

LESSON 4

THE ETHICAL EMPHASES OF THE PROPHETIC AND POETIC BOOKS

PART I: ETHICS IN THE PROPHETS

Introduction

The Mosaic legislation had the purpose of being the guide for the nation in its relationship to God and to its neighbours. The Israelites spent several years conquering the Promised Land. In this period, Joshua and his helpers tried to persuade the people to be faithful to God by keeping the moral, civil, and social teachings of Moses. During the period of the judges, which is known as the 'dark ages' in the history of Israel, the people vacillated between following the teachings of God, as revealed through Moses, and the practices of the surrounding pagan nations. On the one side were the followers of Baal—the Canaanites—who provided constant temptation to practise idolatry, as well as being a political threat to the Israelites. In addition, Israel was experiencing the normal difficulties of a nation recently repatriated. There were enemies on every side, and thus each tribe had to engage in self-defence while learning to be an agricultural people. Their will to survive was tested on several occasions .

During the period of becoming established in the Promised Land, the Israelites frequently repeated an interesting cycle, especially under the judges:

1. experienced peace, tranquility, and prosperity as a result of obedience and faithfulness to God;
2. fell into sin as a nation;
3. suffered punishment from God as a consequence of their sins;
4. brought to repentance as a result of suffering;
5. restored to a relationship of peace and tranquility followed by God's prosperity for the nation.

Samuel is recognized as a man used by God during the time of transition for the nation. He was a judge, a priest, and a prophet, either simultaneously or at different times during his life. He is seen as a person who was striving to maintain theocracy when the nation began to clamour for a king. From the vantage point of our day, we can see the advantages of having a king rule over the nation Israel. During the time when the nation was little more than a loosely knit group of tribes and families, government by local judges had its advantages. But as the tribes united to form a nation, there was need for a centralized government which naturally resulted in the need for a ruler.

The Prophetic Message

What is prophecy?

God chose the medium of prophecy as a means of revealing His will to man in this epoch of the history of the nation Israel. Prophecy as a literary and verbal method was not unique nor exclusive to the Israelites. God used prophecy as a means of effectively revealing His will to the nation through the use of human media.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The Mosaic Law was to be the guide for the nation in its relationship to _____ and to its _____.

(God, neighbours)

BRIEFLY OUTLINE THE CYCLE WHICH THE ISRAELITES OFTEN EXPERIENCED AS THEY BECAME A NATION.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Samuel was a _____, a _____, and a _____.

(judge, priest, prophet)

What did God use to reveal his will to Israel through human media? _____

(prophecy)

Prophetic literature is characterized by the element of compulsion which was felt by the speaker. When one reads the prophetic books of the Old Testament, he is impressed by the burden which the prophets felt for bringing a radical change upon their world and its inhabitants. The words which are used to refer to the prophet indicate this truth. The Hebrew word *nabhi* came from a verb which means *to boil*. This verb is not used in the active voice in the Hebrew language; this indicates that the prophets were moved upon by a power outside themselves. The power was of such force that it caused them to 'boil forth' with the message which they had to speak. The Hebrew word *roeh* comes from the root that means *to see*. *Roeh* carries the idea that the prophet sees truths that the ordinary man is unable to discern. The English word *prophet* is derived from the Greek *pro*, meaning *before*, and *phēmi*, meaning *I speak*. Thus the prophet is one who speaks before, or in place of, another. The prophets felt that God had called them and was speaking through them to the people.

Prophecy contained many elements, such as clairvoyance (the ability to see mentally what is happening or exists out of sight or beyond the range of ordinary perception), ecstasy (the state of being beyond reason and self-control, or overwhelmed by emotion), and patriotism, besides moral instructions and predictions. However, our concern for ethics centres on moral instructions and predictions. Many people believe that the most important element in prophecy is prediction. They think one can find a mysterious key to the future of the nations of the world today through the messages of the prophets who wrote and spoke several hundred years before Christ. While it is true that many of the prophecies predicted future events, the great majority of these predictions were fulfilled in history during the time of the prophets or immediately thereafter. Many of the prophets predicted the destruction of Israel and Judah, which took place in 722 B.C. and 587 B. C. Even fulfilled prophecy is valuable because of the principles that grow out of it. Many of these principles still have application for our day as well as for future generations. In studying the prophetic messages, we should not get the idea that everything is pointing to future dates; rather we should see principles relevant to our day as well as the future in the messages.

Many of the prophets and their messages dealt with the moral situations in which they lived. The prophets were considered to be the moral preservatives in the life of their nations. Their messages were directed to the people and to the religious and political leaders. They appealed to the leaders to return to God and His revealed way in order for the two kingdoms to avoid disaster. This study turns now to the moral element in their messages.

Foundation for the prophetic message

The prophetic message was based upon theological and moral principles that man had received in previous revelations from God:

1. God is Creator (Jer. 27:5; Isa. 40:12-24);
2. God is omnipotent (has unlimited authority and power) and sovereign over His creation (Jer. 23:23-24; Amos 9:7; Isa. 43:1);
3. Man is the creation of God and has been given the responsibility of subduing the earth and having dominion over it (Gen. 1:28).

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

1. Prophetic literature is characterized by _____ on the part of the speaker.
2. The prophets were burdened for a radical _____ in their world and its inhabitants.
3. The prophets saw _____ that others were unable to discern.
4. Therefore, the prophets spoke in place of another: They spoke for _____ to the _____.

(1. compulsion; 2. change; 3. truths; 4. God; people)

The two elements of prophecy which involve ethics most are m _____ i _____ and p _____.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Many of the predictive messages of the prophets, even those that have been fulfilled, have applications for _____ as well as for the _____.

(today, future)

The theological and moral principles of prophetic messages included:

1. God is _____.
2. He is _____ and sovereign.
3. Man is God's creation and is responsible to _____ the earth and have _____ over it.

(1. Creator; 2. omnipotent; 3. subdue, dominion)

The prophets called to memory the covenant that God had made with Abraham and his descendants Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and later Moses. This covenant was a basis for appealing to the people to return to the God of their forefathers and to be faithful to Him and His teachings. Later the prophet Jeremiah was inspired to speak of a future new covenant which would be internal and not simply external, like the former covenants (31:31-34). The prophets emphasized the coming 'day of the LORD', which was to be a day of judgement—punishment by God of His people for their wickedness. This punishment would cause the nation to return to Him and decide to live in a way more pleasing to Him (Isa. 2:12; 13:6; Ezek. 30:6; Joel 1:15; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14). The prophets looked to the future when, under the reign of a perfect king (the Messiah), there would be peace, plenty, and harmony with God. They believed that God would send this king, the Messiah (Isa. 9:6-7).

In addition to the theological message for the nation, the prophets pronounced many messages that had to do with moral needs. They appealed for the basic moral principles of justice, love, mercy, and holiness. An appeal for justice was central to the message of Amos. Hosea, who lived towards the end of the history of Israel and saw the forthcoming collapse as a result of moral decay, emphasized love. Jeremiah and Ezekiel had much to say about personal responsibility. Micah summarized the content of ethical religion by stating that God requires us 'to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God' (6:8). The prophets emphasized the fact that ceremonialism is not sufficient for establishing a good relationship with God (see Amos 5:21-24).

The Pre-Literary Prophets

During the first years after Israel established a monarchy, the nation had many problems. There were frequent wars with the neighbouring tribes and nations, especially with the Philistines. Several times prophets appeared and directed the attention of the kings and the people to their responsibilities before God. An example of such action is seen in the case of David and Bathsheba when Nathan, the prophet of God, appeared to admonish David (2 Sam. 12).

The authors of the historical books of the Old Testament evaluated the reign of each king over Judah and Israel with the words, 'And he did that which was evil (or good) in the eyes of the LORD'. This comment affirms the fact that there were people who were conscious of the ethical and moral requirements for the nation.

The prophets Elijah and Elisha stand out in the pre-literary period. Although they did not write any books that are a part of the Old Testament Canon, they were very active in interpreting the will of God to the people. In 1 Kings, we see many of the activities of Elijah, the great prophet who was a contemporary of Ahab and Jezebel. During the twenty-two years of the reign of Ahab, Elijah was at his side to call attention to his sins against God. The great contest between the true God and Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) is familiar. Elijah used this experience to emphasize the importance of remembering the first commandment, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me' (Exod. 20:3). Elijah also appeared before Ahab to defend the moral rights of the common man. The king had decided that he wanted the vineyard of Naboth but, when Naboth

MATCH THE PROPHET WITH HIS MORAL EMPHASIS.

- | | |
|----------|----------------------------|
| Amos | 1. personal responsibility |
| Hosea | 2. love |
| Jeremiah | 3. justice |
| Ezekiel | |

(Amos—3, Hosea—2, Jeremiah—1, Ezekiel—1)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Old Testament authors' evaluation of the kings by how well they did 'in the eyes of the LORD' indicates there was a consciousness of the _____ and _____ requirements for the nation.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

FINISH READING THIS PARAGRAPH ON THE NEXT PAGE AND DO THE EXERCISE THERE.

refused to sell the inheritance from his forefathers (in keeping with the Old Testament Law), Ahab became depressed. His wife Jezebel took over and caused the death of Naboth. When Ahab went to possess the vineyard, he found the prophet Elijah there. Elijah pronounced judgement upon him and his wife. In this passage, we see how the prophets stood with God in defense of the rights of the common people. Although Ahab's repentance postponed God's judgement, it was carried out on his wife and children (1 Kings 21:1-29).

The Old Testament gives very little information about Elisha; however, some miracles are recorded which he performed in behalf of the people. But it can be concluded from this section of the Old Testament that he was a positive influence on the development of moral sensitivity among the people.

The World of the Prophet

Economic conditions

In the literary prophets, there is a high point in inspiration and activity in the eighth century B. C. Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah figure as four prophets whose messages were filled with pleas for justice, righteousness, love, and mercy. This period is called the 'golden age' of prophecy. In order to understand the message of these prophets, the conditions of that day need to be analyzed.

Economic development of the nation.—The Hebrew people were nomads during their early history. From the time of Abraham, they had moved from place to place as the need arose for additional pasture for their animals. This life did not lend itself to the possessing or carrying of many material goods from one place to another. Surely they learned to accumulate only those things which were most necessary for their minimum needs and comforts. This way of life also lent itself to a tribal form of government in which all the possessions belonged to the entire group. When one suffered hunger, everyone probably had the same problem. When prosperity came, it was enjoyed by all. This way of life produced a group of people who were rustic, strong, and ready to fight for survival.

When these people entered into the experience of slavery in Egypt, they experienced a different way of life. Certainly it was more difficult than their previous life as nomads. Having to make bricks of mud and straw under the conditions imposed by the Pharaoh intensified their suffering (Exod. 1:8-14). When the opportunity came to gain their freedom under the leadership of Moses, surely a great dream was realized. The years in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land were in many aspects a return to the nomadic life.

Upon arriving in Canaan, the Hebrews found a way of life that was more stable than what they had experienced previously. They began to till the soil and to develop agricultural skills in order to survive without migrating. The land was divided among the various tribes and families, and each family had its own area. The people began to understand what it was like to till the soil, plant, cultivate, wait for the rains, and hope for a harvest. This struggle with the elements of nature taught them many important lessons. They had to develop the virtues of patience, ambition, and personal dedication which came to characterize them as a race. There was a decrease in tribal ties as individual family units took on more importance.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Elijah's influences on moral sensitivity included:

1. He called Ahab's attention to his sins against _____.
2. He used the contest between God and Baal on Mt. Carmel to emphasize the first _____.
3. He used the occasion of Ahab's wanting Naboth's vineyard to defend the moral rights of the _____ man.

(1. God, 2. commandment, 3. common)

Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah pleaded for _____, _____, _____, and _____.

(justice, righteousness, love, mercy)

From the time of Abraham to the time of slavery, the Hebrew people were n _____.

(nomads)

After slavery and during the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites returned to the n _____ life.

(nomadic)

FINISH READING THIS PARAGRAPH ON THE NEXT PAGE AND THEN FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Life in Canaan was more stable and brought changes and adjustments:

1. The H _____ became agrarian.
2. As they farmed, their struggles with the elements taught p _____, a _____, and personal d _____.
3. Decreasing tribal ties and increasing importance of family units placed more emphasis on private p _____, acquisition of w _____, and individual e _____.
4. Commerce evolved, and some left the farms to live in c _____.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

More value was placed upon private property, the acquisition of wealth, and individual effort. As commerce evolved, many left the farms to live in the cities and dedicate themselves to commerce as a way of life.

Corruption and injustice.—When changes like the ones just discussed come, corruption and evil also flourish. Men begin to look for ways to become rich. The sins of avarice, covetousness, and deceit result. In the day of the prophets, there was widespread corruption among the political and economic leaders as a result of these sins. Inequality developed, and injustice became the rule of the day. The wealthy and powerful began to take advantage of the poor. The prophets saw the effects of this evil upon the victims and strongly condemned the unjust leaders.

Amos attacked the offenders of his day with the words, 'When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit? That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat?' (8:5-6). The Book of Hosea reflects the same message, 'There is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood' (4:1b-2).

Over a hundred years later, Jeremiah referred to the same corruption in the following words, 'For every one from the least even unto the greatest is given to covetousness, from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely. For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace: when there is no peace' (8:10b-11).

The prophets cited specific examples of the evils that existed in their day. Surprisingly, many of the same evils still exist today. Just a short time ago, an article appeared in a newspaper about a poor man who came in from the country with all his savings in his pockets. When some of the criminal element saw him, they recognized in him an easy prey. One of them told him that he would have to exchange his money for other bills that were negotiable. They offered to help him and thereby stripped him of his savings, leaving him with false bills that were worthless.

Political conditions

Epochs of crisis.—The prophets lived in times of domestic and international crisis. Some prophets were contemporaries of the conflict between Israel and Judah. This conflict lasted almost three centuries, until Israel disappeared after being conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B. C. During those years, political corruption, injustice on the part of officials, and an abandonment of dependence upon, and confidence in, Jehovah as the God of the nation prevailed.

Amos 6:1-7 called for the political officials to recognize that their own comfort and ease were not shared by the rest of the nation. A great majority of the population was suffering as a result of inept government and graft on the part of the politicians. These political leaders lived in comfort and slept upon beds of ivory but did not think of the suffering population that lived in houses of mud and straw and slept upon the floor. They even ate the lambs of the flocks, thereby showing their greed for that which was most luxurious without regard for the consequences. They were so irresponsible that they thought

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

In the day of the prophets, there was widespread corruption among the political and economic leaders as a result of the sins of a _____, c _____, and d _____.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

During the three centuries of conflict between Israel and Judah, there were political c _____, i _____ exercised by officials, and abandonment of dependence upon and confidence in J _____ as God of the nation.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

only of themselves and did not consider the future needs of the nation.

The nations surrounding Judah and Israel greatly affected the activities of these nations. Finding herself surrounded by stronger powers, many times Judah tried to play 'power politics' by aligning herself with the most powerful nation at the moment. The prophets insisted that trusting in God and His power to deliver was wiser than depending on the Egyptians or the Assyrians. Isaiah gave a classic appeal to the nation whose confidence was placed wrongly:

Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD! Yet he also is wise, and will bring evil, and will not call back his words: but will arise against the house of evil-doers, and against the help of them that work iniquity. Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit. When the LORD shall stretch out his hand, both he that helpeth shall fall, and he that is holpen shall fall down, and they all shall fail together.

(Isa. 31:1-3)

These verses show that Isaiah saw the possibility of a great deal of help from God to the nations that would trust in Him instead of putting their trust in the visible strength of surrounding nations.

Corruption of officials.—The leaders of Judah and Israel had become corrupted by the power in their hands and their own selfish greed. The whole society was infected with this disease, but it had not yet been recognized. The judges accepted bribes for rendering decisions against the innocent. Justice was unknown in the courts. Amos and Micah condemned this practice repeatedly. The leaders were not sincere in their recognition and worship of the only true God; rather, some of them also worshipped Baal and even placed idols and places of worship for false gods within the boundaries of their nations. One of the most evil kings, Manasseh, 'built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he made his son pass through the fire, and observed times, and used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards: he wrought much wickedness in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger' (2 Kings 21:5-6).

Foreign nations.—Another aspect of the prophetic message relating to the political sphere had to do with the foreign nations. Obadiah, whom some consider to be the first of the prophets, spoke against the Edomites, who had invaded the land of the Israelites and had begun living in the cliffs of the mountains. They thought that they were secure in these caves. But Obadiah spoke against them in his 'hymn of hate', insisting that Jehovah would bring them down from their high dwellings (v. 4).

Nahum, filled with prejudice against the Assyrians, that powerful enemy to the north, prophesied against the great capital city of Nineveh (1:15—3:19). The total destruction of the city is predicted in the words, 'Behold, I am against thee, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will burn her chariots in the smoke, and the sword shall devour thy young lions: and I will cut off thy prey from the earth, and the voice of thy messengers shall no more be heard' (2:13).

Isaiah, the great prophet to the nations, spoke messages to all the surrounding nations, telling them that the wrath of God

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The prophets reminded Judah and Israel that trust in God was wiser than to trust in the _____ and the _____.

(Egyptians, Assyrians)

The leaders of Judah and Israel became corrupted by p _____ and g _____. Justice was unknown in the c _____. The leaders did not always r _____ the true God and w _____ Him only.

(power, greed, courts, recognize, worship)

AS YOU READ, LIST SOME PROPHETS WHO SPOKE AGAINST FOREIGN NATIONS.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

was going to fall upon them also. He mentioned that Assyria would be used by God to bring judgement upon Israel, but that the Assyrians would eventually be destroyed (10:5-34). Babylon was another nation which was the object of Isaiah's message of destruction (13:1-22). Their own great king would fall like one of the great stars from the heavens (14:1-24). Some have interpreted this passage to be a reference to Satan and his fall from heaven, but responsible biblical scholarship does not see the fall of Satan in this passage.¹ Rather it is a reference to the fall of the great king Nebuchadnezzar.²

Other places to be destroyed according to Isaiah were Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Arabia (14:28—22:25). Thus this great prophet could see the end of the history of many nations which were more powerful than his own.

Religious conditions

The prophets had to fight constantly against syncretism (the tendency to mix the worship of Jehovah with forms of worship of other gods). Jeremiah criticized the people because they sacrificed to Baal in the house of Jehovah (7:9-10). Each nation had its gods; and, since Israel had other relationships with these nations, there was a constant temptation to absorb some of the religious influences from these nations. The Old Testament contains references to the influences of the Ammonites, Moabites, Philistines, Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Babylonians in addition to the Canaanites. 'The same men who prostrated themselves on the roof-tops to the (probably Assyrian) star-gods, prostrated themselves also before Yahweh and swore by Milcom, the Ammonite king-god'.³

The struggle with Baal.—The false religion which threatened the Israelites most was the Baalism of Canaan. Since the Israelites knew very little about agriculture when they arrived in the Promised Land, they had to learn what they could from the Canaanites. They were naturally exposed to the beliefs of the Canaanites. One of the chief beliefs of Canaanite religion was that the fertility of the soil came from the god of nature. The Israelites adopted Canaanite fertility rites to insure abundant harvests. The Canaanites offered human sacrifices when catastrophes were threatening since they believed that the calamity was a manifestation of their god's wrath against them. At times the first-born of the one making the sacrifice was offered upon the altar. From this practice the term 'pass through the fire' came to be used with reference to human sacrifices (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6).⁴

Baalism came to be a great threat to the religious unity of Israel. Bright says that man tends to take on the qualities of the gods that he serves, and, therefore, it is very important who these gods are. He continues by saying that, if Israel had embraced the religion of Baal, it would have been the end of the nation.⁵ The canonical prophets spent much time trying to convince the people that they should not mix the rites and

¹Carroll Owens Gillis, *Historia y Literatura de la Biblia*, 5 vols. (El Paso: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1958), 3:273.

²See Daniel 4:33-37.

³R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), p. 187.

⁴James Orr, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 1:345.

⁵John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 53.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The prophets also had to stand against s_____.
 J_____ was such a prophet and he spoke against
 s_____ offered to B_____ in the house of J_____.

(*syncretism, Jeremiah, sacrifices, Baal, Jehovah.*)

The false religion which threatened the Israelites the most
 was _____.

(*Baalism*)

ceremonies of Baalism with the worship of Jehovah. *Ethical monotheism* is the technical term that is used for the emphasis of these prophets. The conflict between the worship of Jehovah and Baal is seen from the very first activities of the prophets, when Elijah engaged in his campaign against Baal of Tyre-Melkart (1 Kings 18:20-40). Later Jehu used violence to destroy the followers of Baal by killing them with the sword (2 Kings 10:18-28). But even this practice did not succeed in getting rid of idolatry (2 Kings 12:3).

Religious insincerity.—Insincerity in religious activities is evident from the criticisms of the prophets. The nature of the religious ceremonies and other activities was easily perverted into outward participation without internal consecration. Daily and weekly sacrifices tended to become perfunctory and legalistic. Many concluded from these ceremonies that God moved in a mechanical manner, and the subtle feeling developed that a man could manipulate God. Isaiah appealed to the people to recognize that external obedience without internal devotion was useless. He called for repentance and a return to sincerity in making sacrifices (1:11-20). Micah touched on the same theme and showed that ceremonial acts had no effect upon God if they did not first represent a right attitude on the part of man (6:1-8). In fact, God hated the solemn assemblies which were nothing more than ritual.

We should recognize that even today it is possible for the act of worship to disintegrate into an empty ritual without real significance for the worshipper and, certainly, with no significance for God. The more ceremonialism characterizes our worship, the greater the danger that it will lose its meaning. For worship to have constant meaning for participants, it is good to vary the ways of praising God. A vital, personal relationship with God is more important than fulfilling outward acts which only symbolize devotion.

Corruption among religious leaders.—Two kinds of prophets existed among the Hebrews: the true and the false. Micah refers to the false prophets as those who made the people of God to err (3:5). They gave approval to the unjust decisions handed down by corrupt officials. Often the false prophets received bribes to prophesy according to the desires of those who had vested interests.

There was no visible way to distinguish between the false and true prophets, but their messages distinguished them. The message of the false prophet tended to justify the status quo with its corruption, injustice, and spiritual indifference. On the other hand, the message of the true prophet was one of judgement, condemnation, and impending punishment because of the social, moral, and religious sins of the day. The true prophets offered words of hope for those who repented of their sins and returned to God. The true prophets also predicted the destruction of the false prophets:

Thus saith the LORD concerning the prophets that make my people err, that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace; and he that putteth not into their mouths, they even prepare war against him. Therefore night shall be unto you, that ye shall not have a vision; and it shall be dark unto you, that ye shall not divine; and the sun shall go down over the prophets, and the day shall be dark over them.

(Mic. 3:5-6)

Micah analyzed the evils of his day in the following statement: The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The prophets emphasized ethical monotheism, which means they tried to convince the people not to mix rites and ceremonies of B with their worship of J.

(Baal, Jehovah)

LIST TWO PROPHETS WHO EMPHASIZED THAT CEREMONY (EXTERNAL OBEDIENCE) WITHOUT INTERNAL DEVOTION (RIGHT ATTITUDE) WAS NOT ACCEPTABLE TO GOD.

1. _____
2. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

What did the false prophets do?

1. _____
2. _____

(1. made the people err, 2. gave approval to unjust decisions)

SINCE THE TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS WERE DISTINGUISHED BY THEIR MESSAGES, MATCH THE KIND OF PROPHET WITH HIS MESSAGE.

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1. True prophet | a. justified the status quo of corruption, injustice, and spiritual indifference |
| 2. False prophet | b. proclaimed judgement, condemnation and impending punishment and offered hope with repentance |

(1.—b, 2.—a)

thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us.

(Mic. 3:11)

This false sense of security on the part of the leaders brought destruction to the nations of Israel and Judah. This fact represents an important truth and warning for us today.

The priests were also involved in the corruption and insincerity of religious practices. They had the responsibilities of teaching the Law to the people, examining the animals that were brought for sacrifice to make sure that they were without blemish, and officiating in the sacrificial ceremonies and other activities in the Temple. They also functioned as judges to determine when people and articles were clean and unclean (Lev. 10:10). Since they were supported by the tithes and offerings of the people, they were not to charge fees for the specific services. However, there is some evidence, based on Micah's mentioning that the poor people could not pay for priestly services, that the religious leaders may have had fees.

The message of the prophets was one of condemnation for priests who could be bought and who were insensitive to the needs of the people regardless of their inability to pay or contribute to the support of the priestly system. Does this have an application for us today? Should religious leaders be available to and interested in people and their spiritual needs regardless of their economic situation? Is it possible for religious leaders to become more motivated by materialistic interests than by a sincere desire to serve God and their fellow-man? This danger constantly confronts the religious leader.

Conclusion

Although the prophets lived centuries before Christ, there is a great similarity in their messages and Christ's teachings. Their messages are needed in our own day. The evangelical preacher can identify very easily with the prophets. He can see the application of the prophetic message to individuals and the society in which he lives. The preacher should proclaim the principles that are necessary for the nation to follow God's teachings and, thereby, to become great. He should also have a preventive ministry by seeking to show the people the way to greatness and the way that avoids decay and destruction.

The minister who is true to God and of great value to society must be prophetic in his outlook and ministry. He may experience some of the same resistance and rejection that Amos and Isaiah experienced. But if he is sure that God is on his side, then he will ultimately triumph. The cause which he is serving is far greater than one which gains man's temporary approval and praise. The true minister pronounces a message of judgement upon the injustices which surround him and appeals to man to practise justice, mercy, love, and humility in every relationship. He emphasizes the principles which, when followed by man, create a better world. He proclaims the hope that man experiences when he obeys God's commandments.

LIST THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PRIEST.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The prophets condemned the priests because:

1. The priests could be _____.
2. They were insensitive to the needs of the _____.

(1. bought, 2. people)

The evangelical preacher can see the _____ of the prophetic _____ to _____ and the _____ in which he lives.

(application, message, individuals, society)

The minister of today should also be p _____.

(prophetic)

PART II: ETHICS IN THE POETIC BOOKS

Introduction

Is it possible to give ethical and moral teachings through poetry? The answer is an enthusiastic affirmative. In reality, some of the passages that create the greatest disposition to live in harmony with God and all mankind belong to this class of literature.

More poetry exists in the Old Testament than is obvious to the English reader. Clyde T. Francisco states that poetry is the oldest type of Hebrew literature.⁶ The poems in the Pentateuch and in the historical and prophetic books indicate that poetry was in use during the entire period of Old Testament history. The primary interest in this chapter is to see how the writers of poetic literature used this medium to teach ethical and moral principles.

Date and authorship of the poetic books is difficult to establish. Opinions vary with each book. But it is evident that the writers of this literature tried to come to grips with the basic problems of the people of their day. They sought answers to some of the most difficult problems confronting man: the problem of suffering—why the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper—and the source of evil. Their answers grew out of their own experiences and the truths which were revealed to them.

These truths had a sound biblical and theological basis, such as the teaching that God is Creator and He sustains and controls creation (Prov. 3:19ff.; Job 9:4-10; Eccles. 3:11). He is an omniscient (all knowing), just, and merciful protector and guide (Prov. 15:3; Eccles. 7:13ff.; Prov. 3:6; 16:11). God demands from man his confidence, reverence, patience, and the consecration of his riches to His service (Prov. 3:5ff.; 3:11-12; 9:10).⁷

Job: Why Serve God?

'The patience of Job' is a figure of speech that is used often to call attention to the person who endures suffering without complaint. The Book of Job presents the reactions of Job to the trials that came to him in life in dramatic form. His friends gave typical responses, for their day, to the problem of suffering. Philosophers today still have to consider this problem.

The basic question, 'Why should man serve God?', is closely related to this problem. What motive does man have for serving God? Fear is the motive of many people. Some find in fear the basis for belief in supernatural powers. Satan stated that Job's motive in serving God was fear (Job 1:9). But the development of the book shows that fear was not the reason for Job's serving God. Other contemporaries of Job suggested that he was faithful to God because of the prosperity which he was enjoying. Many serve God today because they think that God is obligated to bless them materially, as well as spiritually, if they are faithful.

Doubtless, suffering does cause one to profoundly examine his motives in serving. Barnette suggests four explanations,

⁶Clyde T. Francisco, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1950), p. 186.

⁷Henlee H. Barnette, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), p. 35.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

The poetic literature of the Old Testament also teaches e_____ and m_____ principles.

(ethical, moral)

Two ethical problems with which the writers of poetry sought to deal are:

1. _____
2. _____

The problem of suffering raises the question, Why do the innocent _____ and the wicked _____?

(Compare your answers with the text.)

FINISH READING THIS PARAGRAPH ON THE NEXT PAGE AND DO THE EXERCISES THERE.

which are based on the Book of Job, to the problem of evil and suffering.

1. Suffering is a means of proving man's character (1:11ff.; 2:4ff.).
2. Suffering is a punishment for sins that one has committed (4:7-9; 5:17ff.; 9:22; 10:1-15; 12:5ff.).
3. Suffering is a way of warning man that he is vacillating in his service to God (33:14-30).
4. Suffering is a means of reaching a more personal relationship with God and a deeper understanding of oneself (42:5-6).⁸

To serve God without having unworthy motives is very difficult. There are many who serve out of fear that something tragic will happen to them or their families if they do not. Others serve because they have made a vow to God and do not want to fail. Doubtless, none of these motives was basic in Job's motivation. Perhaps Job was an extraordinary example of a man who served God without any personal interests at stake.

Francisco states that Job 31 presents the highest model of ethical living in the Old Testament.⁹ The ideals expressed here are even higher than those in the Ten Commandments. Job stated that he had reached a high level of morality because he had not committed so many of the common sins of his day. Job stated that he had made a covenant with God, 'Why then should I think upon a maid?' (31:1). Lust was not a part of his comportment. He had not lied (31:5); he had not robbed (31:7-8). He had not practised lust (31:9-12). In his relationships with others, Job had manifested an attitude of benevolence. He had done so even in relation to his slaves (31:13-15). He had not been a covetous man (31:24-25), nor had he participated in idolatry (31:26-28). He was not characterized by a spirit of vengeance (31:29-30). He had an attitude of love even towards his enemies. This chapter present the ideals of a man who had struggled to fulfil the highest requirements of a good relationship with God and his neighbour. Job is a good example for us today.

Psalms: The Moral Character of Man

The Book of Psalms is full of religious teachings that are helpful to man in his daily life. The teachings are couched in moulds quite different from those of the other literature of the Old Testament. The psalmists used poetry effectively to teach the same moral ideals that are in other parts of the Old Testament.

One classification of the Psalms has to do with the character of man. What qualities in man please God? They may be seen in various passages (1; 15; 24; 50; 82; 101; 112; 127; 128; 131; 133). All of these psalms give variations in answer to the question: What is involved in being good? In the first psalm, we have two contrasting pictures: the evil man and the good man. The manner of life of the evil man is expressed and contrasted with the way in which the just man lives. The poem concludes by pointing man in the direction of the good life as the most perfect way.

⁸Barnette, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 36.

⁹Francisco, *Introducing the Old Testament*, p. 196.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Suffering causes one to examine closely his _____ in serving God.

(motives)

Barnette suggests that Job teaches that suffering is a means of _____ man's _____; a _____ for _____; a way of _____ man that he is _____ in his _____ to _____; and a means of reaching a more _____ with God and a deeper understanding of _____.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

According to Francisco, the highest model of ethical living is found in _____.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

LIST THE HIGH REQUIREMENTS FOR A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS NEIGHBOUR WHICH JOB SAID HE HAD FULFILLED.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

What is the ethical teaching of Psalm 1?

(The life of the good man is contrasted to that of the evil man. Man is pointed towards the good life.)

Psalm 15 asks, 'Who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?' Moral and ethical answers are given. The three principles presented in the answers are: walking in integrity, doing justly, and speaking the truth from the heart. Integrity is seen in the word *tamin* which signifies *one who is complete, sincere, and without blemish*. Justice is man's right treatment of his fellow-man and God's right treatment of man. It is a legal term in the Old Testament and means that one has to measure up to the norms that have been established by a superior authority. 'Speaking the truth in the heart' means that the words from one's mouth should be in accordance with what he thinks in his heart. To speak the simple truth is just not enough. Man should seek to be transparent in his whole person. The Hebrews thought and expressed it in terms of 'truth from the heart'. These three verbs (see 15:2) are in the participle form in the Hebrew, which indicates a continuing attitude. The pattern of man's life should be perpetual truthfulness.

The author of Psalm 15 mentions several actions and attitudes that are prohibited by integrity of character, justice, and truthfulness:

He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour. In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not. He that putteth not out his money to usury, nor taketh reward against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved.

(Psalm 15:3-5)

This psalm teaches that man's general comportment is without criticism, his activity is correct, his thoughts are pure, and his attitude towards his neighbour is all that one could desire.¹⁰

Psalm 24 was probably written on the occasion of the Ark's transfer to Jerusalem, the city captured by David, which was to become the capital of the Hebrew nation. This psalm asks the question, 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place?' (24:3). The answers to these questions are given in terms of human conduct, both external ('he that hath clean hands'), and internal ('and a pure heart'). Access to God is predicated upon having a life that is clean. One cannot enter into His presence without first correcting his moral imperfections.

Psalm 50:16-23 illustrates the fact that one's conduct is not a complete indication of his character. One may be hypocritical, but he will ultimately fall before the judgement of God. The man who professes to be religious should conduct himself in such a manner that his life will be a complement to the faith that he professes. If he does not, then the conclusion may be drawn that he is not sincere in his profession.

Another classification of Psalms has to do with ethics. These psalms are penitential—they speak of repentance on the part of man. Psalm 6 is a petition for pardon from the sins that God is about to punish. The words offer an example to anyone who has sinned, 'Have mercy upon me, O LORD; for I am weak: O LORD, heal me; for my bones are vexed' (6:2).

Psalm 25 speaks of the need for protection and pardon and reflects the upright character of God (25:8-10). Psalm 51 is probably the most familiar of the penitential psalms. Some

What moral and ethical principles are given in Psalm 15?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(1. walking in integrity, 2. doing justly, 3. speaking the truth)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Psalm 24 sets forth the moral principle that access to _____ is predicated upon having a clean _____.

(God, life)

Psalm 50:16-23 illustrates that one's conduct must complement the _____ which he _____.

(faith, professes)

Penitential psalms express man's _____.

(repentance)

Two examples of penitential psalms are Psalms 25 and 51. Psalm 25 speaks of the need for _____ and _____.

(protection, pardon)

¹⁰Kyle M. Yates, *Studies in Psalms* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1953), p. 7.

Bible students believe that this psalm was written by David after the visit of the prophet Nathan to declare to him his sin with Bathsheba (see 2 Sam. 12). Others have suggested that it had no relationship to David's sin because there is no specific reference to it. In the psalm, David is repentant for his sins against God (51:4). He used three words to illustrate his condition: rebellion, wickedness, and sin. Repentance was the only solution to his condition. Many have felt the thrill of forgiveness by God and acceptance once more into an intimate relationship with Him after repentance.

Psalm 32 is parallel to Psalm 51 in that it also speaks of the blessedness of forgiveness after confessing sin and repenting. How difficult it is to uncover and to confess sin! How natural it is to try to conceal it! But the psalmist had experienced what modern psychology also teaches about the effects of guilt upon one's person. Guilt is destructive but confession and cleansing are uplifting.

Proverbs: Practical Living

The Book of Proverbs does not deal so much with theological issues, nor does it mention the great personalities that form a part of other books of the Old Testament. But it does point out the moral values that are so important in life and that make a nation great.

The general theme of the Book of Proverbs is wisdom, not just intellectual knowledge, but knowledge seasoned with maturity and spiritual perspective. 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction' (1:7). Genuine wisdom is an understanding of the workings and will of God and a commitment to follow His way.

Proverbs mentions many personal virtues and points up the evil effects of laziness and the value of industriousness (6:6-10; 10:4-5; 15:19; 18:9; 19:24; 22:13). The author shows the wrong of the evil use of the tongue (6:12-19; 18:8; 14:29; 18:13; 15:1; 16:32; 18:21; 26:20-28; 29:20). He warns against pride and boasting (16:18; 25:14; 26:12; 27:1-2).

In addition to the passages that deal with personal virtues, many of the proverbs mention teachings for the family. The young man is warned not to follow after evil women (5:6-7; 9:13-18; 15:17; 17:1; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:5, 15, 16; 11:22; 12:4; 14:1). This book presents one of the most beautiful and complete descriptions of a virtuous woman (31:10-31). It also speaks of the right relation between parents and children (1:8; 4:2-4; 10:1; 13:24; 20:11; 22:6, 15; 30:17).

Proverbs gives guidance in matters related to business and the need for aggressiveness in order to succeed (20:4; 24:30-34). Honesty is highly valued (11:1; 15:27; 20:10, 14). Truth is emphasized (12:19, 22), and the importance of avoiding excessive debts is mentioned (6:1-5; 11:15; 22:26). In the midst of it all is the need to maintain a trust in God (13:5-6; 16:3). The book emphasizes the fact that it is better to have a small amount of money and be righteous than to have wealth and be dishonest (16:8).

One can find much ethical and moral material from which to pattern his life in the Book of Proverbs. Truly it is a book of wisdom. The short, pithy statements make a great impact.

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Psalm 51 in which David is _____ for his sins against _____.

(repentant, God)

Psalm 32 speaks of the blessedness of forgiveness after _____ sin and _____.

(confessing, repenting)

The Book of Proverbs expresses m_____ values that are important in life and make a n_____ great.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Proverbs 1:7 means that genuine _____ is an understanding of the workings and will of _____ and a commitment to follow His way.

(wisdom, God)

AFTER READING PROVERBS: PRACTICAL LIVING, LIST SOME OF THE MORAL THESES FOUND IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Ecclesiastes: The Supreme Good

The preacher, or the protagonist, of the book called Ecclesiastes was a lay philosopher who looked for meaning in life. He asked, 'What is the purpose of life? Is there some real value in living? What should man do with his talents?' In an attempt to answer these questions, the author gave four pathways and then concluded with the words, 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity' (1:2). He suggested first that wisdom can resolve the philosophic problems of man (1:12-18), but he found that this search also produced affliction of spirit. 'For in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow' (1:18).

The preacher also attacked the idea that pleasure could give lasting satisfaction to life. He concluded that one who tries happiness, laughter, and self-indulgence still finds that life is full of vanities (2:1-11).

Then the preacher suggested that riches might give purpose to living (2:18; 6:12). But he recognized that one may spend all his life working to accumulate many material things, but he realizes the futility of it all when he dies. He must leave it all with those who have not worked to produce it (4:8). After finding that wealth is vanity, he decided that one could follow the search for fame (7:1; 11:8).

The preacher reached the conclusion that there is only one worthy end in life—to fear God, who has created us, and to follow His commandments (12:13). This goal is in accord with the other high standards which we find in the Word of God, that the *summum bonum* (supreme good) is the will of God.

Ethics in the Song of Solomon

Although there have been few people who doubted the validity of the Song of Solomon as part of the canon of the Old Testament, there has been a battle over the meaning of the book for man. Some follow an allegorical interpretation (referring to the hidden spiritual meaning contained in the literal text) and insist that the book presents the relationship between God and the nation of Israel in symbolic form. The apocalyptic interpretation (seeking to discover concealed meanings revealing future events) of the book insists that it paints a picture of the future relationship between Christ and the Church. But if the historical interpretation is followed, a more natural picture of something that is very normal is gained. The book is the story of two people who deeply love each other.

Some have suggested that the terminology in the Song of Solomon is not appropriate for the Holy Bible. But it is in keeping with Oriental customs in the day in which it was written. It may be said that the book excludes all that is not appropriate between two people who are in love and devoted to each other in marriage. It has the purpose of praising the natural love and devotion in such relations. The world needs this emphasis. Love is lacking in many relationships. Many simply want to use others to satisfy their own personal lusts. Thus the book does present a high ideal of the warm and exclusive love between two lovers.

AFTER READING ECCLESIASTES: THE SUPREME GOOD, TELL WHAT CONCLUSION THE WRITER REACHED.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

Allegorical refers to the h _____ s _____ meaning of a scripture passage. A _____ interpretation seeks to discover c _____ meanings that reveal f _____ events in a scripture passage.

(hidden spiritual, Apocalyptic, concealed, future)

The purpose of the Song of Solomon was to praise natural _____ and _____ in marriage.

(love, devotion)

Conclusion

The poetry of the Old Testament touches upon some of the most profound and penetrating problems that man has had to face during all of history. Solutions to these problems are presented in poetic form. The daily duties of man are specified in these books. Obedience to the teachings would result in peace and harmony.



Home Study Exercise

Basic Assignment (*Levels 1, 2, 3*). Do the following exercises.

Part I: Ethical Emphases in the Prophets

1. What characterized prophecy as a class of literature in the Old Testament?

2. Name two elements of prophecy with which we are most concerned in Christian ethics.

3. What should we learn for our day from the Old Testament prophecies that predict future events?

4. List the theological foundations of the prophetic messages.

5. According to this study guide, what moral principle did each of the following prophets stress?

Amos: _____

Hosea: _____

Jeremiah: _____

6. List the contributions to morality made by Elijah.

7. What was the moral condition among political and economic leaders during the time of the prophets?

8. Which false religion most threatened the Israelites and how did the prophets meet this religious threat?

9. How was it possible to distinguish between true and false prophets?

10. Why did the prophets speak out against the priests (religious leaders)?

Part II: Ethical Emphases in the Poetic Books

1. What problems did the writers of poetic literature seek to answer?

2. According to Francisco, where is the highest model of ethical living found in the Old Testament?

3. List the moral ideals taught in Job 31.

4. State the principle ethical teaching of each of the following psalms.

Psalm 1: _____

Psalm 24: _____

Psalm 51: _____

5. Explain 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Prov. 1:7)

6. List the three moral themes found in the Book of Proverbs which are mentioned in the study guide.

7. What conclusion did the writer of Ecclesiastes finally reach?

8. According to this study guide, what is the purpose of the Song of Solomon?

Supplementary assignment (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 26-41 in *Introducing Christian Ethics*, and do the following exercise.

1. What does Barnette mean by the statement 'The Hebrew prophets' oracles are loaded with the stuff of theology'? Illustrate your answer.
2. List the problems that the prophets attacked.
3. Describe the Book of Proverbs.

Advanced assignment (*Level 3*). Do the following additional exercise based on the above reading assignment.

1. Write an essay about the role of the prophets in the Old Testament.
2. What contributions of the prophets are related to every age?
3. What is the ethical significance of wisdom literature?

Seminar Discussion

1. What political, economic, social, and religious conditions made the work and message of the prophets necessary? Compare these conditions to modern times.
2. How did the messages of the prophets relate to the moral conditions of their day? Are these messages relevant today? If so, how are they relevant?
3. Suggest ways a modern minister can be prophetic concerning moral behaviour today. How may other Christians fulfil prophetic ministry concerning morals?
4. What are the moral teachings of Psalm 15? What teachings of this psalm are applicable today?