?
- b. Re-read Matthew 1:1-6. Three mothers are mentioned. What is unusual about them? (see New American Bible footnote)

Series IV

Lesson 1
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Map 3
Palestine of the Old Testament

▬ Tribes of Israel

▬ Tribes of Judah

* Neighbouring Peoples

miles
0 10
kilometres
0 10

