

# Road Trip: Journey Into the Bible

## Midweek Part 4: How to Read the Old Testament Prophetic Books

### I. What are the Prophetic Books?

This section of the Bible is known as ‘The Prophets’ and is usually divided up into two categories: the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets (also known as ‘The Twelve’). The distinction between Major and Minor Prophets is based on the length of their writings, not on their importance. This group of prophets is also known as the ‘Writing Prophets’, as these prophets have books named after them that specifically contain their prophecies and messages.

**The Major Prophets:** Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel

**The Minor Prophets:** Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

The most important thing to know about these prophets are they are Jewish Prophets sent to the nation of Israel, and the prophetic books take place during a time of great turmoil for the nation. The nation of Israel had been divided between the Northern Kingdom (called Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (called Judah), and all of these books take place around the time of the ‘exile’ or captivity of each kingdom. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) was carried off into Assyrian captivity in 722 BC. The Southern Kingdom (Judah) was carried off into Babylonian captivity in 586 BC. So these prophets wrote during great times of national, political, and religious upheaval.

Three crucial things to find out about the prophetic books are:

1. **Who were these books written to?** – Were they written to the Northern Kingdom Israel, the Southern Kingdom Judah, or to/about another nation? It’s critical to understand that
2. **When were these books written?** – Were they written before the exile, during the exile, or after the exile? The timing of these books help us to understand the message of the books.
3. **What is the content within the book?** One thing that makes prophetic books so difficult is that most of these are not in narrative form, but a series of prophetic oracles (or messages/sermons), which can sometimes jump around from theme to theme, oracle to oracle, and audience to audience. You must pay close attention.

Sometimes the books themselves will give a short introduction, such as:

- **Isaiah 1:1** The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Iotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.
- **Jeremiah 1:1-3** The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> The word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, <sup>3</sup> and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.
- **Amos 1:1** The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.
- **Hosea 1:1** The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Iotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:

## II. What was the purpose of the Prophets?

The prophets were those men who spoke to the nation of Israel, during times of national crisis, as God's spokesmen. They didn't invent their prophecies but spoke what was revealed to them by God, hence they regularly preface, conclude or punctuate their oracles with, "Thus says the Lord." Next, we need to understand that the prophets spoke to their nation about things going on within their nation, and the nations surrounding them, in their day and time.

When a lot of Christian think about 'prophets' or 'prophecy' they often think about predicting events surrounding 'the end of the world' or the return of Christ. However, that is not the function and purpose of the Old Testament prophets. 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 call Israel to faithfulness to their Covenant with God and call them to repentance for idolatry, injustice, and faithlessness. They were to offer warnings about impending judgment if they do not repent and turn back to God. 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, but to enforce the ones found in Deuteronomy.

## III. The Theology of the Prophets

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

- **Identity As Yahweh's People.** They belong to God, God does not belong to them
- **Be A Light.** God has called them into being for his purposes of being a light to the nations.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.

## IV. The Genre of Prophecy

The prophets employed a variety of literary forms in their writings:

1. **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.
  - a. **The lawsuit**, for example Isaiah 3:13-26 where 'the Lord takes his place in court, He rises to judge his people', and Hosea 4:1-19. 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.
  - b. **The woe**, e.g. Habakkuk 2:6-20, 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.

2. **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)
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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.
6. **Apocalyptic Literature:** Apocalyptic literature is a genre of writing popularized in Israel and is characterized by a highly symbolic and visionary style, which presents local calamities on a grand cosmic scale.
  - a. It often includes elaborate descriptions of supernatural beings, heavenly realms, and cataclysmic events, and uses numerology and other symbolic codes to convey its message.
  - b. It calls to mind images like stars falling, the sun not shining, the moon turning into blood, and clouds rolling up, as a means to speak of the 'Day of the Lord'
  - c. It uses numbers in a very symbolic way: like the repetition of numbers or patterns, or figurative numbers such as 7, 144,000, a thousand, etc.
  - d. 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.
  - e. Apocalyptic literature is often times associated with eschatology, or the end times, but is more often presented to convey the idea of a local judgment upon a nation, the overthrow of a nation, war, calamities, etc. The books of Daniel and Ezekiel contain numerous examples of apocalyptic literature.

## V. How To Interpret and Apply the Prophets

### 1. 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.

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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?
4. **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?

5. **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.
6. **'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.
7. **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. Many of the stories of the Kings that the prophets dealt with are told in the books of Kings and Chronicles.

## 2. How to Apply (and Misapply) the Prophets

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
- Pull out random verses and apply them to our day

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. So here are some 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)