

PROPHET

CULTURAL INSIGHT

In the Old Testament, the word *prophet* refers to any kind of spokesperson for a divine being. This is usually, but not always, a spokesperson for Jehovah (see 1 Kings 18:22). *Prophet* is a translation of the Hebrew term *nabi'*, which has no clear etymological explanation. The position and role of prophets in the Old Testament is a bit different from what we are accustomed to seeing in the Church of Jesus Christ today. As Latter-day Saints, we are accustomed to thinking of prophets as ecclesiastical leaders associated with the apostleship, but this is not how the word is used in the Old Testament. Many of the figures whom we think of as prophets, such as Adam and Enoch, are not called prophets in the Old Testament (although the Joseph Smith Translation calls Enoch a seer; see Moses 6:36). The earliest figure identified as a prophet in the Old Testament is Abraham, but he was called that by Abimelech, who was not part of the covenant with Jehovah (Genesis 20:7).

In Exodus, Aaron is described as Moses's prophet (meaning that he served as Moses's spokesperson the way that prophets are spokespeople for God; Exodus 7:1). Although Moses is, in many ways, the prophetic figure par excellence in the scriptures, he is not explicitly described as a prophet until Deuteronomy 34:10. In fact, Numbers 11:29 suggests that Moses was something more than a prophet in Jehovah's perspective. Moses himself wanted all of Israel to be prophets, suggesting that he did not view the calling of prophet as a limited ecclesiastical role (Numbers 11:29).

Samuel represents the beginning of formal prophets among the Israelites in the sense that we often give it. In the books of Samuel and Kings, prophets are closely entwined with kings and kingship. Saul and David were anointed by Samuel (1 Samuel 10:1; 16:12–13), Solomon was anointed by Nathan (1 Kings 1:45), Jeroboam I was selected by Ahijah (1 Kings 11:29–40), and Jehu was anointed by Elijah (1 Kings 19:16).

Prophets seemed to be especially involved during dynasty changes or when the kingly succession was somehow in doubt. Prophets also served as advisors of kings, as in the case of Ahab with Micaiah and his prophets and of Isaiah with Hezekiah (1 Kings 22:1–14; Isaiah 20:1–11).

There seems to have been a shift in the eighth century BC to literary prophets who wrote down their prophecies. Although Chronicles suggests the existence of prophetic books by Samuel, Nathan, and others (see 1 Chronicles 29:29), we do not have access to these books, and they appear to have been primarily historical records rather than records of prophecies. The period of writing prophets in the Old Testament spans, therefore, from Micah and Isaiah in the eighth century BC through the Babylonian exile and the postexilic prophets to Malachi. Obviously, God’s messages to His people are not limited to those given by these individuals, but they represent a specific kind of prophet and prophecy that flourished in this period.

One of the intriguing elements for Latter-day Saints is that *prophet* is not a word with wholly positive connotations in the Old Testament. Of all the books in the Old Testament that discusses prophets, the largest percentage of references is in the book of Jeremiah (which has almost 27 percent of total references to prophets in the Old Testament). In Jeremiah, however, prophets are not primarily described as righteous servants of Jehovah. Rather, Jeremiah describes these “prophets” as rivals who claim to speak in the name of Jehovah but who speak falsehoods. The biblical book that uses the word *prophet* the most is thus also the book that preserves the most ambiguities about prophets in ancient Israel and Judah.

Amos is another intriguing example of the Old Testament ambiguity in the term *prophet*. Amos was from the Kingdom of Judah in the south and was called to preach in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The priest at Bethel, Amaziah, told Amos to go home and prophesy somewhere else. In his response to Amaziah, Amos famously stated, “I *was* no prophet, neither *was* I a prophet’s son; but I *was* an herdsman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit” (Amos 7:14). The italicized words in the King James Version indicate that these words are not in the original Hebrew. In Hebrew, this verse contains no verbs, and so any verbs are supplied by the English translators. Although the King James Version renders this in the past tense, meaning that Amos was making a statement about his past life, other translations read it differently. Compare, for example, the New Revised Standard Version: “Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees.’” It is possible to read Amos’s statement not as a temporal statement about what he was doing before coming to preach but as an expression of his reservation at being identified as a prophet. Amos rejected, in some way, Amaziah’s identification of him as a prophet, suggesting that *prophet* did not have wholly positive connotations to Amos.

For Latter-day Saint readers of the Old Testament, it is important to recognize that God always speaks to His covenant people and that He adapts His messages to the needs of His people. Prophets are a great

example of this—the ancient Israelites had prophets that looked and acted differently than our prophets do today. We can be grateful that the Lord sends us messengers who speak to us according to our needs.

Related verses

Genesis 20:7	1 Kings 22:1–8	Jeremiah 23:28
Exodus 7:1	2 Kings 5:1–13	Jeremiah 28:5–17
Deuteronomy 13:1–5	2 Kings 9:1	Ezekiel 2:5
Deuteronomy 18:15–20	2 Kings 14:25	Ezekiel 14:4–9
Deuteronomy 34:10	2 Kings 19:2	Hosea 9:7
1 Samuel 3:20	1 Chronicles 29:29	Hosea 12:13
1 Samuel 9:9	2 Chronicles 9:29	Amos 7:14
1 Samuel 22:5	2 Chronicles 12:15	Micah 2:11
2 Samuel 24:11	Ezra 5:1	Habakkuk 1:1
1 Kings 1:8	Isaiah 3:2	Haggai 1:3
1 Kings 11:29	Isaiah 9:15	Zechariah 1:1
1 Kings 13	Jeremiah 1:5	Malachi 4:5
1 Kings 18:22	Jeremiah 6:13	

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