



Lesson 2: The History of the Future

Dear friends,

Prophecy is a fascinating but complex phenomenon which defies any single or simple description. Not all prophets spoke or behaved in the same way or offered the same kind of message. Clearly, the popular notion that prophecy is prediction of the future is only partially true in the case of the biblical prophets. They filled different roles in different contexts in often very different ways. What they had in common was their role as God's spokesmen and women.

It is even more difficult to understand the experience and self-consciousness of the biblical prophets. Above all, this is true because few prophets seem to have felt the need to describe what had happened to them. Many a prophet stated that "the word of the Lord came to me," but they left few hints as to how that occurred. For that reason, it is hard to say how our lives parallel theirs. Nevertheless, I have to wonder what it was like to be Jeremiah or Isaiah or Amos. They carried a heavy burden, but the experience of God that came with it must have been quite extraordinary.

I wrote in this chapter about the many similarities between the prophets of Israel and those of other lands. On reflection, it seems to me that the most striking difference concerns what we might call the prophets' social location. Many court and temple prophets in the ancient world enjoyed relatively high status and a fairly cozy relationship to political power. Most of the great biblical prophets were outsiders who spoke "hard words to power." To say the least, their prophetic calling was not in their own self interest. The biblical prophets spoke words of truth at considerable personal cost. In my own mind, it is this fact that sets them apart from so many other religious leaders of their day. It is an interesting test to apply to Christian leaders—indeed, to all Christians--today.

I do not know if any of us is a prophet, but, by God's grace, I hope that we all will share the prophets' courage as we speak for God in today's world.

Grace & peace,

Craig