Introduction to the Prophets

General Terminology

ecstasy--many claim special inner knowledge or even mystical union with deity, either inside or outside body--state in which message received called ecstasy

3 possible definitions:

• mental state in which one has feeling of soul leaving body (transmigration)

• mystical union with God--[both a & b too narrow]

• "an abnormal state of religious consciousness in which one is so intensely absorbed by one single idea or one single feeling, or by a group of ideas or feelings, that the normal stream of psychical life is more or less arrested" (Lindblom)

types of intermediaries between gods & people:

• shaman--person with ability to control spirits which might otherwise harm the living but which, if handled properly, can be harnessed & even made beneficent

• witch--one who uses innate power to cause harm to other people

• sorcerer--one who manipulates magical objects for the purpose of bringing about harm

• medium--anyone who acts as a channel of communication between the human & divine realms

• diviner--a person who manipulates or interprets physical objects or natural phenomena in order to seek from the spirits hidden information about the past, present, or future

• priest--a specialist in the continuous operation of a cultic enterprise, permanently associated with particular names, places, and times, and related to specific social groups

• mystic—rarely used by anthropologists, because mystics don't fill a particular social role

• prophet—rarely used by anthropologists because of widely divergent characteristics displayed by those seen as prophets—a generally positive term when used within the social group to which the prophet belongs—more a term of validation than of description

Prophecy and Society

social prerequisites:

1. belief in the reality of supernatural power or powers
2. belief that those powers can influence earthly affairs and can be influenced by human agents

3. intermediaries can only exist when they are viewed positively and where their specific actions are encouraged or at least tolerated

4. intermediaries will exist only in those societies where social conditions require the services of an intermediary

mechanisms of intermediation:

1. possession--spirit temporarily takes up residence in body of intermediary, but spirit dominates relationship--possession often stimulated by dancing, drugs, self-hypnosis, rhythmic stimulation, etc.

2. nonpossession--soul leaves body and travels to supernatural world (transmigration)

the making of an intermediary:

1. mental and social predisposition--usually psychologically normal & above average intelligence, often from periphery of society

2. sense of supernatural choice--either symptoms recognized by society as indicative of spirit possession or choice indicated by other intermediary

3. role of society--call validated by society as a whole and by peers

behavioral characteristics of intermediaries:

1. stereotypical behavior--actions & speech patterns ("thus says the Lord," "utterance of Yahweh," ecstatic behavior)

2. society influences behavior by its expectations & positive or negative responses

social functions of intermediaries:

1. peripheral intermediation--improvement of social position, support (or hinder) social change, maintain social stability (allows peripheral group to "let off steam")

2. witchcraft accusations--demands that are too outrageous often met with charges of witchcraft, resulting in fragmentation of society (collaborators, communists, terrorists)

3. central intermediation--maintain social stability by mediating between divine & human realms; by legitimating existing social order & traditional religious, political, & social views; & by easing social tension

Prophets & Prophecy in the ANE

diviners (people who interpret physical phenomena), oracles (people who provide divinely
inspired answers to specific questions), & other kinds of prophets common in ANE

Mesopotamia

best extant example of prophecy similar to that practiced by Hebrew prophets found in Mari

"intuitive" prophecy, by non-professionals, has three distinctive characteristics:

1. based on divine inspiration rather than rational divination

2. prophet's consciousness of mission

3. ecstatic component

some evidence of prophecy elsewhere in Mesopotamia, esp. Assyria, as well

Egypt

Admonitions of Ipu-wer show affinities with both wisdom tradition and prophecy
text on interpretation of dreams (ANET:495)

Hatti

Hittite documents speak of omens, dreams, & prophets as means of obtaining divine direction

Syria/Phoenicia

Journey of Wen-amon refers to prophecy in Phoenicia (under control of Egypt)

Prophecy within Israel

Terminology

roeh (12x), chozeh (19x): "seer" (2 Chron 16:7; 19:2; 1 Sam 9:9), perhaps emphasis on divination

ish ha-elohim: "man of God"

qosem: "soothsayer/fortune teller"

nabi (313x): "prophet" in the strict, institutional sense—later designation (1 Sam 9:9) for same phenomenon, though probably originally distinct—root may mean (1) "to bubble up" (ecstasy; cf. hithpael of verb in ref. to Saul, 1 Sam 10:11-12; 19:24); (2) "to call" with a message (Arab); (3) "to be called" (Akk)—OT meaning primarily from context (e.g., Exod 6:28-7:1)

prophetes--one who proclaims a message, tells the future (often associated with ecstasy)

Historical Origins
OT prophecy up to the time of Amos:

1. Moses prophetic prototype in later times (Deut 18:18), spokesman for God—probably a retrojection of ideal of prophecy

2. Samuel represents beginning of institution of prophecy (sons of the prophets)--closely associated with cult (Nathan, Gad)

3. Elijah is turning point--a maverick (peripheral prophet), though some association with institution--succeeded by Elisha

4. Amos beginning of literary prophecy--directed toward people as well as king

Prophecy and Society

Weber (1920) saw Israelite prophets as primarily outsiders offering critique of cult & official practices—Mowinckel saw many prophets as closely related to the cult, esp. as revealed in the Psalms

functions of the prophets:

1. preacher (forth-teller)

2. predictor (fore-teller)

3. mediator--Samuel, Jeremiah

4. cult functionary

5. statesman/advisor--Micaiah, Elisha, Isaiah

6. author

7. miracle-worker--Elijah, Elisha

8. political activist--anointing new king, advocating resistance

characteristics of the Israelite prophets:

1. worshiper of Yahweh

2. called by God--for whole life or one message

3. message from Yahweh

4. usually male, sometimes female (Huldah--2 Kgs 22:14; Isa 8:3)

place in Israelite society:
1. sons of the prophets--similar to guild, family business
2. many associated with royal court--advisors, intercessors
3. many associated with cult--priests, Levites (Jeremiah, Ezekiel)
4. decline in prestige in post-exilic times

message of the prophets:

1. two sources: Spirit & Word--pre-exilic prophets exhibit certain animosity toward work associated with ruach, emphasizing "word" of Yahweh in contrast to false prophets (Jer 5:13; 1 Kgs 22:19-24; Hos 9:7; Amos 7:14)--Ezekiel identifies Spirit as medium of inspiration (Ezek 11:5)
2. new doctrines (ethical monotheism, Wellhausen) or revival & reinterpretation of ancient tradition (Clements)?

prophetic themes:

1. judgment & hope (weal & woe)--possible in same prophet
2. social justice
3. God's sovereignty in history
4. Day of Yahweh--judgment but also hope
5. emphasis on exodus & wilderness wanderings
6. remnant
7. judgment on Israel's enemies
8. eschatological kingdom
9. messiah

**Principles for Interpreting Prophecy**

1. Readers must recognize the nonsystematic character of the prophetic writings.
   
   Example: The book of Jeremiah is perhaps the least systematic of the prophetic books. Material is grouped thematically rather than chronologically. For example, all of the oracles against foreign nations are grouped together.

2. Parallel prophecies must be considered before a reader attempts to apply a prophecy to a specific historical or contemporary situation.
Example: the Davidic messiah (Isa 11:1-10; Jer 22:24-30; Hag 2:23; Matt 1:12): Isaiah envisions a Davidic messiah as ruling over Israel. Jeremiah sees a future for Judah, but he specifically rejects the descendants of Jehoiachin (Coniah) from the picture. Haggai, on the other hand, says that Zerubbabel is the chosen leader (the signet ring), and Matthew agrees with Chronicles in seeing Zerubbabel as a direct descendant of Jehoiachin.

3. The essence of the prophetic passage must be considered when reading books of prophecy.

   a. Is the passage didactic or predictive?

      Example: "out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1): The context of this passage shows that it is clearly a description of history, and thus didactic, not predictive, despite its use in Matt 2:15 (see below).

   b. Is the passage conditional or unconditional? Most passages are conditional, regardless of whether the condition is stated explicitly. Since the prophets were more concerned with changing the behavior of the people to whom they were speaking than telling the future, it is natural to assume that the events foretold in most prophecies could change if the people's actions and attitudes changed.

      Example: "Zion shall be plowed as a field" (Mic 3:12; cf. Jer 26:16-19): The text of Micah gives no explicit indication that this or any other prophecy in the book is conditional. Nevertheless, since the prophecy was not fulfilled in the context in which Micah was speaking (the Assyrian crisis), Jeremiah's contemporaries understood that because the people repented, under the leadership of Hezekiah and Josiah, God had spared the city. The message of the book of Jonah seems to confirm this general principle, for Jonah certainly believed that God could decide not to destroy the city of Nineveh after threatening to.

   c. Is the passage fulfilled or unfulfilled? Many modern readers try to read current events into the prophecies of the past, often without realizing that the prophecies have already been fulfilled in the distant past, usually in the prophet's time or close to it.

      Example: "you shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa 7:3-17; 8:1-8): When one reads the entire context of the Immanuel prophecy (Isa 7:14), it is clear that the prophecy refers not to a future messiah but to a child born in Isaiah's day. The birth of the child was a sign to King Ahaz that the Syro-Ephraimitic War, in which Aram and Israel joined forces to try to put an anti-Assyrian partisan on the throne of Judah in place of Ahaz, would not last long. Before the child was old enough to know right from wrong, Aram and Israel would be destroyed. Chapter 8 even tells who the child was who fulfilled the prophecy: Isaiah's son Maher-shalal-hash-baz (cf. 8:3-4, 8).

4. Prophecies that are reapplied to events or people outside the original context should be seen as re-readings of the text rather than multiple fulfillment of the original prophecy.
The word usually translated "fulfilled," especially in Matthew, should actually be translated "filled" (i.e., with new meaning). "Filled" is the primary meaning of the Greek verb; "fulfilled" is a secondary meaning.

Example: "you shall call his name Immanuel" (Matt 1:23): Matthew takes Isaiah's prophecy concerning Immanuel (Isa 7:14), which, according to the book of Isaiah itself, was fulfilled in the eighth century B.C.E., and reapplies it to the birth of Jesus. From the gospel writer's perspective, Jesus was even more "God with us" than Maher-shalal-hash-baz, so it was appropriate to re-read Isaiah in this way.

Example: "out of Egypt I called my son" (Matt 2:15): Here Matthew takes a non-predictive passage from Hosea and reapplies it to the circumstances surrounding the early life of Jesus. In its original context, Hos 11:1 is clearly a historical portrait of the exodus event, but Matthew re-reads it so that the scripture is "filled with new meaning."

Example: Melchizedek as a symbolic forerunner of Christ (Heb 7:1-3): The author of Hebrews see parallels between the enigmatic Old Testament figure Melchizedek and Jesus, and he makes the most of these parallels. Like Jesus, the author says, Melchizedek is "king of righteousness" and "king of peace." Both are also "without father, without mother, without genealogy." The author is not contending that Melchizedek had no parents, but only that since they are not mentioned in Genesis, the parallel with Jesus is greater (did the author of Hebrews agree with the genealogies for Jesus given in Matthew and Luke?).

5. Some prophetic passages have apocalyptic elements, such as extensive symbolism, which must be taken into account when interpreting the passage.

Example: angel, chariots, horses (Zech 6:1-8): The extensive symbolism of this passage and others in Zechariah indicate that the book incorporates many apocalyptic elements, which should obviously be treated non-literally.

6. Prophecy dealing with the eschatological kingdom treats the future in an idealized way and should not be construed literally.

Example: hills flowing with wine and a city of gold (Amos 9:13-15; Rev 21:18): These descriptions of the eschatological kingdom, whether on earth or in heaven, use figurative language to describe the beauty and bounty of the kingdom ruled directly by God.

7. Every prophetic message, even those dealing with eschatology, speak primarily to the people of the prophet's day.

Example: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa 9:2-7): Though this familiar passage from Isaiah refers to a future messianic king and the establishment of a righteous rule on earth, it is intended primarily for an eighth-century audience that was facing the oppressive presence of the Assyrian armies in their land. The prophecy gives hope to those who "walk in darkness."
Understanding the Message of the Prophets

prophetic books, & prophetic corpus as a whole, result of long process of transmission, expansion, & redaction—e.g., Hos 14:9; Isa 36-39, 40-66; Zech 9-14; Jer 22:24-30 || 33:14-26 (missing in LXX); Jer 52; book of Jeremiah as a whole

thus, prophetic books a product of the community, a sort of dialog between the prophets, who spoke for Yahweh, & Israel—diversity of perspective, often within the same book, but unity of faith in God

modern readers must consider both the historical setting of the prophetic books and their canonical form—critical tools (e.g., textual, form, redaction, source criticism) can help illuminate layers of tradition or the process of transmission of the text—ultimately the prophetic books are often multivalent, speaking different messages at different times to different communities of believers—thus, it is a violation of the basic form of the prophetic books to see them as elaborate, esoteric forecasts of the future

the prophets undoubtedly spoke many more oracles than were preserved, so those that were preserved apparently were viewed as particularly important for the community—predications of judgment in particular were preserved as a witness for contemporary Jews—primary motives redemptive and constructive—oracles of hope accompany oracles of doom (weal and woe)

one important factor in preservation of prophetic works was to help exilic & postexilic community understand the fall of the kingdoms of Israel & Judah in theological terms—thus, books often contain interspersed doxologies, hymn fragments, & wisdom sayings—similarly, modern readers will benefit most from the prophets when they use them as a springboard for understanding their own world in theological terms—often useful to see the prophets, and those involved in transmitting their words, as theologians who interpreted the world around them in accordance with their understanding of the will of God (Amos 3:7; exegete the world)

community of faith called Israel or Judah, but prophets saw God as sovereign, so other nations invited to join people of God (Isa 2:2-4)—prophetic view of community inclusive (Isa 56:3-8; Jonah), in contrast to the practices of some of their contemporaries (e.g., Nehemiah)