

# The Prophets: An Introduction

## *An Overview*

- More books of the Bible come under the heading ‘prophecy’ than any other heading
- Written between 760 and 460 BC
- 4 major prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
- 12 minor prophets: Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
  - In the Hebrew Bible, they are one book known as the ‘Book of the Twelve’
  - “Minor” refers to their length, not their importance

## *The Nature of Prophecy*

- The Prophetic Books are among the most difficult for modern readers to interpret or read with understanding because their function and form are often misunderstood
- It can include foretelling or predicting future events, but rarely does
  - Less than 2% of OT prophecy is messianic
  - Less than 5% specifically describes the New Covenant age
  - Less than 1% concerns events yet to come in our time
- Thus, over 92% of OT prophecy is set solidly in its own time
  - The bulk of the ‘future-telling’ aspects of the Prophets dealt with the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and surrounding nations of their own time
    - Which would be past events for us
- Prophecy: “Speaking forth a truth revealed directly from God.”
  - Prophet: “Mouthpiece”
- The fact that prophecy was primarily spoken can cause issues for modern readers
  - Of the hundreds of prophets in ancient Israel, only 16 spoke oracles\* that were collected and put in written form
    - Oracle: “Individual message spoken by a prophet”
  - Others’ actions are recorded
    - Elijah & Elisha
  - While others have biography and prophecy mixed
    - Gad, Nathan, Huldah, etc.
    - Noah, Jeremiah, Daniel
- Furthermore, because the Prophets are often collections of spoken oracles
  - They do not always have the historical occasion for the oracle tied to the text
  - They are always in chronological order
  - It is often difficult to determine where one oracle ends and another begins
  - They are often poetic in form

## *The Problem of History*

- Historical distance causes issues in understanding the text
- The original hearers of the oracle would have had a much easier time understanding the prophets' words because they shared culture, language, circumstances, & worldview

## *The Function of Prophecy in Israel*

1. The prophets were covenant enforcement mediators
  - The Law constituted a suzerain covenant between God and Israel
  - The prophets pronounced God's enforcement of the covenant
    - The prophets' pronouncements of blessings and curses are always in line with the earlier declaration of God to Israel in the Covenant Law
    - Blessing: Lev. 26:14-38; Deut. 4:32-40; 28:1-14
      - Life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect, safety
    - Curses: Lev. 26:14-39; Deut. 4:15-28; Deut. 28:15-32:42)
      - Death, disease, drought, dearth\*, danger, destruction, defeat, deportation, destitution, disgrace
    - All the oracles fall under one of these categories
  - Always corporate, referring to the nation as a whole
    - Ex.) Amos 9:11-15 (blessing of restoration); Hosea 8:14 (destruction); 9:3 (deportation)
  - As you read the Prophetic Books, look for this simple pattern:
    - a. An identification of Israel's sin or God's love for his people
    - b. A prediction of curse or blessing, depending on the circumstance
2. The prophet's message was not their own, but God's
  - Though every prophet has their own unique style, vocab, emphases, etc.
  - No one could proclaim to be a prophet of their own accord
    - This would make them a false prophet, which was punishable by death
  - Thus, much of the "I" language in the Prophets is representative of God speaking
    - And the phrase "Thus says the Lord" is common among their oracles
3. The prophets were God's direct representatives
  - Prophets held a kind of social office
    - Almost like an ambassador for God
  - They were NOT:
    - Radical social reformers
    - Innovative religious thinkers
  - They did not present God's word as the prophets saw it
    - But rather, God's word as God wanted it conveyed in that time and place
4. The prophet's message is NOT original
  - They were inspired by God to present to their generation the essential content of the original Mosaic covenant's warnings and promises

- Though often in new wording or imagery
  - Ex.) Hosea 4:2 (see Fee, 194.2-3)
- This even includes messianic prophecies
  - The oracles might give new information
  - But the idea of the Messiah is firmly rooted in the Law (Deut. 18:18)