

Old Testament #5: Major Prophets

PROPHETIC LITERATURE

1. The primary function of the prophets was to call their own generation to repentance according to the provisions of the Mosaic Covenant.
2. Prophecy has a unique perspective of time. The future may appear present, or nearby, or indefinitely remote. Widely separated events taking place in the sequence of history may appear together in the prophetic sequence.
3. The WRITING Prophets (a term used to distinguished the prophets who left a written account of their ministry i.e. Isaiah, Jeremiah, from those who did not i.e. Deborah, Elijah, etc.) are divided into three groups: Pre-exilic, Exilic, and Post-exilic.

PROPHET	ERA	DATE	AUDIENCE
Joel ¹	Pre-exilic	Late Ninth Century	Judah
Jonah	Pre-exilic	Early Eighth Century	
Hosea	Pre-exilic	Mid Eighth Century	Israel
Amos	Pre-exilic	Mid Eighth Century	Israel
Micah	Pre-exilic	Late Eighth Century	Judah
Isaiah ²	Pre-exilic	Late Eighth Century	Judah
Zephaniah	Pre-exilic	Late Seventh Century	Judah
Nahum	Pre-exilic	Late Seventh Century	Judah
Habbakkuk	Pre-exilic	Seventh Century	Judah
Jeremiah	Pre-exilic	Late Seventh Century	Judah
Daniel	Exilic	Sixth Century	Exile Community
Ezekiel	Exilic	Early Sixth Century	Exile Community
Obadiah ³	Post-exilic	Late Sixth Century	
Zechariah	Post-exilic	Late Sixth Century	
Haggai	Post-exilic	Late Sixth Century	
Malachi	Post-exilic	Late Fifth Century	

¹ There is no agreement among scholars on the date of Joel.

² Isaiah's ministry extended into the late seventh century.

³ There is no agreement among scholars on the date of Obadiah.

ISAIAH – THE BIBLE IN MINIATURE

BACKGROUND

Isaiah is often called the “Bible in miniature.” There are sixty-six chapters in Isaiah and sixty-six books in the Bible. The first section of Isaiah contains 39 chapters and emphasizes judgment and the Law. The first section of the Bible (the OT) contains 39 books and emphasizes judgment and the Law. The second section of Isaiah contains 27 chapters and emphasizes comfort and grace. The second section of the Bible (the NT) contains 27 books and emphasizes comfort and grace.

1. Isaiah ministered to the rulers of the Southern Kingdom for almost sixty years.

There are two distinct sections in Isaiah. Chapters 1-39 are very different from chapters 40-66. The reason for this is Isaiah clearly had two different audiences in mind. The first section warns of impending judgment and was addressed primarily to the people of his day. The second section proclaims comfort and encouragement and was addressed prophetically to the exiles who were to return from Babylon (in about 150 years).

2. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians during Isaiah’s ministry.

Assyria destroyed Israel in 722 BC, carried them into exile, and made Judah a vassal state subject to a heavy tribute. Later, during the reign of Hezekiah, Assyria tried to destroy Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom. Hezekiah was pressured to turn to Egypt for aid, but he instead trusted in the Lord and 185,000 Assyrians were destroyed in one night by the angel of the Lord.

Hezekiah’s prayer is recorded in Isaiah 37:15-20 and II Kings 19:15-19. It is a powerful model prayer for deliverance against overwhelming odds.

3. Isaiah gave many important prophecies concerning the Messiah.

Only the book of Psalms has more messianic prophecies than Isaiah.

- Isaiah foretold of the Messiah’s birth. (Isaiah 7:14)

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son, and will call Him Immanuel.”

- Isaiah foretold of the Messiah’s ministry. (Isaiah 42:1-4)

“Here is my servant... I will put My Spirit on Him and He will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out. In faithfulness He will bring forth justice; He will not falter or be discouraged till He establishes justice on earth. In His law the islands will put their hope.”

- Isaiah foretold of the Messiah’s sufferings. (Isaiah 53:4-7)

“He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open his mouth.”

JEREMIAH – THE WEeping PROPHEt

BACKGROUND

Jeremiah was the primary author, aided by the scribe Baruch. “Then Jeremiah called Baruch who wrote at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord, which He had spoken to him, on a scroll.” (Jeremiah 36:4)

Jeremiah began his ministry in the thirteenth year of Josiah (627 BC), prophesying through the destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC). He continued to prophesy to the rebellious Jews who went to Egypt after the deportation to Babylon.

The historical context surrounding Jeremiah’s ministry was complex.

In 612 BC, Babylon defeated the Assyrians. Judah then enjoyed a brief period of independence (612-609 BC).

In 609 BC, Egypt joined the conflict on the side of Assyria. Josiah went to war against Egypt, and was killed.

In 606 BC, Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt, invaded Judah, and took hostages to Babylon (including Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego).

In 588 BC, Judah rebelled against Babylon. In 586 BC, Jerusalem was overrun and the temple destroyed.

1. Jeremiah is the most personal, biographical, and intense of all the prophets. He rarely hides his true feelings.

“O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, ‘I will not mention Him or speak any more in His name,’ His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”
(Jeremiah 20:7-9)

2. God often called upon him to proclaim a message in dramatic ways (13:1-8; 51:60-64).

In chapter 13, Jeremiah was instructed to buy a linen waistband, put it around his waist, but not to put it in water. He was then commanded to take the waistband to the Euphrates and hide it there in a crevice of the rock. After a period of time, he went back to the Euphrates and found the waistband ruined and worthless. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Just so will I destroy the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. Let them be just like this waistband, which is totally worthless.”

In chapter 51, Jeremiah was instructed to write in a single scroll the entire calamity that would come upon Babylon, and then to read the words aloud. When he finished reading this scroll, he was commanded to tie a stone to it and throw it into the middle of the Euphrates and say, “Just so shall Babylon sink down and not rise again, because of the calamity that I am going to bring upon her; and they will become exhausted.”

THEMES

1. Jeremiah is about the inescapable judgement that comes when God's covenant is violated.

Jeremiah 25:31

"The Lord will bring charges against the nations; He will bring judgment on all mankind and put the wicked to the sword."

2. Jeremiah is also about restoration.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

"The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

LAMENTATIONS – THE FUNERAL DIRGE

BACKGROUND

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations after the destruction of Jerusalem.

1. During Nebuchadnezzar's two-year siege, the conditions in Jerusalem deteriorated to the point of cannibalism.

Lamentations 4:10

"With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed."

2. After Babylon breached Jerusalem's walls, they plundered everything of value and then burned the city. Jeremiah saw these events and recorded his feelings in five dirges.

Chapters 1, 2, and 4 are acrostic poems with each verse corresponding to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In chapter 3, each letter of the alphabet has three consecutive verses making a total of sixty-six. Chapter 5 is also a twenty-two verse poem, but is not an acrostic. Chapters 1-4 use a "limping meter" where the first part of the verse has one more beat than the second half. This produces a mournful intensity used in funeral dirges.

THEMES

1. Lamentations is an existential plunge into the despair that disobedience to God will bring.
2. In the midst of the most sorrowful book in the entire Bible, these great words of comfort ring out:

Lamentations 3:21-23

"Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness."

EZEKIEL – THE PROPHET AND PRIEST

BACKGROUND

1. Ezekiel spent his early years in Jerusalem, during the end of Josiah's revival and Judah's slide to judgment.

At the age of 25, Ezekiel was taken to Babylon during the second deportation in 597 BC. Five years later, he began his prophetic ministry. He lived the rest of his life in Babylon. Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Daniel. He was a priest, which therefore explains his repeated emphasis upon the temple, the glory of the Lord, the behavior of the priests, and the future temple of the Lord.

Ezekiel is the only major prophet to provide such a consistent and definite chronological background for his prophecies. His prophecies are dated in connection with the year of his exile: 597 BC.

2. Ezekiel's ministry was to the Jewish exiles in Babylon before and after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Ezekiel is the easiest of the prophets to date because of his many chronological references. His first recorded prophecy came in July of 593 BC, and his last recorded prophecy came in April of 571 BC, a ministry spanning twenty-two years.

There are three distinct sections in Ezekiel. Section one (1:1-24:27) was directed to Judah before the fall of Jerusalem; it listed her sins and the reason for God's judgment. The Jews refused to believe that

Jerusalem would fall. The prevailing idea was that God's presence in the temple would withstand and repel all foreign invaders. Ezekiel replied that God had left the temple because of the abominations practiced there.

Section two (25:1-32:32) was directed to the surrounding nations; it proclaimed judgment upon them for their sin.

Section three (33:1-48:35) was directed to the exiles; it promised restoration for God's covenant people.

3. Ezekiel provided a constant reminder to the exiles that their sin had produced their plight, and that they must repent. He tried to bolster the faith of the exiles by telling them of God's plans for their nation.

THEMES

1. The twin themes of judgement and restoration are seen throughout the entire work.

"The end is now upon you and I will unleash my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices." (Ezekiel 7:3) "Now I shall restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I shall be jealous for My holy name." (Ezekiel 39:25)

2. The return of the glory of the Lord to the temple is one of the major themes of restoration.

Ezekiel 43:1-5

"And I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with His glory. The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple."

DANIEL – THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

BACKGROUND

1. Daniel was taken to Babylon in the first deportation (606 BC) while he was still very young.

The Babylonians habitually captured the best and the brightest from the royal families in the nations they conquered to indoctrinate them and train them for civil service.

Daniel 1:3, 4

“Then the king ordered Ashpenaz to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.”

The first six chapters of Daniel are historical narrative, but the last six chapters are apocalyptic. Apocalyptic is a genre that concerns the end of the world and the salvation of the righteous. It contains many symbols and visions.

Daniel is unique in that it was written in two different languages. Chapters 1:1 through 2:4 and chapters 8-12 were written in Hebrew. The middle section from 2:4b through 7:28 was written in Aramaic, the international language of the day.

THEMES

1. Daniel's main theme is the sovereignty of God over the nations. Jehovah is portrayed as the great shaper of the events of history, putting one leader forward and removing another at His will.

- In chapter one this theme is seen in God's promotion of Nebuchadnezzar.

And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. (Daniel 1:1, 2)

- In chapter two it is seen in Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Daniel's interpretation.
- In chapter three it is seen in the elevation of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego to positions of prominence.
- In chapter four it is seen in the dementia and restoration of Nebuchadnezzar.

- In chapter five it is seen in the judgment of Belshazzar.
- In chapter six it is seen in the decree of Darius.

Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land: "May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For He is the living God and He endures forever; His kingdom will not be destroyed, His dominion will never end. He rescues and He saves; He performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions." (Daniel 6:25-27)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Isaiah tell us about the Messiah? How does Isaiah contrast the image of the Messiah as King and yet also a suffering servant?
2. Jeremiah and Lamentations both depict the tension between the suffering that comes from disobedience and separation from God with the hopeful expectation of redemption and reconciliation. Where do you see this tension in your life? In your workplace? In your neighborhood or city?
3. Ezekiel and Daniel both use wild prophetic imagery in their narrative. How can we understand these passages? How would their original audience have understood them?