

BIBLE STUDY ON THE PROPHETS

Prophets have been concerned with fundamental changes in human society. They understood a great deal about change and they offered an alternative perception of reality.

The Old Testament mentions prophecy over 300 times. In its wide usage persons were called prophets who communicated a divine message - Abram (Gen 20:7), Aaron (Ex. 7:1). We generally think of them receiving a call and spreading God's message in an oral, dramatic, or written form.

Sometimes prophets were very confronting of the king; at other times they were very supportive. Scholars suggest that the prophets represented the kingship of Yahweh (God). When the earthly king operated within the divine will, the prophet was a friendly intercessor or messenger of God to the king.

1. Read Deuteronomy 18:18-22 and 1 King chapter 22. What do these passages say about God's prophets and false prophets. Who are such prophets today?

2. Read Jeremiah 1:10 and 31:27-34. Jeremiah takes place before and after Judah was overthrown by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. How does God relate to nations in negative and positive ways? How can despair and hope relate to our nation?

2. Read Micah 2:1-2; 3:1-2, 8-9; and 6:8. Looking at the notes below, pick out the verses relating to leadership, economics and the system. Do you agree with Brueggemann?

(on Micah) "In biblical faith, the doing of justice is the primary expectation of God. Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them. ... Of the indictments from Micah, we may note three important factors. First, the poetry is addressed to the leadership ... Second, the agenda is consistently economic. Third, Micah is making a critique of the system of social control. The invitation to do justice is in a context of the systemic power of evil." TO ACT JUSTLY, LOVE TENDERLY AND WALK HUMBLLY, Walter Brueggemann, 1986.

A BIBLE STUDY ON ISAIAH 40-55

Are we living in exile? Yes, suggests Walter Brueggemann who states that *"those persons, however, find out even in their power and influence how difficult it is to act through the rhetoric and out of the claims of this theological tradition. Like Daniel and the exiles of ancient Israel, the powerful among us must travel mostly incognito in the culture at large the faith claims in our theological tradition are increasingly at odds with dominant American values the anti-human side of American self-discernment has grown more powerful and bold. We hold to an identity and a vocation, an overriding loyalty, which is largely unwelcome in our society."*

For Brueggemann, Neither assimilation nor despair are appropriate responses. Instead he calls for "fresh, imaginative theological work" through six disciplines of readiness he draws from Isaiah 40-55. The six are a litany of dangers - memories, criticism, promises, song, bread, and departure.

Read Isaiah 46:6-7, 51:1-2, and Hebrews 11:8-13. Can your faith speak of dangerous memories and criticism within our empire.

Read Isaiah 54:1-3 and 42:10-16. Are their dangerous promises and songs to embrace today?

Read Isaiah 55:1-3, 12, and 52:11-12. Is their a satisfying dangerous nourishing bread for you? (see Exodus 16) Should we depart from the American empire? (see note below)

"We reflect upon a departure from the ideology of the empire, from militarism which produces fear, from consumerism which ends in satiated despair, from greed which breeds brutality, from ambition which ends in isolation, from competence which begets anxiety ...

"Such newness of people, community and creation is God's gift which God may give or withhold. We can only stand in readiness for what God may do But that standing in readiness requires the use intentional disciplines which in every case are marked by danger: dangerous memories reaching all the way back to our barren mother Sarah; dangerous criticism which mocks the deadly empire; dangerous promises which imagine a shift Of power in the world; dangerous songs which sing of unexpected newness of life; dangerous bread free of all imperial ovens; all leading to dangerous departures of heart and body and mind, leavings undertaken in trust and obedience. The gospel, in our moment of exhaustion, is a caring promise and a wondrous assertion that we belong and are intensely cared for." (Is:43:1-2) (See Brueggemann's ISAIAH commentary)

A BIBLE STUDY ON JEREMIAH

Jeremiah lived during the time of the fall of Jerusalem (597 and 586 B.C.). Israel was idolatrous and sinful. The nation did not repent so God raised up his "servant" Nebuchadnezzar to "destroy them and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation." (Jer 25:9).

The book of Jeremiah is not only about Judah but is also about Jeremiah himself. Jeremiah feared for his life, even in his hometown Anathoth (11:18f). Jeremiah felt great anger and grief about his land and his nation. He had to withdraw support for his nation; even God directed him to stop praying for the people (7:16, 11:14)!

Walter Brueggemann traces three aspects of the theological tradition found in Jeremiah: "Israel's covenant with Yahweh, rooted in the memories and mandates of the Sinai tradition; the pathos of Yahweh; and the royal-temple ideology of Jerusalem.

1. Read Jeremiah 7:6-9; 11:9-13 and 7:4. What were the sins of Judah? Were they hiding behind the royal-temple ideology (v. 4)? (see note below)
2. Read Jeremiah 11:1-8. What is the covenant? When it says "command" (v. 4) and "obey" (v. 7), do you accept the covenant requiring obedience?
3. Read Jeremiah 11:14-23; 12:7-13. Do you believe God will do something like this today? Do you sense anger and grief about our nation? About God?

"Indeed, that Jeremiah's contemporaries could not discern the relation between imperial politics and covenantal theology is a central issue of the book. ... Thus the severity of covenant sanctions and the power of God's yearning pathos are set in deep tension. This deep tension forms the central interest, theological significance and literary power of the book of Jeremiah. ... Royal-temple ideology articulated in the Jerusalem establishment, fostered by the king and articulated by temple priests, claimed that the God of Israel had made irrevocable promises to the temple and the monarchy, had taken up permanent residence in Jerusalem, and was for all time a patron and guarantor of the Jerusalem establishment. Jeremiah's work only makes sense as antithetical response to that ideology." (Walter Brueggemann, TO PLUCK UP, TO TEAR DOWN, 1988, p. 3-6.)

A SECOND STUDY ON JEREMIAH

Jeremiah prophesied from 626 BC (his call, Jer 1:4-10) until the final defeat of Jerusalem by Babylon (587 BC). He was set apart from all the people and leaders and was without family. He did have support though. In his last years he even counseled the weak King Zedekiah. He followed King Jehoiachin who later was taken captive by the Assyrians in 598 BC. Jeremiah called for obedience (7:23-29, 23:1-5) and repentance and change of heart (8:4-7, 9:5).

The prophets called for repentance and often ignored mention of the covenant. Persecution and even martyrdom resulted. Informing and spying were common.

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. Look at a complete concordance and see to what extent the prophets used the word "covenant." Should we use it today?

Read Jeremiah 11:18-20 and 26:1-10, 20-24. Jeremiah was never killed but Uriah was. What contemporary persecution and martyrdom do you observe today?

Read Jeremiah 36:1-19. Micaiah was an informer. Can the church expect informers and spies on itself (see Luke 20:19-26)?

"Prophets are religious persons; not politicians, nor social reformers, nor thinkers nor philosophers nor poets The special gift of prophets is their ability to experience the divine in an original way, ... In every respect they give themselves up to their God and stand unreservedly at God's disposal That which distinguishes prophets from other homines religiosi is that they never keep their experiences to themselves; they always feel compelled to announce to others what they have seen and heard." (Prophecy in Ancient Israel, J. Lindblom, 1962, p. 1)

"... the prophets who preached judgment were hated and persecuted. The history of the Israelite prophets is a history of martyrdom, the outstanding example being Jeremiah (Jer 11:18f; 12:6; 15:10, 15; 18:18; 26: 1-10; ch 36-38; etc.) Hosea encountered hostility (Hos 9:8); Isaiah was scoffed at (Is 28:22); the attempt was made to prevent Micah from prophesying (Mic 2:6)." See also Jer 2:30; 26:20f; Is 50:6." (Lindblom, p. 204)