

The Prophets

Study Notes

Introduction

The books of the Old Testament prophets are filled with dense poetry and vivid imagery. If you've tried to read them, odds are you were both intrigued and confused. But when we learn how to read these prophetic books with attention and context, we will discover the fascinating role they play in the storyline of the Bible. Use these study notes to go deeper into the ideas from our video *How to Read Bible: The Prophets*.

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What Is Biblical Prophecy?

The books of the Hebrew prophets are some of the most challenging books of the Bible to read, but they are also some of the most beautiful books. Learning to read them does take effort, but the effort is totally worth it.

The Challenge of Reading the Prophetic Books

The prophets have an odd way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at.

Martin Luther, quoted in Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Vol. 2*, 33

What makes the prophetic books particularly, and one might say needlessly, difficult is the very manner of their arrangement—or, to be more accurate, their apparent lack of arrangement ... All seems confusion ... The impression that the reader gains is one of extreme disarray; one can scarcely blame him for concluding that he is reading a hopeless hodgepodge thrown together without any discernible principle of arrangement at all.

John Bright, *Jeremiah (Anchor Bible Commentary)*, ivi

Definitions of Biblical Prophecy

Biblical prophecy is not the prediction of future events, but most people understand the term prophecy as just that. This definition is inadequate and does not account for huge amounts of the material in the prophetic books. While there are certain passages within the Prophets that do contain predictive elements, most of these poems and narratives don't present themselves as predictive prophecy.

In the Bible, a prophecy is a message that God speaks to his people through a human prophet. Thus, prophecies often contain the quoted speech of God himself.

*Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
"Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying,
'Thus says the LORD: "I remember concerning
you the devotion of your youth ..."'"*

Jeremiah 2:1-2

Take a look at some key biblical texts that define or illustrate the nature of prophecy.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "I am the LORD; speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I speak to you." Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh."

Exodus 6:28-7:2

*I am filled with power—
with the Spirit of the LORD—
and with justice and courage
to make known to Jacob his rebellious act,
even to Israel his sin.*

Micah 3:8

*Now these are the last words of David.
David the son of Jesse declares,
the man who was raised on high declares,
the anointed of the God of Jacob
and the sweet psalmist of Israel, declares,
"The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me,
and his word was on my tongue."*

2 Samuel 23:1-2

Here we see the prophet as God's mouthpiece, and the Spirit guides Micah to say what God wants his people to hear. Also, notice what God wants Micah to talk about: Israel's sin and injustice. This leads us to the purpose and role of the biblical prophets.

Why Biblical Prophecy Matters

The Prophets are the bridge between the past story of Israel and the covenant and the future story of God's rescue plan for the world through Jesus.

Did you know that the prophetic books take up as much page space in the Bible as the entire New Testament?

Also, in the New Testament itself, Jesus and the apostles constantly quoted the Prophets to explain how Jesus was bringing Israel's story to its fulfillment. The Prophets are quoted 77 times in the Gospels and 98 times in the rest of the New Testament.

Who Were the Biblical Prophets?

There were more Israelite prophets than the fifteen who have books named after them in the Hebrew Bible. These other prophets include Deborah (Judg. 5), Gad (1 Sam. 22:5), Nathan (2 Sam. 7, 12), Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs. 22), and many more.

Moses is a key figure in the lineup of prophets because he is portrayed as the archetypal prophet.

- He is the first divine spokesman sent to Israel and the nations (Exod. 3).
- He is the first figure to mediate between Yahweh and Israel and establish Yahweh's covenant with the people (Exod. 19-24, the Sinai narrative).
- He is the only figure allowed to enter the divine presence directly (Exod. 19-20, 33-34).
- He is the key intercessor for Israel when they have violated the covenant (Exod. 32-34).
- He suffers because of Israel's failures (Num. 11-21), and accuses them of present and ongoing rebellion against Yahweh that will result in exile (Deut. 28-32).
- His death is marked as the end of an era. Deuteronomy 34:10 says, "Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face ..."

The prophets are best understood as covenant watchdogs. They carry the larger covenant story of Yahweh, creation, and Israel.

2 Kings 17:13 summarizes the message of the prophets to Israel.

The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets saying, "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your ancestors to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets."

For every significant king in Israel's history, there was a prophet on his heels.

Prophet	Samuel	Nathan	Gad	Ahijah	Elijah	Elisha	Isaiah
King	Saul	David	Solomon	Jeroboam	Ahab	Jehoshaphat	Ahaz and Hezekiah

12 of the 15 prophetic books begin with a historical note telling us when that prophet lived and the kings they held accountable. It's worth going back to the books of Samuel-Kings to read about those specific kings to remember the context of the prophet you're reading.

A helpful fact to remember about the relationship between a prophet and the current king is how kings were viewed in the ancient Near East. Unlike in Egypt, where the kings were considered divine, Israelite kings were viewed as humans who were subject to the law of God's covenant justice. Prophets helped keep the Israelite kings accountable to God.

The Covenant Story of Yahweh, Creation, and Israel

1. Yahweh is the creator and king, whose image-bearing stewards have rebelled and corrupted his good world (Gen. 1-11).
2. In the covenant with Abraham, Yahweh will use Abraham's family to restore his divine blessing to all nations (Gen. 12).
3. In the covenant with Israel (also known as the Sinai or Mosaic covenant), Yahweh calls Israel to become a kingdom of priests to the nations by adhering to the laws of the covenant. Obedience will result in covenant blessing, and rebellion will bring covenant curses (Exod. 19, Lev. 26, Deut. 28-30).
4. In the covenant with Israel's priesthood, Yahweh will provide a perpetual priesthood through the line of Aaron to intercede on Israel's behalf and atone for their covenant failures (Num. 25).
5. In the covenant with Israel's monarchy, Yahweh will raise up a king from the line of David who will bring God's kingdom and blessing to all the nations (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 2, 72, 89, 132).
6. In the new covenant, Israel was unable to fulfill its side of the Sinai covenant and was sent into exile. But in the future, Yahweh will transform their hearts so they can truly love and obey their God (Deut. 30, Jer. 31, Ezek. 36).

What Are Prophetic Books?

The fifteen prophetic books (three major prophetic books and 12 minor prophetic books) are a mosaic collection of narratives, poems, and essays that represent the message of the Israelite prophets. These collections were expertly crafted over a long period of time, and were eventually integrated into the larger collection of the Hebrew Bible. Many of the prophetic books begin with editorial introductions that coordinate the collection within the narrative context provided by Genesis-2 Kings and Ezra-Nehemiah. Take a look at the verses below for examples.

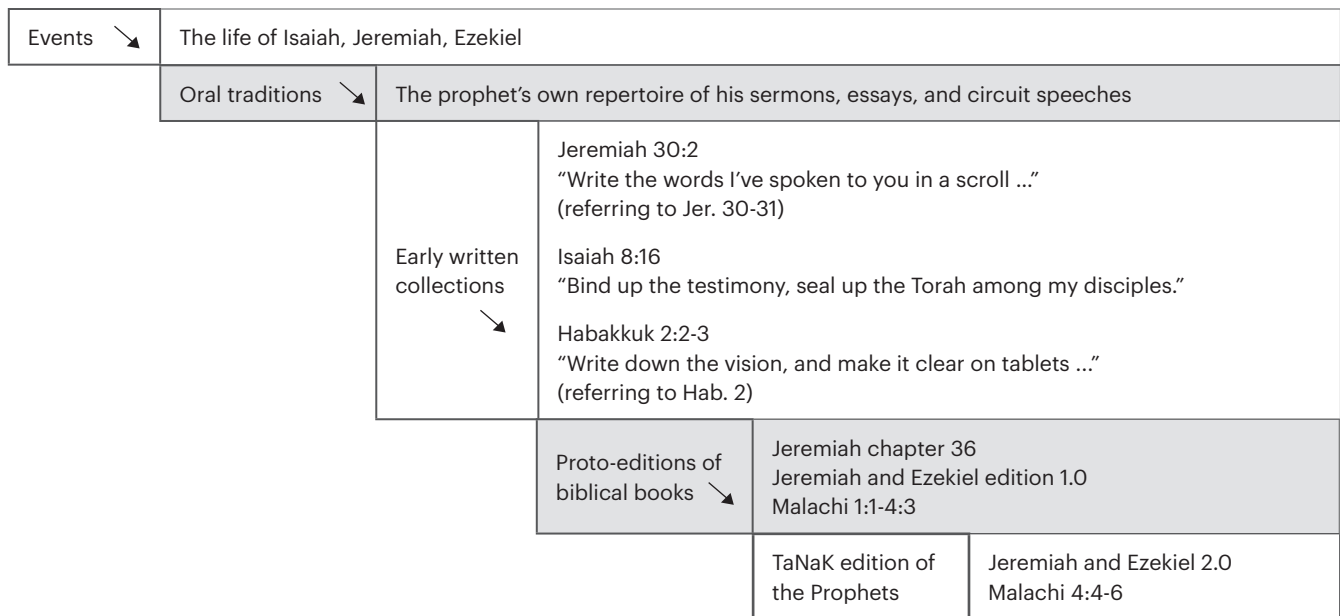
The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. [cross-references to 2 Kings 14-20]

Isaiah 1:1

In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. [cross-references to Ezra 1-6]

Haggai 1:1

These prophetic scrolls came into existence through a lengthy process that began with the prophet's own calling and message to his contemporaries.



The Family Quilt Metaphor

A quilt made of many pre-existing materials can both retain the integrity of the earlier materials while giving new layers of meaning when they are set within a larger context and frame of reference.



These books accomplish a number of important goals within this collection.

- 7. They are literary representations of the message of these prophets (in poetry and prose) passed down through the disciples of the prophets.
- 8. These traditions have been intentionally woven together and set within a narrative framework (the superscriptions within all the prophetic books plus the narrative blocks within them) that ties them into the main theological themes of Genesis-Kings.

For more on this idea, read Isaiah 8:10-20 and Jeremiah 36, key biblical texts that discuss the composition of the prophetic scrolls.

Main Themes in the Prophetic Books

Biblical prophecy frequently deals with the following themes.

1. Accusations that Israel and the nations have **rebelled** against Yahweh.

- Israel/Judah have (1) broken the covenant, (2) worshiped other gods, (3) allowed social injustice, and (4) made alliances with the foreign nations.
 - Key rhetorical device: the covenant lawsuit
 - Key metaphor: idolatry as adultery
- Nations accused of injustice, cruelty, and arrogance.

2. Calls for repentance and admonitions to turn from wicked ways and return to faithful obedience to Yahweh.

- Calls for religious devotion to Yahweh alone and no other gods.
- Calls for social justice and care for the most vulnerable people such as the widow, orphan, and immigrant.

3. Announcements of the day of Yahweh that will address injustice and rebellion.

- Refers to historical events that God will use to judge evil and vindicate the righteous, all leading up to the great future day when God will do this for all creation, like a cosmic house cleaning.

The bad news: Yahweh will bring his justice against human rebellion, and because of human hard-heartedness, future punishment becomes inevitable.

- Justice upon Israel and Judah, resulting in disaster, defeat, and exile.
- Justice upon individual nations (especially Assyria, Babylon, Egypt).
- Justice upon all nations.

The good news: Yahweh will bring about the restoration of his covenant people on the other side of exile.

- Hope for a righteous remnant: God will preserve a faithful remnant, an important minority who remain faithful.
- Hope for a restoration from exile (captivity): God will restore their fortunes.
- Hope for a new covenant: Yahweh will renew his covenant with his people.
- The Kingdom of God: Yahweh will establish a peaceful, universal Kingdom over all nations, ruled by the future messianic King.
 - New temple/new Eden/new Jerusalem: God's personal presence will permeate his people in a new cosmic temple.
 - Messiah: The anointed one refers to a royal king figure (as promised to David), as well as a royal priest figure (as promised to Phinehas)—a priest king who will rule and represent all humanity before God and bring God's reign of justice and peace to the nations.
 - All nations: The Gentile nations will undergo a conversion to Yahweh worship, and they will be gathered in and included in the blessings of Yahweh's reign.
 - Restored creation: The future age will be a time of glory, joy, and peace in God's presence, and it will also be a time for the removal of sin, curses, and death.

Common Patterns in the Prophetic Books

Some of the prophetic books share common large scale compositional patterns.

	Isaiah	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Zephaniah
Judgments Against Israel	1-12	1-25	4-24	1:1-2:3
Judgments Against Nations	13-23	46-51	25-32	2:4-15
Announcements of Salvation	40-55	26-35	33-48	3:9-20

Main Characters in the Prophetic Books

Some recurring characters in the prophetic books include:

- Yahweh
- The prophet
- Israel and Judah
- The kings and prophets of Israel
- The righteous remnant
- The nations (especially Egypt, Assyria/Nineveh, Babylon, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre/Sidon)

Literary Forms and Features in Prophecy

Each prophetic book has a unique design and an organized flow of thought, but it's rarely chronological. Reading the Prophets is a lot like listening to a symphony or a concept album. There is always an opening introduction to all the main themes, but then the work is broken up into multiple movements or sections. If you pay attention, you'll hear the key themes being repeated and developed throughout and begin to see how all the parts fit together.

For example, the book of Ezekiel is organized into a collection of poems accusing Israel of worshipping other gods and calling the people to turn back to God (Ezek. 1-24). This section is followed by a section filled with accusations of violence and arrogance against the nations (Ezek. 25-32). However, when Ezekiel finds out Jerusalem has been destroyed and the people have been carried into exile (Ezek. 33), the book transitions into poems about future hope after exile. These poems talk about how God will raise up a messianic king and bring his people back from exile and renew his covenant with them (Ezek. 34-48). The overarching theme throughout all these sections is the presence of God. Ezekiel highlights how the personal presence of God left the Jerusalem temple because of Israel's idolatry, but after the exile God promises that his presence will return one day (Ezek. 1, 11, 36, 40-48).

Other Literary Forms and Features of Prophecy

- The use of the phrase, “Thus says the LORD ...” indicates the claim made by the prophets that they are actually speaking for God. This phrase usually marks a new structural division as well.
- The quoted speech of God uses a lot of first person pronouns such as “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine” in reference to Yahweh (rather than the prophetic author). Most often when God speaks, it is in poetic verse.
- Rhetorical questions are used extensively.
- Lawsuit: a legal charge is brought against Israel/Judah for having broken the terms of their covenant with God.
- The prophets perform symbolic actions.
- The use of satire and irony: “Prophecy which seeks to instruct, amend, and reform also seeks to offend” (Thomas J. Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*).

Guidelines for Interpreting Prophecy

1. Determine the literary type you are dealing with in each section. The prophetic book may contain narrative, poetry, and discourse all mixed within a single book. Once you have identified the type of literature encountered in your passages, adjust your reading expectations to fit that type.
2. Recognize that prophecy is organized topically (symphonically) rather than chronologically or sequentially. Then seek to understand its structure and the arrangement of the parts on the basis of either theme, content, or literary patterns.
3. Identify figurative language. As a general rule, the Bible will interpret its own symbols either in the immediate context or elsewhere in the Bible. The best way to interpret symbols is to carefully look at the main points developed by the author in the passage, and then to compare that symbol with other passages by using a concordance.
4. Investigate whether the passage is using earlier Scriptures. Frequently, the prophets build on or allude to prior passages (especially from the Pentateuch). They also commonly contest how the priests, leaders, and false prophets have interpreted the earlier promises of God to their forefathers. When this is the case, make sure that you understand these background passages.
5. Determine the author’s purpose from the text. What kind of response is the author trying to elicit from the reader? Think of emotions like joy, hope, comfort, repentance, fear, shock, awe, or worship and so on. What kinds of sins are exposed, and what would be their modern day equivalents? What is the basis of its hope? What is the content of its hope?
6. Be on the lookout for dramatic literary techniques. The prophets, generally speaking, stood against the status quo of society. Their message was seen as radical and usually offensive to the listeners. The prophets can be characterized as unwanted, annoying interrupters in the lives of their contemporaries. The prophets’ speech, artistic skill, rhetorical courage, emotional sensitivity, and political chutzpah all stand free of the dominant conventions—free to protest against, free to disclose change, free to move to better worlds. As a result, be especially alert to the presence of satire and irony, two tactics often used by critics of society.

Key Insights From the Prophets

1. God loves justice. Israel is called to a higher level of justice than the nations around them, especially in the treatment of their land and the poor (see Isa. 1:10-20).
2. God gets angry at evil. The prophets give a lot of space to God's exposure of the evil among Israel and the nations. It's intense, but it reveals how much God cares about the goodness of his world (see Hos. 13).
3. God has hope for our world. God refuses to let Israel's sin get the last word, and so all the prophetic books contain profound images of future hope and restoration for God's people and for the entire world (see Isa. 11:1-9).

Helpful Resources

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