

The Old Testament For Grown Ups **Lesson 74 – Introduction to Prophetic Literature**

Introduction

This section of the Bible is known as ‘The Prophets.’ In the Jewish canon they are known as the ‘Latter Prophets’ (as opposed to the ‘Former Prophets’ of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings), and in the Christian Bible they are known as the ‘Major’ and ‘Minor’ Prophets.

In the Hebrew Bible the Latter Prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and ‘The Twelve’ (Lamentations and Daniel are a part of ‘The Writings’)

In the Christian Bible the Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The Minor Prophets are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)

The Function of the Prophets

The prophets were those men who spoke to the nation of Israel, during times of national crisis, as God’s spokesmen. The prophets are difficult to interpret mainly due to misunderstandings about their function and form. So, to help us clear up a lot of confusion, we need to understand that first and foremost, the prophets spoke to their nation about things going on with their nation (and the nations surrounding them) in their day and time.

For most people, prophecy means ‘foretelling or predicting what is to come’. Using the prophets in this way is highly selective, for less than 2% of OT prophecy is messianic; less than 5% describes the new covenant age and less than 1% concerns events yet to come (if it even does at all). The prophets usually announced the *immediate* future of Judah, Israel and the surrounding nations, rather than our future. Those events were future for them but past for us.

A prophet’s job was to offer warnings to the nation about impending judgment if they do not repent and turn back to God and His covenant. Thus the prophets were ‘covenant enforcement mediators.’ they cannot be properly understood apart from their function in relation to the Law. They were to encourage the nation to be faithful to the Mosaic Covenant and they would be blessed, and they were to warn the nation when they were being unfaithful to the covenant and call them back to repentance toward Yahweh. The prophets didn’t invent the blessings or curses they announced, they were based off of the blessings and curses of the law found in Deuteronomy.

These were men who spoke for God. They were called by God and raised up by God, they didn’t take it upon themselves. They regularly preface, conclude or punctuate their oracles with, “Thus says the Lord.”

The Theology of the Prophets

The prophets constantly call God’s people back to divine realities:

1. **Identity As Yahweh’s People.** They belong to God, God does not belong to them
2. **Be A Light.** God has called them into being for his purposes of being a light to the nations.
3. **Keep Covenant.** At the heart of the prophets’ message is deep concern that Israel reflect God’s character by walking in his ways and keeping covenant with him.
4. **Reject Idolatry.** They are constantly reminded that Yahweh is not a local Israelite deity, but is the sovereign God of the universe and sovereign over all the other nations. Thus, they are to reject idolatry.
5. **Justice and Righteousness.** As God’s people they were called to practice justice and righteousness as part of their society. They often emphasize caring for the poor, rejecting oppression, perversion of justice, and religious hypocrisy.
6. **Messianic Hope.** The prophets offer a vision of a future age in which God would bring about the restoration of Israel through the coming of a Messiah.

When Did The Prophets Write?

There are three main eras of the prophets. The entire length of the prophetic writings takes place between 750's -450's BC.

The first category includes those of the Assyrian period, whose attention fell upon the circumstances leading up to and the conditions following the fall of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in 722 B.C. The constellation of prophets who assessed the moral and theological climate that led to the end of Israel was constituted by Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah. In varying ways but with sympathetic insight, they saw the end of Israel and its implications for Judah.

The second group of prophets is composed of those of the Pre-Exilic Babylonian era, whose focus marked out the attendant circumstances and succeeding conditions of the fall of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) in 586 B.C. Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Nahum, Ezekiel, and Obadiah contributed their distinctive insights to their contemporaries and delivered their message from the Lord to Judah.

The third group of prophets consists of those during the Post-Exilic era, which would take place as Israel was returning from Babylonian exile. This would constitute the **Persian period**. The decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. marked the beginning of that era. The prophets message would build upon a message of hope, restoration, and a future for Israel. Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, and Malachi in their respective ways articulated the hope and implicated the changing conditions of the first hundred years of postexilic life in Judah.

Types of Prophetic Literature

The prophets employed a variety of literary forms:

Oracles of Judgment: These are messages of warning and judgment, in which the prophet announces the impending punishment of God against the people for their sins and disobedience. These oracles often describe the specific sins that have brought judgment upon the people, and call for repentance and a return to God.

- **The lawsuit**, for example Isaiah 3:13-26, Hosea 3:3-17. God is portrayed as the plaintiff, prosecuting attorney and judge against the defendant, Israel. The lawsuit form contains a summons, a charge, evidence and a verdict, though some of these features may not be explicit.
- **The woe**, e.g. Habakkuk 2:6-8, Micah 2:1-5, Zephaniah 2:5-7. Woe oracles implicitly or explicitly contain an announcement of distress, the reason for distress and a prediction of doom.

Oracles of Salvation: These are messages of the promise of hope and salvation, in which the prophet announces that God will deliver his people from their enemies and bring about their restoration and redemption. These oracles often include a vision of a future age in which God will reign and his people will live in peace and prosperity. (Amos 9:11-15, Hosea 2:16-20, Isaiah 45:1-7, Jeremiah 31:1-9)

Prophetic Speeches and Sermons: These are extended speeches or sermons that the prophet delivers to the people, often in public gatherings or at the temple.

Symbolic Actions: These are actions that the prophet performs as a symbolic representation of God's message. For example, the prophet may wear a yoke to symbolize the coming Babylonian captivity, or break a clay jar to symbolize the destruction of Jerusalem.

Visionary Literature: This type of prophetic literature includes visions or dreams that the prophet experiences, in which he receives a message or a revelation from God.

Apocalyptic Literature. Apocalyptic literature is characterized by a highly symbolic and visionary style, which presents local calamities on a grand cosmic scale. It often includes elaborate descriptions of supernatural beings, heavenly realms, and cataclysmic events, and uses numerology and other symbolic codes to convey its message.

It calls to mind images like stars falling, the sun not shining, the moon turning into blood, and clouds rolling up. It also used animals to speak of people, rulers, and nations. You might recall seven-headed beasts, locusts with men's faces, and a lamb slain. These images are never meant to be taken literally, but symbolically to convey a message in a cryptic way.

Apocalyptic literature is often times associated with eschatology, or the end times, but is more often presented as a response to the oppression and suffering that the Jewish people were experiencing, and is intended to provide hope and encouragement in the midst of difficult circumstances. The books of Daniel and Ezekiel contain numerous examples of apocalyptic literature

How To Interpret the Prophets

There are many challenges to interpreting the prophetic writings. Some parts of the Bible—the prophets included—require time and patient study to understand. You may find help in Bible dictionaries, commentaries and Bible handbooks.

The Time of the Prophetic Writing: as mentioned above each prophet wrote during a certain time period; the Assyrian conquest, and Pre and Post Babylonian Exile. It's important to know when a prophetic book was written.

Audience Relevance: it's also imperative to know who, not just the book but each prophetic oracle, was written to. Was it written to Judah, Israel, or another nation.

The Overall Prophetic Message/Imagery: asking questions can help determine the message. Is the message a message of judgment or salvation? Is it a promise or a call to repentance? What imagery is used in the prophetic message and what does this imagery symbolize?

The Type of Prophetic Literature (Genre): as we discussed above, as yourself, 'what kind of literature is this?' Is it literal or figurative. Is it information or a sermon? Is it a judgment oracle or a salvation promise?

The Historical Context: to understand the works of the prophets, one must understand the environments in which they lived. The prophetic years were characterized by: Political, military, economic and social upheaval; Enormous religious unfaithfulness; and shifts in populations and national boundaries. The prophets spoke in large measure directly to these events.

'Rightly Dividing' Prophetic Oracles: Sometimes the words spoken by the prophets at various times and places are written down without any indication as to where one oracle ends, and another begins. Chapter divisions aren't always reliable indicators to the separation of oracles.

Compare scripture with scripture: Understanding the context of the prophetic book requires comparing it with other books in the Bible. Many prophetic books contain references to earlier scripture, and comparing these references can provide a better understanding of the text.

Application: It would be easy to dismiss the prophetic message as a whole, but there is much we can still gain from the Prophets to apply to our lives.

Ways we can properly interpret and apply the message of the prophets:

- Read in light of the rest of the Old Testament (how does it fit into the whole story)
- Don't get lost in the details (what is the overall message or principle)
- Look for the big themes (is the text teaching justice, repentance, obedience, trust, etc)
- Look for Jesus (how can we find Jesus in Isaiah, or Jonah, etc.?)
- How do we view this in light of the Gospel (their message isn't our message)
- What does it reveal about God's character (what do the issues of justice and righteousness teach us about God? What does Jonah teach us about God loving 'outsiders'?)
- What does it teach us about God's sovereignty (what does this teach us about God's plans and purposes for humanity?)
- Let it lead to faithfulness (the main point of the prophets is faithfulness to God)

Ways we often misinterpret and misapply the message of the prophets:

- Read the prophets as if they were written directly TO us instead of for us
- Take too literal the figurative aspects of prophetic literature
- Overemphasize the predictive aspect of prophecy
- Try to connect every natural disaster with God's judgment
- Equate America with ancient Israel
- See ourselves as relating to God 'under the law' instead of grace
- Fail to consider the Gospel and God's reconciling work of the cross
- Equate New Testament prophets/prophecy with Old Testament prophets/prophecy

PROPHETS OF THE BIBLE

PROPHETS	PROPHESED TO/ABOUT	KINGS WHO RULED DURING PROPHET'S TIME	APPROX DATES (B.C.)
Jonah	Nineveh (Assyria)	Jeroboam II	Before Northern Kingdom of Israel Captivity (780-740)
Nahum	Nineveh (Assyria)	Manasseh, Amon, Josiah	Before Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (658-615)
Obadiah	Edom	Zedekiah	Before Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (590-586)
Hosea	Israel	Jeroboam II, Zechariah, Shallum, Menahem, Pekahiah, Pekah, Hoshea	Before Northern Kingdom of Israel Captivity (780-731)
Amos	Israel	Jeroboam II	Before Northern Kingdom of Israel Captivity (790-779)
Isaiah	Judah	Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh	Before Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (760-681)
Jeremiah/ Lamentations	Judah	Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah	Before Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (626-585)
Joel	Judah	Joash	Before Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (830-798)
Micah	Judah	Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh	Before Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (740-695)
Habakkuk	Judah	Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin	Before Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (609-597)
Zephaniah	Judah	Amon, Josiah	Before Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (640-626)
Ezekiel	Exiled Judah in Babylon	Jehoiachin, Zedekiah (Babylonian Captivity)	During Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (593-571)
Daniel	Exiled Judah in Babylon	Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah (Babylonian Captivity)	During Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (605-536)
Haggai	Returned Remnant of Judah	Governor Zerubbabel	After Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (520)
Zachariah	Returned Remnant of Judah	Governor Zerubbabel	After Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (520-518)
Malachi	Returned Remnant of Judah	Governor Nehemiah	After Southern Kingdom of Judah Captivity (420-415)