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# How to Read Biblical Prophecy

by Kurtis Peters

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Prophecy in ancient Israel and Judah is not what we normally think of as prophecy. Most people today associate prophecy with the prediction of the future. Yes, this did exist in ancient Israel as well, but it was only one of many things a prophet could do. Royal courts often had a guild of prophets connected to it that the king could consult concerning an important decision, such as whether or not to go to war. The prophets and other diviners may consult oracles, read the entrails of animals, or the flights of birds, or the movements of the planets, all as a way to provide some kind of omen for the king. It's less about future prediction and more about the will of the god(s). There were also prophets who acted more like oracles, who received words from gods and pronounced them to their intended recipients, even if that recipient hadn't sought any prophecy to begin with. The biblical prophets, especially those who have books associated with them, are closer to this type, though they also did some of the consultation work as well. Many of these biblical prophets were more marginal characters, rather than being in the employ of the royal court. This may be because their words were often quite negative toward those in power. What we have in the biblical prophetic books usually consists of collections of sayings/oracles from these prophets, usually not arranged by strict chronology, but rather by theme. There is also

some narrative in some of them, providing context for the oracular sayings.

In all of this, however, the main point is that the prophecy within them is less about future-telling, and more about providing God's/Yahweh's perspective on the events of the present. If kings/nobles are acting unjustly, God sends a word predicting calamity. This may or may not come to pass, depending on whether the recipients change their ways. If people are being persecuting, God sends a word of comfort. This is an oversimplification, but it should at least provide a helpful way to begin reading prophetic texts. ✨