

# INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETIC BOOKS



## Introduction

Mesopotamian texts indicate that long before Israel entered Canaan, other countries had prophets. These texts from Israel's neighbors indicate that their prophets claimed to intercede for people to the gods, speak for the gods, criticize the people's moral and ethical deficiencies on behalf of the gods, predict future events through special knowledge given by the gods, and denounce enemies by the power of the gods. Though the Bible asserts belief in one God, not many gods, it basically portrays Israel's prophets fulfilling the same tasks. This is not surprising if the idea of a "prophet" was of a person who spoke for a god to the people.

The OT includes three basic terms for the concept of "prophet," two of which have a similar connotation. First, on a few occasions the OT uses the terms *hozeh* or *ro'eh*. The former means "visionary," while the latter means "seer." These words imply that prophets were people who could "envision" or "see" things others could not. They could "see" or "envision" details about the present as well as what God wanted in the future. For example, Saul expected the "seer" Samuel to know where some lost donkeys had gone (1 Sam. 9:1–10). Samuel could indeed "see" where the donkeys had gone, but he could also "see" that God had chosen Saul to rule Israel (1 Sam. 9:15–17). Saul expected to pay the "seer" something for his trouble. Such expectations and the greed of some individuals calling themselves prophets eventually led people to think that all seers were after money (see Amos 7:12).

Second, the OT most commonly uses the word *nabi'* for "prophet." The origins of this word are uncertain; perhaps it comes from a root that means "to announce," which could imply that a prophet was one who announced or declared vital information. In any event the prophet serves as a spokesman: in Exodus 7:1 Moses will be like God to Pharaoh, while Aaron will be his prophet (i.e., his spokesman). Indeed, Israelite prophets claimed to declare the words of Yahweh, the God of Israel, while in other lands the prophets claimed to speak the words of other gods. Since so many prophets were active and were declaring conflicting messages, people had to determine who actually spoke for God and who was a false prophet.

The prophets addressed both future and present issues, with present issues often being the overwhelming concern of their messages. They did announce future events, such as the Messiah's coming and the final day of judgment, but typically they declared how God's people should live in light of their covenant with God (see below).

## The Prophets in Israel's History

The Bible indicates that prophets who served the one true living God existed well before the careers of the writing prophets. Abraham (as early as 2000 B.C.), Moses (as early as 1450), Samuel (c. 1050–1010), Nathan (c. 1010–970),

Elijah and Elisha (c. 860–850), and Huldah (627) are but a few of the persons whom Genesis–Psalms calls prophets.

Through Moses, God revealed his standards for prophets. According to Deuteronomy 13:1–11, Israel's prophets must never teach the people to serve any other god but Yahweh. Even if a prophet can perform signs and wonders, the people must not follow him if he advocates serving other gods. In Deuteronomy 18:9–22 Moses adds that other nations will have prophets who tell the future and communicate with spirits (Deut. 18:9–14); in contrast, God will put his own words in his prophets' mouths (Deut. 18:18). Further, a prophet can show that he has God's authorization by speaking the truth about future events (Deut. 18:21–22). Israel must wait for the perfect prophet whom God will send (see Acts 3:22–23). As they wait, they must obey prophets who proclaim faithfulness to God's covenant with Israel and whose predictions come true every time. Any prophet failing to meet these standards does not speak for God.

It is important to recognize that the prophets were not the regular teachers of God's word—that was the priests' calling (Deut. 33:10). Rather, God raised up prophets for particular times in the OT story (which is why their "calls" were so important, as in Isaiah 6).

The first Prophetic Books originated in the eighth century B.C. These books came about during the decline of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the rise of Assyria as a world power. Eventually Assyria destroyed Israel in 722 B.C., leaving only Judah as a remnant of David's kingdom. Hosea, Amos, and Jonah all ministered at mid-century (760–745 B.C.). Hosea and Amos decried social injustice fueled by covenantal disobedience and warned the covenant people and the nations of a future "day of the Lord," a day of judgment for their sins. Jonah reluctantly preached to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, before Assyria became a dominant, oppressing nation. Isaiah, the greatest prophet of this era, shared his predecessors' concerns for sin and judgment and wrote some of the Bible's richest promises of a future Savior and his kingdom. Isaiah's book contains decades of writing (c. 745–690 B.C.). Micah ministered near the end of the century (overlapping with Isaiah), rebuking Judah for personal and societal sins and (like Isaiah) predicting God's victory over Assyria during the Sennacherib crisis of 701 B.C. (see 2 Kings 18–19). Micah promised that a leader born in Bethlehem would defeat God's enemies (Mic. 5:1–5; see Matt. 2:1–12).

Seventh-century B.C. prophets wrote against the background of the continuing power and ultimate demise of Assyria, which by 612 B.C. had lost its place as the world's greatest power to Babylon. These prophets pressed God's claims on the chosen people, especially the standards of the Mosaic covenant. Zephaniah (c. 640–609 B.C.) denounced Judah's worship of other gods, warned of judgment, and promised renewal beyond judgment. Nahum

(c. 660–630 B.C.) announced the end of Assyria's tyranny, and Habakkuk (c. 640–609) explored the ways of God in the days leading up to Babylon's capturing of Judah. Of course, Jeremiah also worked during this century and well into the next. He declared God's word of repentance to Judah for at least 40 years (627–587 B.C.; Jer. 1:1–3), decades that spanned from the period when Judah still had time to change its ways and avoid punishment, to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 and the subsequent exiling of the people. He repeatedly preached repentance, yet his most famous words are the promise of a future new covenant with the house of Israel (Jer. 31:31–34; see Heb. 8:8–12).

Sixth-century B.C. prophets lived under the shadow of exile. A few of them also lived during the shifting of world domination from Babylon to Persia, which occurred in 538 B.C. Daniel was taken to Babylon in 605 B.C. He worked there until at least 536 B.C. Ezekiel joined the exiles in Babylon in 597 B.C., where he wrote accounts of visions he received during 593–571. Both of these exiles envisioned perilous times and future days of glory for God's people. Obadiah witnessed the terrors of Babylon's invasion of Judah in 587 B.C. Haggai and Zechariah were among the people allowed to return to Jerusalem from Persia in 520–516 B.C. They participated in the rebuilding of the temple and looked forward to future glory for God's people under the Messiah's leadership.

Malachi served during the fifth century B.C. A contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah (c. 460–425 B.C.), he experienced the problems associated with rebuilding Jerusalem and restoring faithful worship and covenantal obedience. Malachi identified flaws in the returned exiles' commitment to God, such as insincere worship, the failure of the priests to teach God's Word, and marital infidelity (Mal. 1:6–2:16). He also predicted the coming of a new Elijah and the Messiah (Mal. 4:5–6). The book of Joel probably comes from this period as well, as it makes no mention of a king in Judah. Joel calls the people to repentance at a time of national calamity (a locust plague).

### Prophetic Books

Little is known about the Prophetic Books' composition and preservation, though some helpful information may be gleaned from the biblical text. For example, Isaiah had disciples who were able to preserve his words (Isa. 8:16), and Jeremiah's disciple Baruch was a scribe who wrote down some of the prophet's messages (Jer. 36:1–32). Many prophets were probably able to write their own words (Isa. 8:1–2; Jer. 1:4–19) since literacy was fairly widespread.

The prophets' words were originally copied on papyrus or leather scrolls that were passed on to future generations by persons who valued them (Jer. 36:1–4). Several such books existed at one time, for the author of 1–2 Chronicles reports sources composed by or about prophets (1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29; 26:22). By Jeremiah's time the prophecy of Micah had been handed down and was considered authoritative (Jer. 26:13, quoting Mic. 3:12). According to the apocryphal book *Sirach*, by the second century B.C. (at the very latest) all the Prophetic Books were considered authoritative Scripture (see *Sir.* 48:22; 49:6, 8, 12; cf. *1 Macc.* 2:60).

Many types of literature appear in the Prophetic Books. There are narratives detailing what the prophets did and the circumstances in which they received and delivered their messages. There are also sermons, extended poems,

dialogues between God and prophets, and visionary experiences. All of these forms reveal the great themes noted in the next section, and these themes provide the books' plot (or story line) and major characters.

### Unifying Themes in the Prophetic Books

The Prophetic Books include most of the OT's greatest themes, preserving in written form for future generations the reasons Israel's history happened as it did. Though the authors wrote in different times and under different circumstances, their messages are in theological harmony with one another and with other types of biblical books. Several interrelated ideas unify the prophetic message, making it possible for readers to find their bearings in some difficult literature. It is often helpful to decide which of the following themes the biblical author is stressing when one becomes puzzled by the content of the books.

First, *the prophets assert that God has spoken through them.* They clearly considered themselves God's messengers and heralds, for they repeatedly preface their messages with the phrase, "Thus says Yahweh." In this way the prophets are claiming that their books are the written word of God. Peter explains that the prophets "were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). Just as God used Moses to write and preach so that Israel could know God's will in his era, so God used the prophets in their generations. The prophets declared God's instructions in two basic ways: word and symbol. Usually the prophets presented God's word orally (e.g., Jer. 7:1–8:3) or in written form (e.g., Jer. 36:1–32) to varying types and sizes of audiences. Occasionally they performed symbolic acts that demonstrated God's purposes. For example, Isaiah went naked and barefoot for three years to teach God's people their future if they continued to seek help from other nations rather than from God (Isa. 20:1–6). Perhaps the saddest case of symbolic prophecy was Hosea's marriage to unfaithful Gomer, which portrayed God's relationship with unfaithful Israel (Hosea 1–3).

Second, *the prophets affirm that God chose Israel for covenant relationship.* The Pentateuch (the first five books of the OT) teaches that God chose Abraham and his family to bless all nations (Gen. 12:1–9), that he revealed salvation by grace to Abraham (Gen. 15:6), and that he assigned Moses to write a record of this revelation (Ex. 24:4). Furthermore, through Moses in Exodus–Deuteronomy he revealed the lifestyle that reflects that relationship. With these truths in mind, the prophets addressed Israel as a people with special responsibilities based on this special relationship (Jeremiah 2–6; Hosea 1–3; Amos 2:6–3:8; etc.). Through the prophets God revealed the success and failure of Israel's attempts or lack of attempts to fulfill their confession of faith in God and their God-given role as a kingdom of priests charged with serving the nations (see Ex. 19:5–6).

Third, *sadly, the prophets most often report that the majority of Israel has sinned against their God and his standards for their relationship.* They have failed to trust God (Isa. 7:1–14). Thus, they have broken the Ten Commandments (cf. Ex. 20:1–17 and Jer. 7:1–15; Hos. 4:2). They have worshiped other gods (Ezek. 8:1–18). They have mistreated one another and failed to preserve justice among God's people (Isa. 1:21–31). They have refused to repent (Amos 4:6–11). Of course, in these times there was always a faithful minority, called the "remnant" (see Isa. 4:3; 10:20–22; etc.), as the prophets' ministries themselves demonstrate (see Hebrews 11).

Fourth, *the prophets warn that judgment will eradicate sin*. This judgment is often called the “day of the LORD” (Isa. 2:12–22; Joel 2:1–11; Zeph. 1:7–18; etc.; see note on Amos 5:18–20). This is a day in history, as when Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon (Jer. 42:18), but it is also a day to come, when God will judge all the world’s inhabitants (Isa. 24:1–23). The prophets recorded these warnings in writing so readers can do what the prophets’ original audience usually failed to do—turn from sin to God.

Fifth, *the prophets promise that renewal lies beyond the day of punishment that has occurred already in history and beyond the coming day that will bring history as we know it to a close*. The coming of the Savior lies beyond the destruction of Israel and other such events. He will rule Israel and the nations, and he will bring peace and righteousness to the world (Isa. 9:2–7; 11:1–16). This Savior must suffer, die, and rise from the dead (Isa. 52:13–53:12). He will be “like a son of man,” and “the Ancient of Days” (God himself) will give him all the kingdoms of the world (Dan. 7:9–14). He will be the catalyst for a new covenant with Israel that will include all those, Jew or Gentile, whom God’s Spirit fills and changes (Jer. 31:31–40; 32:14–26; Ezek. 34:25–31; 36:22–32). This new people will serve him faithfully. Eventually he will cleanse the world of sin and recreate the earth (Isa. 65:17–25; 66:18–24; Zeph. 3:8–20). The creation now spoiled by sin will be whole again.

### Scholarly Issues and the Prophetic Books

The past two centuries have seen many debates concerning the Prophetic Books. These discussions include many facets but may be summarized in the following categories: unity, authenticity, and relationship to the NT.

For centuries most scholars basically accepted that the Prophetic Books were written by the persons whose names were mentioned at the beginning of the books (Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1:1–3; etc.). They did so because they held traditional beliefs about the inspiration and authority of the Bible (see Ps. 19:1–14; 2 Tim. 3:14–17; 2 Pet. 1:21) yet also because the books are as well attested by other ancient sources, and as coherent in content and style, as any surviving ancient books.

Beginning in the late 1700s, however, several scholars began to argue that differences within individual books indicate that they were not composed of the words of the persons that the books name as the source of the material. For example, they noted that the book of Isaiah stresses judgment and renewal, mentions Assyria and Babylon as conquerors of Israel, and describes exile and return from exile. Therefore, they posited at least two authors, one who lived in the eighth century B.C. and one who lived in the sixth century, with perhaps a third in the fifth century. They soon made similar arguments about other prophetic books. As they continued to find other differences, they suggested still more authors. By the early 1900s such scholars wrote freely about the “authentic” passages (written or spoken by the persons the Bible names as authors) and the “inauthentic” passages (written by later editors of the books).

Many of these critical scholars also concluded that the OT prophets did not predict future events in the manner the NT claims. Rather, in their view the prophets wrote about events of their own day, but NT writers applied these texts to Jesus, the church, and other subjects. Thus, the unity of the OT and the NT, which Jesus and Paul are portrayed as affirming (Matt. 5:17–20; John 5:45–46;

10:35; 2 Tim. 3:14–17), simply does not exist. Church tradition may treat the Bible as a unity, but, they argued, historical research does not confirm that belief.

Evangelical scholars responded to these trends in several ways. First, they reaffirmed their belief in the inspiration and authority of the Bible and in the Holy Spirit’s ability to provide information on the future to the prophets. Second, they observed that the OT and NT writers—the closest witnesses to the time of the books’ writing and the most ancient teachers of that word—never name any writers of a biblical book other than the ones listed in the OT. Third, they offered treatments of the books that explained how the passages in question could come from the time period the books mention. Fourth, they described how the NT writers used the OT books in a contextual, not arbitrary, manner.

Recently evangelical scholars have been joined by less traditional experts in their critique of many of these assertions by critical scholars. These experts believe that differences in emphasis in a book do not necessarily mean different authors, since an author may stress many diverging themes that eventually constitute a unified composition. For instance, in order for a Greek comedy to end happily, there must be some negative reality overcome. For a Greek tragedy to end sadly, there must be some joy lost. Similarly, the prophetic message included punishment on the way to renewal and sin that marred the nation’s once-positive relationship with God. The presence of different concepts helps comprise the whole; it does not necessitate multiple authors.

Despite this emerging agreement on the unified content of the Prophetic Books, evangelical scholars and their counterparts still often disagree on how the books came together. Many evangelical scholars continue to hold to the unity of the books as the words of the prophets that the books themselves identify, while their dialogue partners believe that the unity came about through the careful work of editors over a long period of time. What remains at stake in these discussions is the truthfulness of the text’s claims to originate from a particular person in a particular era, addressing items specific to that era as well as items in the future. It is the special calling of the particular prophet that gives his writing canonical authority for God’s people (Deut. 18:18–19).

### Pronouns in the Prophets

As prepositions are to the letters of Paul, so pronouns are to the oracles of the prophets: crucial for meaning, but often puzzling. Hebrew prophets delivered messages on God’s behalf, so identifying who is being addressed, and who is being spoken about, is central to understanding their preaching. Naturally, use of pronouns (“I” “we,” “you,” “she,” etc.) can frustrate modern readers when their *antecedent* (the actual person or entity being referred to) either is missing or could have more than one possible candidate. Although pronoun confusion arises most naturally in the Prophets, it also crops up in the prayers of the Psalms. Sometimes modern biblical translations smooth out such difficulties for the reader by specifying the referent or adjusting the pronouns. The *ESV* approach, in general, prefers to represent the pronouns in English as equivalent to those appearing in the Hebrew, and not to make decisions for the reader about their referents.

In prophetic literature, confusing pronoun references occur especially in the following cases: (1) unmarked interjections; (2) unsignaled transitions in oracles or other passages; (3) differences in ancient and modern conventions

