**St. Margaret’s English Community – RCIA**

**The Prophetic Books of the Old Testament**

If we can recall two previous classes, first on the Books of Samuel and Kings, as well as in the Psalms, we are introduced to various holy men who were considered “prophets,” or God’s special messengers, such as Samuel himself, or Nathan with King David, and then the famous prophets who appear at the time of the division of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, especially the prophets in the Northern Kingdom, Elijah, Elisha, Hosea and Amos, and for the Southern Kingdom, Isaiah and Micah.

The prophets Elijah and Elisha appear in stories written about them in 1 Kings 17-21 and 2 Kings 1-9. In the lecture posted earlier on these books, we saw how the stories of Elijah and Elisha appear as a form of structural centre to 1st and 2nd Kings and they appear as an example of righteous holy men in the midst of a series of bad monarchs.

The so-called “Elijah Cycle” of stories has five major scenes, on each in 1 Kings 17, 18, 19, 21 and in 2 Kings 1. We are introduced in 1 Kings 17 to a man powerfully blessed with the spirit (*ruach*) of YHWH, who commands a drought for three years as a sign of God’s disfavour with the Kingdom of Israel (Northern Kingdom). In the midst of this punishment, however, Elijah performs the miracle of healing and multiplying food for the widow of Sidon.

The 2nd scene is the famous battle between Elijah and the priests of the god Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). At the centre of this scene we see the contest or battle between the god of Baal and the God of the Israelites, and over the question of which god can overcome the drought and bring rain to replenish the earth. King Ahab, who was still somewhat faithful to YHWH married a pagan wife, Jezebel who set out to persecute and kill Israelites. In the dramatic final scene, God responds to the pleas of Elijah sending down flame on a sacrificial bull, and in consuming it, wins the battle and all the priests of Baal are slaughtered, and God ends the drought.

The 3rd scene (1 Kings 19) begins with the prophet now in a fit of depression, saddened because the people have not reformed their lives sufficiently. God commands him to return to Horeb (the northern Israelite name for MOUNT SINAI), where he experiences God in a small voice. Descending from Mount Horeb, Elijah returns and appoints Jehu to overthrow the rule of King Ahab, and appointing also Hazael of Damascus to overthrow King Ben-hadah, and then choosing the prophet Elisha as Elijah’s successor to usher in a new rule of God’s commands.

The 4th scene in 1 Kings 21 deals with Elijah’s concern with justice. In a scene reminiscent of that between King David and the prophet Nathan, here Elijah confronts King Ahab over his unjust treatment of a poor farmer, Naboth, and a field he would not sell to the King. Ahab allows his wife Jezebel to plot the murder of Naboth. Elijah delivers a divine sentence of death on Ahab and Jezebel – and although Ahab temporarily repents, as the writer of 1 Kings states, “*No one gave himself up to doing evil in the eyes of the Lord as did Ahab, urged on by Jezebel his wife*” (1 Kings 21:25).

The 5th and final scene is found in 2 Kings 1, where Elijah delivers an oracle of judgement against Ahaziah, the son and successor of Ahab. Injured in battle, Ahaziah seeks healing from the Philistine god, Baal-zebub. Elijah confronts the king on this idolatry and announces that the king will die – giving him this death sentence in person. A point to note here is that the cruelty seen is more to be understood as meant to emphasize the power of God and his prophet against all human authority and military might of those who reject YHWH.

For Elisha, Elijah’s disciple, we encounter a different type of prophet. Once Elijah is taken up to the heavens in a fiery chariot, with his cloak falling down and enveloping Elisha (2 Kings 2) as a figure of placing a mantle of leadership on his shoulders, Elisha’s style is very different, described in 2 Kings as a man possessed with miraculous power, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad. He can do all the same miracles as Elijah did, raising the dead, and multiplying food etc., But more than being a wonder-worker, he was a guardian of true faith in YHWH. More than Elijah, Elisha did not fear entering into the realm of politics, especially in dealing with enemies of the Kingdom of Damascus or dealing with general Naaman afflicted with leprosy. It is he who anoints Jehu to overthrow the dynasty of Ahab. In the Elisha Cycle of stories in 2 Kings we see a mixture of tales of miracle stories, and stories of a man who influenced great political change and prophetic opposition to royal policies that went against God’s will.

ALTHOUGH THE Books of Kings are the first major source to address prophecy with large numbers of such people, including Elijah and Elisha, we first find prophets in the *Book of Numbers* (Chapters 22-24), and then again in 1st Samuel, Samuel himself being both a judge and a prophet whose work ushers in the monarchy (recalling it was God speaking through Samuel who spelled out the power of the kings).

We saw also the role of prophecy during the reign of King David (through the prophets Nathan and Gad. We also could see mention of “former prophets” who appear in the *Books of Joshua, Judges, and 1- and 2- Samuel*, distinguished by what are called the “latter prophets” (listed in the *Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel etc…*).

The office of prophet comes about through the direct intervention of God who chooses and appoints the prophets individually. Most of the prophets were men, although we have evidence of prophetesses such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14).

Among the “Latter Prophets,” the first is the prophet Amos (around mid-8th c, BC). This is a turning point because prior to this we read about the prophets from various sources, but beginning with Amos and those after him such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others, we are generally reading their own writings.

The **CALL** and **COMMISSIONING** of the prophet is of critical importance in Scripture, often taking place in a vision or in an extraordinary experience. The Hebrew word for prophet is ***nabi*** meaning “*the one called*.” The prophet is seen as an intermediary and messenger commissioned by God, and prophetic speech or utterances are often introduced by the formula, “***thus says the Lord***” or something similar. Sometimes the prophetic call or vocation would also include personal struggle, persecution and suffering by the prophet.

While some of the prophetic oracles or messages spoke of future events, their primary concern was with contemporary events in the public sphere and social life. Often these dealt with public morality, the treatment of the poor and disadvantaged, and the abuse of power, especially in the judicial systems of the time dispensed by rulers. The prophets pass judgment in the strongest terms on the moral conduct of the rulers and ruling class, with the strong belief that a society that does not practice real justice and righteousness will not survive. The prophets also condemned a sort of religious formalism that could be used to legitimate such an unjust society. And in terms of international relations, with the rise and fall of the great empires of this period, the belief of the God of Israel’s power was not to be taken lightly – the prophets reminded the people that **this favour of YHWH had to continually be rooted in and built upon the COVENANT and upon faithfulness**. The prophets could be seen as radicals – radicals in their radical commitment to and interpretation of the religious, legal, and moral traditions inherited from Israel’s past.

The prophets do not just judge and condemn. They exhort, cajole and encourage; they announce salvation and offer a good prognosis for the future.

**The Great Prophets of the Eighth Century (BC)**

Amidst the many small (and not so small) border incursions and wars between Israel [Northern Kingdom] and Judah [Southern Kingdom] and their constant struggles with their neighbours [Damascus, Edom, Moab and Philistine cities] were nothing compared to the much greater and more lethal threat posed by the new superpower in the area, the Kingdom of Assyria, which controlled the area from 900 to 600 BC. Coming out from northern Mesopotamia and the major cities along the Tigris River, Assyria had many similarities with Babylonian culture, but was strongly independent from it.

Led by a series of strong monarchs in the mid-10th c. B.C., Assyria began a program of systematic conquest of all its neighbours in all directions, but most especially with those neighbours to the south and southwest seeking to control not only Babylon, but also to gain access to the rich forest areas of Syria and Lebanon to get a more steady supply of wood for building and fire (noting Assyria was a generally barren land). When any of the kings died, the subjugated people often rebelled, especially when a weak king succeeded. Thus, the smaller conquered states won back some of their lost lands and freedom. But then when a strong king returned to the throne, the control of these vassal states was more restrictive.

By 800 BC, Assyrian power weakened and the western states of the Near East (including Israel and Judah), enjoyed a period of about 50 years of relative peace. It was in this period that both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom were under two great kings: Jeroboam II in Israel, and Uzziah in Judah. Both Samaria (capital of Israel) and Jerusalem (capital of Judah) were enjoying great economic and social prosperity. Jeroboam II reigned from about 786 to 750 BC (his great grandfather was King Jehu, one of the bad kings of the north who allowed the worship of Baal into the kingdom, and so even at the time of Jeroboam, people with the name or root “Baal” were found. In Judah, there were no traces of names with “Baal” when Uzziah (or Azariah as he is sometimes called) came to the throne from 783 to 742 BC. Uzziah expanded the Kingdom of Judah building up and gaining control of the Edomites, and he had a good but short-lived coalition of other kingdoms against Assyria.

It was at the apex of these two great kings, Jeroboam II and Uzziah that the first prophets of the 8th C BC appear – Amos and Hosea in the north, and Isaiah and Micah in the south. From the evidence we have, it appears only AMOS began his ministry before the deaths of the two kings, although it is possible that Hosea also was prophesying about 750. Each of these four prophets mentioned above had a unique and specific message to bring, but each also faced great difficulty with the reception of the prophecy as they were called at a time of prosperity but when pressure was beginning again from Assyria that was attempting to rob Israel (north) of her independence. Also, in the wake of Jeroboam’s death, civil war, assassinations and internal fighting for people pro and against Assyrian rule broke out. Both AMOS and HOSEA could see that the end of the Northern Kingdom was coming – especially against a people seemingly bent on their own ruin.

By the time of the deaths of both Jeroboam II and Uzziah in the 740’s BC Assyria was coming into one of her greatest and strongest periods with the terrible reign of King Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC). This king conquered one nation after another, and introduced horrific terror tactics into Assyrians conquering tactics – holding entire cities hostage unless they surrendered a rebelling king, and then carting off the entire population to exile, replacing the population with other conquered peoples.

Under this pressure there were six kings in only 20 years, four of whom were assassinated. IN a revolt in 734 BC King Pekah of Israel joined forces with Damascus, and in losing he lost 3/4ths of all of Israel’s land that became Assyrian provinces, while the Israelites of the North were taken into exile.

Because of time constraints, we will not cover the *Books* of *AMOS* or *HOSEA* but will move directly to covering in today’s class and in the next classes the major prophets of ISAIAH (742 to 701 BC), JEREMIAH (627 to 582 BC) and EZEKIEL (593 to 573 BC).

**The Book of Isaiah: [***NAB* pp 864-934]

Isaiah, son of Amoz , was active as a prophet around the same time as both Amos and Hosea. The *Book of Isaiah* is the largest work among the prophecy books of the Old Testament. It has 63 chapters divided into 3 parts, some written by Isaiah himself, others in his style or by his disciples.

***First Isaiah* chap. 1-39**

This first section contains the words and oracles of Isaiah together with some later material, such as chapters 24-27, and 34-35 that were added later.

***Second Isaiah* chap. 40-55**

These sections date from the mid-sixth C. BC, and speak of Babylon instead of Assyria, and they assume that King Cyrus the great of Persia was reigning and he is the one who freed Judah from exile. This section is noted for some hymns of praise as well as courtroom proceedings. The genius of the author here is that he lived some 200 years after the death of Isaiah, but carried on the earlier message of trust in a holy God who loved Zion through the terrible age of exile and total loss of Zion during the Babylonian captivity (586 BC).

***Third Isaiah*** **chap. 56-66**

This section can be traced to about 560-535 BC when Judah has returned from exile under the reign of Cyrus (about 539 BC), and returns to a ruined and poor homeland of Judah for restoration. The themes of 3rd Isaiah are more somber and penitential. But there is a note also of hope for the period of restoration to former glory.

A close study of the *Book of Isaiah* shows how God’s people heard the oracles of a prophet, preserved them, discovered new meanings in them as the years went by, and constantly reminded themselves that God’s WORD does not die but lives anew for each generation just as powerfully as when the prophet first spoke it. Because of this vitality of divine speech, different levels are not regarded as different or separated messages, but they form a single book where each part helps the reader to understand the other parts in a larger vision of history. **This creates a dynamic forward motion of the word through time**. We see this effect in how both Jews and Christians have traditionally understood the prophets as messengers of God’s promise and hope, and as predictors of future restoration, even though many of the words are judgment and damnation as well as warnings of destruction. WHYis this? **Because a combination of words from several periods of time reveals not a single final judgment, but a record of God’s mercy [*hesed*] that returns again and again to speak to Israel in new ways**.

***First Isaiah* chap. 1-39**

We begin *First Isaiah* with the Oracles against Judah (Isaiah 1-12), then the Oracles against Foreign Powers (Isaiah 13-23), followed by the story of the “little apocalypse (Isaiah 24-27, which as mentioned was added years later), Oracles from Isaiah’s later ministry (Isaiah 28-33 – extending from 705-700 BC), then a vision of Zion (Isaiah 34-35, a later addition), and finally Stories of Isaiah’s life – some coming from 2 Kings 18-19 (Isaiah 36-39).

Isaiah was intensely involved in the politics of Judah during his ministry. He appears to have direct access to the king, and perhaps came from a noble family of the time. He lived through many crises, including the fall of Samaria (722), but the *Oracles* we have here address just two special events. The first was the war declared by both King Hoshea of the north and the king of Damascus against Judah in 734. These two kings were afraid of interference from Judah (their back flank) because King Ahaz refused to join them in this battle against Assyria. For Isaiah, the evil results of this was King Ahaz calling on Assyria to come to his aid against Israel and Damascus, and thus ally himself to a pagan faith and powerful people, that eventually sets Judah up to fall.

While Assyria defeated Israel and Damascus, the cost of this was the rule of King Tiglath-Pileser III who destroyed Israel, Damascus and made Ahaz and Judah a vassal state.

The second event of the oracles was the attempt of King Hezekiah of Judah (son of King Ahaz) to free himself from under Assyrian rule. While Sennacherib (new Assyrian ruler) took control of Assyria, the attempt by Hezekiah to break from Assyria ended with the siege of Judah in 701, and the near destruction of the Southern Kingdom. This does end however with a miraculous plague that wipes out the Assyrian army, and the city of Jerusalem and the Temple or saved.

*End of Lecture 1 on Prophets*

*Musical pieces:*

Georg Frederick Handel, *The Messiah*

Isaiah 40: 1-3 “*Comfort Ye My People*”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dDjva1ecYo>

Isaiah 40: 4 “*Every Valley Shall Be Exalted”*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NCO6UzZ2R8>

Isaiah 40: 5 “*And the Glory of the Lord*”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z_tFJosT3k>

Isaiah 55: 6-9 “*Seek the Lord While he May be Found*”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLjgnSKepow>