

The Prophets: The Exegetical Task

The Need for Outside Help

- There is a popular notion that everything in the Bible should be clear to everyone who reads it
- However, even with the help of the Holy Spirit, this proves to be difficult at times
- Parts of the Bible are obvious on the surface, but other parts are not
- Since God's thoughts are profound compared to human thoughts (Ps. 92:5; Isa. 55:8), it should not be surprising that some parts of Scripture will require time and patient study to understand
- The Prophetic books especially need such time and study
 - Because they spoke into specific historical settings that are different from our own
- 3 great resources to help understand the setting of each section of any given Prophet:
 - Bible Dictionary: "A reference which provide articles on the historical setting of each book, its basic outline, the special features it contains, and issues of interpretations of which the reader must be aware."
 - Commentary: "A reference which comments verse by verse throughout a biblical book, including lengthy introductions."
 - Bible Handbooks: "A reference that includes elements of both Bible dictionaries and commentaries, though do not go into as great of detail as either."

Historical Context

- When studying the Prophets, there are 2 levels of historical context that must be considered:
 - The Larger Context: What were the circumstances of their era?
 - The Specific Context: What situation is any individual oracle speaking into?

The Larger Context

- All 16 of the Prophets were written within a 300-year span (760-460 BC)
 - Why don't we have written oracles from other periods?
 - Because that era called specifically for covenant enforcement mediators
 - And because God wanted to record for all subsequent history the warnings and blessings that the Prophets pronounced during those pivotal years
- That era was characterized by:
 1. Unprecedented political, military, economic, and social upheaval
 2. An enormous level of religious unfaithfulness and disregard for the Mosaic covenant
 3. Shifts in populations and national boundaries, including enormous shifts in the balance of power on the international scene
- By 760 BC Israel was a nation divided permanently by long, ongoing civil war
 - Israel/Ephraim in the north, Judah in the south

- Disobedience to God was worse in Israel
 - Thus, God begins pronouncing judgement on it first through Amos (c. 760 BC) & Hosea (c. 755 BC)
 - It fell to Assyria, the international superpower of that day, in 722 BC
 - This also resulted in deportation of many of the wealthy and noble families of Israel
- After that, the Prophets shift focus to Judah who is falling deeper into sin
 - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Ezekiel 1-24 are from this period
 - They also show the rise of a new superpower, Babylon
 - To whom Judah fell in 587 BC
 - Deportation of many of the wealthy and noble families of Judah occurred
- During the Babylonian Captivity, the Prophets focused on God's will to restore all of Israel
 - Ezekiel 33-48, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are from this period
 - This began in 538 BC
- All of this follows the pattern laid out in Deut. 4:25-31
- Since, the Prophets speak primarily to *these* events, we must understand them to understand their message

The Specific Context

- Each oracle was delivered in specific historical setting
 - Therefore, a knowledge of the date, audience, and situation helps us understand the meaning of the text, when these are known.
- Ex.) Hosea 5:8-12
- Form: War oracle
 - Which announces judgment from God through battle through: a call to alarm, description of attack, and prediction of defeat
 - Date: 734 BC
 - Audience: Northern Israelites/Ephraim
 - Specifically, to certain cities that lay on the road from Jerusalem to Bethel, the center of Israelite false worship
 - Situation: War
 - Judah counterattacked Israel after Israel & Syria had invaded Judah (2 Kings 16:5)
 - The invasion had been beaten back with the help of Assyria, the regional superpower (2 Kg. 16:7-9)
 - Content: Hosea sounds the alarm to cities located in the territory of Benjamin (5:8), which was part of the Northern Kingdom
 - Destruction is sure (v. 9) because Judah will capture the territory it invades (“moving the boundary stones” (v. 10))
 - But Judah will also be punished for their idolatry (2 Kings 16:2-4)

- Such a civil war was a direct violation of God's covenant!

Isolating Oracles

- In the Prophets, it is important to think in terms of Oracles
 - Just like thinking in paragraphs in the Epistles
- This is difficult due to the run-on nature of many of the collections of oracles
 - Not knowing where one ends and another begins
- And even when you can determine the division, there is rarely any explanation given
 - Meaning that we can't always tell if two adjacent oracles are to the same audience, spoken at the same time, or to different audiences at separate times
- However, some oracles are dated, like those in Haggai and the early chapters of Zechariah
- And others give the situation into which they were spoken, like in sections of Jeremiah and Ezekiel

Exercise: Amos 5

- If it's all one oracle, then why does it change topics so often:
 - Lament over Israel's destruction (v. 1-3)
 - Invitation to seek God to live (v. 5-6, 14)
 - Attacks on social injustice (v. 7-13)
 - Prediction of miseries (v. 16-17)
 - Description of the Day of the Lord (v. 18-20)
 - Criticism of hypocritical worship (v. 21-24)
 - A brief overview of Israel's sinful history that culminates in a prediction of exile (v. 25-27)
- If it is more than one oracle, how do you divide it?
- It is generally agreed upon that this is actually 3 oracles:
 - A short lament oracle pronouncing judgment (v. 1-3)
 - A complex oracle of invitation to blessing and warning of punishment (v. 4-17)
 - A complex oracle warning of punishment (v. 18-27)
- All 3 oracles were given late in the reign of King Jeroboam of Israel (793-753 BC) to a people whose prosperity caused them to consider it unthinkable that their nation would be so devastated as to cease to exist in just a generation
- Chapter divisions were not an original part of the text
 - They don't always reflect individual oracles either
- Oracles are isolated by attention to their known forms (next lecture)