Symbolism in the Lives of the Prophets

ARTICLE FOR UNIT 2

For many Christians today, the books of the Old Testament prophets are largely unknown territory. It is true that during the Christmas season we often read and cherish passages from Isaiah, Micah, and several other prophets that speak of a coming king, the Messiah. We might also know something of Isaiah’s incredible vision of God or the many tribulations Jeremiah faced, but otherwise little from these books finds its way into our personal Bible study or informs the preaching and teaching in our churches. This is probably because the prophetic books seem mostly to be filled with pronouncements of God’s anger toward the sinful Israelites and announcements of his coming judgment upon them. Certainly most of us do not enjoy reading a lot of “doom and gloom.”

There is, however, a great deal more to the prophetic books than future predictions and judgment. First and foremost, the prophets were messengers from God whose ultimate goal was to bring the people of Israel back to Yahweh, their God. Yahweh was their covenant partner, the God who called their father Abraham, formed them into a nation, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and gave them the fruitful land of Canaan as their home. But the Israelites had responded to God’s gracious covenant by repeatedly rebelling against him, beginning in the Wilderness of Sinai and continuing through the time of Joshua, the Judges, David, and the rest of the kings of Israel. If God’s people were to survive their own wickedness, it was vital that the prophets find ways to persuade the people of Israel to hear and respond to him.

It is ironic that the more sinful we become (and hence the more we need God), the further from God we wander and the less inclined we are to listen to him. On the other hand, as our relationship with God deepens and matures, the more we desire to spend time in his presence and listen to his voice. Because of this principle, it was necessary for the prophets to do everything possible to overcome the Israelites’ reluctance to listen to the word of God. These people who desperately needed the preaching of the prophets were in fact those who least wanted to listen. For this reason, the prophets employed many methods to capture the Israelites’ attention and get them to listen to God’s word. Inspired by the Spirit, the prophets spoke by means of poetry, parables, metaphors, analogies, visions, hyperbole, and irony; always seeking to turn Israel back to their God.

These rhetorical methods were effective at times, but the prophets recognized that there are also nonverbal ways to communicate God’s word to the people of Israel. Frequently the prophets performed odd, sometimes even bizarre, actions that acted out a message from Yahweh in a visible way. In addition to proclaiming God’s message verbally, the prophets also enacted his word in and through their lives.

These acts, often called prophetic symbolism, are found throughout the books of the prophets. For example, Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot for three years to symbolize that the Assyrians would soon defeat the Egyptians and send them into exile (Isaiah 20). Jeremiah purchased a linen loincloth, wore it for a while, and then hid it in the cleft of a rock for a period of time. When he retrieved it, it was ruined; good for nothing (Jeremiah 13). This was to symbolize how quickly the pride of Judah and Jerusalem would come to ruin. Jeremiah performed other symbolic acts as well, including wearing the yoke of an ox (Jeremiah 27) and buying a field during the final siege of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 32). Ezekiel probably performed more symbolic acts than any other prophet; in chapters 4 and 5 alone he performed a series of four acts to dramatize the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

Instances of prophetic symbolism include three distinct elements. At times the pattern may be rearranged somewhat, but each of the three elements is still present. Prophetic symbolism begins with a divine command. God instructs the prophet to perform a certain action, often a deed that seems outrageous to us today (and probably to the ancient Israelites as well). Next, God explains the significance of the act, telling the prophet what it symbolizes concerning his covenant relationship to the people of Israel. The final part is the prophet’s obedience to God’s command; the obedient prophet does precisely what God commands.

Although it is tempting to think of prophetic symbolism as the ancient equivalent of a sermon illustration or the drama ministry in a modern church, it was actually quite different. Preachers today utilize sermon illustrations to bring light into a sermon, to illuminate the message of the sermon. The pastor first proclaims the message and then illustrates it to make it more accessible to the congregation and more applicable to their lives. As important as an illustration is, however, it should never overwhelm the message of the sermon. Unfortunately, we sometimes remember the sermon illustration but forget what the pastor’s message was. In a similar way, drama can be used effectively as part of a worship service to introduce the topic of the sermon or to stimulate the listeners’ interest in the topic. Once again, the drama is not the message; rather it should point to the message and the divine truth being proclaimed.

If prophetic symbolism is not a sermon illustration or a drama, then what is it? Simply put, the prophet’s act is...
God’s message just as much as are the prophet’s words. Note that prophetic symbolism always begins with a command from God. The prophet does not employ his or her imagination to devise a prophetic act, it comes directly from God. Even though a preacher may sense some degree of divine inspiration when selecting an illustration for a sermon, ultimately the illustration comes from the preacher. Prophetic symbolism, however, originates with God. Furthermore, the interpretation of the act also comes directly from God. God commands the prophetic action and then provides its interpretation in order to communicate his vital message to the people of Israel. Prophecy is usually communicated through the spoken word, but at times it may be even more effective when communicated through the visible “word.” Perhaps in some sense prophetic symbolism foreshadows the supreme instance of God revealing himself in a visible way, the incarnation of Christ. Divine revelation certainly comes to us through the written Word, but the ultimate revelation of God is through the living, active Word.

One of the best known instances of prophetic symbolism is found in the first chapter of the book of Hosea. In verse 2 God commands Hosea, “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom” (ESV). This constitutes the divine command. Next, God explains the meaning of his command when he says, “For the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.” Then in verse 3 we read of Hosea’s obedience to the divine command: “So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.”

A second, closely related example of prophetic symbolism is found in Hosea chapter 3. The first verse records the divine command: “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress.” God’s explanation of the command follows: “Even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.” Hosea’s obedience is then recorded in verse 2: “So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley.”

It’s not surprising that Bible interpreters across the centuries have had much to say about God’s very surprising commands to Hosea. Many early commentators thought that Hosea did not actually marry Gomer. It must be a vision or an allegory, they reasoned, because God would never command a prophet to enter into an immoral marriage. Most recent interpreters, however, argue that the passages do record actual events in Hosea’s life. Shocking as it may seem to us, God actually did issue this command, and Hosea obeyed. A great deal of discussion has also centered upon the character of Gomer. Was she a common prostitute? Was she one of the sacred prostitutes who participated in the detestable rites of Canaanite fertility religion? Or, was she a woman whom God knew would later prove to be unfaithful to her husband, Hosea?

Despite the fact that there are many different perspectives concerning Gomer and her marriage to Hosea, there are some firm conclusions we can reach concerning the two instances of prophetic symbolism in the book. First, both events in chapters 1 and 3 were prophetic acts; they are prophecy acted out, a visible means for God to deliver his message to the Israelites. As such, their primary purpose in the book is not to record a biography of Hosea. Although these two examples of prophetic symbolism do record actual events in the lives of Hosea and Gomer, they do not begin to tell us all we might like to know about these two ancient people.

Third, these prophecies explicitly focus on the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. Many centuries before the time of Hosea, God had entered into covenant with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. Even though God gave the Israelites many important laws to obey on Mount Sinai, their overarching obligation was to be faithful to their covenant Partner. Above all else, they must worship Yahweh and Yahweh alone. The best human analogy to the covenant at Sinai is marriage. When Christians enter into holy matrimony we pledge that we will forsake all others and be faithful to our spouse. The wedding pledge certainly includes sexual fidelity, but it involves much more. We pledge that we will be faithful in every aspect of our lives, spiritually and emotionally as well as physically. Unfortunately, throughout their history the people of Israel had failed to remain faithful to Yahweh, so God called upon Hosea to prophesy against this unfaithfulness through his own life. Hosea’s marriage to Gomer and the three children born to her proclaim this message in a way that mere words cannot.

Finally, prophetic symbolism in Hosea clearly prophesies that judgment is never God’s final word to his people. Although there is, indeed, a lot of judgment in the prophets (including Hosea), the final word of prophecy is hope and restoration. In Hosea 3, God commanded Hosea to reclaim his unfaithful spouse. To do so, Hosea had to pay a price. Needless to say, Christians have long recognized the parallel between Hosea’s redemption of his wife and Christ’s redemption of sinful humanity, a redemption that required Christ to pay the highest price.

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