



Old Testament Prophets

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Contents

1	How to approach the Prophets.....	5
1.1	What's a prophet?.....	7
1.2	How the prophets contribute to the Bible narrative.....	7
1.3	The message of the prophets.....	9
1.4	How do the prophets apply to us?.....	10
1.5	How do the prophets apply to Christ?.....	11
1.6	Why do the prophets feel cryptic?.....	13
1.7	Resources.....	14
2	Isaiah.....	15
2.1	Isaiah's call (Isaiah 6).....	15
2.2	Isaiah 1–39.....	17
2.3	Isaiah 40–55.....	18
2.4	Isaiah 56–66.....	20
2.5	Resources of Isaiah.....	21
3	Jeremiah.....	23
3.1	The temple (Jeremiah 7).....	23
3.2	The potter (Jeremiah 18).....	24
3.3	Seventy years (Jeremiah 25).....	25
3.4	“The plans I have for you” (Jeremiah 29).....	26
3.5	New covenant, new king (Jeremiah 31).....	27
3.6	Speaking for the enemy? (Jeremiah 37–40).....	28
3.7	God's reign when the kingdom is gone (Jeremiah 41–52).....	29
3.8	Resources.....	31
4	Ezekiel.....	33
4.1	Who's running the world now? (Ezekiel 1–2).....	33
4.2	The end! (Ezekiel 7–13).....	34
4.3	Judgement on God's people (Ezekiel 14–24).....	35
4.4	Judgement on the nations (Ezekiel 25–32).....	36
4.5	Restoration of God's people (Ezekiel 33–39).....	37
4.6	Restoration of a house for God (Ezekiel 40–48).....	39
4.7	Resources.....	40
5	The Twelve.....	41
5.1	To Israel and Assyria (Hosea, Amos, Nahum, Jonah).....	42
5.2	To Judah (Micah, Zephaniah, Joel, Habakkuk).....	45
5.3	After the exile (Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi).....	47
5.4	Resources.....	50

6 Christ fulfilling the Prophets51

1 How to approach the Prophets

Welcome to this overview of the Old Testament prophets: Isaiah to Malachi. These are some of the most fascinating and least understood books in the Bible.

In this series, we'll give some insight into how to approach them, and provide some context for listening to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets. We'll draw some conclusions about how they apply to us, and how they are fulfilled in Christ.

The first step in understanding any Scripture is realizing what God was saying to **them**, so we can understand what God is saying to **us**. So, tonight we'll talk about how to approach the prophets, with questions such as:

- What's a prophet? What kind of message were they delivering?
- What was happening in their time? How do we know? Why does it matter?
- How do the prophets apply to us? Are they being fulfilled in our lifetime?
- How do the prophets apply to Christ? How does he fulfil the prophets?

Then in the next three weeks, we'll look at a Major Prophet each week: **Isaiah**, **Jeremiah**, and **Ezekiel**. We will **not** be covering Lamentations or Daniel: while those two books are placed among the Major Prophets in our Bible, they're categorized as Writings (not Prophets) in the Hebrew text. We did touch on Daniel when we covered the history of the Old Testament.¹

In week 5, we'll look at the setting for the twelve **Minor Prophets** (Hosea – Malachi).

Then in our final week we'll discuss how **Christ** fulfils the Prophets. The New Testament consistently understands the Prophets as fulfilled in the Messiah.

Each week we'll suggest two chapters for you to read. We learn best by listening to the Prophets, not just talking about them.

So here's what you can expect in the next six weeks:

Week	Topic	Reading
1	How to approach the prophets	
2	Isaiah	Isaiah 6, 40
3	Jeremiah	Jeremiah 7, 31
4	Ezekiel	Ezekiel 1, 34
5	The Twelve (minor prophets)	Amos 9; Jonah 4
6	Christ fulfilling the prophets	

Please bring your questions. The *Church Center* app includes a way to message your question, or email me directly: allen.browne@riverviewchurch.com.au

Use whatever translation you're comfortable with. If you're wondering, I mostly use the NIV (*New International Version*, 2011 edition).

How does that sound? Do you have any questions or comments at this point?

¹ On Daniel: notes http://allenbrowne.com/files/figs/FormedInGodsStory_Genesis-Esther_Week6.pdf and podcast https://allenbrowneblog.files.wordpress.com/2023/06/figs_gen-esther_week6_estherdaniel.mp3

Here's how the Middle East from Old Testament times relates to the countries today:



Source: Paul H. Wright, *Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas* (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2012), 16.

1.1 What's a prophet?

A prophet is a person who speaks for God:

- They heard what God was saying, and delivered *the word of the LORD*, or
- they saw *a vision* of what God was doing, and called God's people to follow.

Prophets were not soothsayers predicting the future. Sometimes they spoke of things to come as they described what God was doing, but that wasn't their aim. What defined them was that **they spoke by revelation**: the message God spoke, the vision of where God was leading.

God sent prophets when his people got off track. Israel was God's covenant people, called to live under divine kingship, guided by God's laws and leadership. When they got off track, God would send a prophet to warn, "Turn back! That's heading for disaster. Turn back to the LORD, and walk in his ways. He will lead us and rescue us."

Sometimes the word of the LORD was one of encouragement and comfort rather than warning. God sent the prophets to say, "Keep going! You're on the right path, even though it's tough. Don't give up." Sometimes the message was, "Even though it's all fallen apart, I will rescue you. Even though you were unfaithful to the covenant, I am faithful to you. I will save you."

Those are the general themes, but the message God gave the prophets was quite specific. He sent them to confront a specific diversion from God, or to allay fears of a particular enemy. That's why understanding the circumstances is so crucial to understanding the Prophets.

A couple of Bible scholars put it this way:

You need to know the background information in order to be able to catch the point of much of what a prophet conveys. God's Word came through the prophets to people in *particular situations*. Its value to us depends partly on our ability to appreciate those situations so that we can in turn apply it to our own.²

So how can you know what was going on when a prophet delivered their message? Fee and Stuart wrote another book called, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*. It's a great little survey of all 66 books of the Bible—worth buying from [Koorong](#) or [Kindle](#).

Understanding something of what situation a prophet was addressing will transform how you hear the Prophets.

1.2 How the prophets contribute to the Bible narrative

There's a story that runs through the whole Bible. It's a narrative of reconciliation, of heaven and earth being reunited. But before we get to the end where "they all lived happily ever after," this story has more twists and turns than a spy novel.

The Prophets don't appear in chronological order in this story. To see where they fit in, you'll need to know how the narrative of the Bible works. Here's an overview:

² Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Zondervan, 1993), 189–190.

- a) Earth belongs under heaven's reign, but violence took over. God chose Abraham as the family to restore the blessing of his reign (**Genesis**).
- b) God saved Jacob's family, forming them into a kingdom under God through the covenant at Sinai (**Exodus – Deuteronomy**).
- c) Joshua fought for the land for God's kingdom, and the judges fought to keep it (**Joshua – Judges**).
- d) Israel asked for a king to fight their enemies. God gave them his anointed, promising David the kingship forever (**1–2 Samuel**).
- e) The kingdom **split**. Israel (the north) and Judah (the south) had separate kings. They lost it all: Israel fell to Assyria; Judah was exiled to Babylon (**1–2 Kings**).
- f) After the **exile**, some returned and rebuilt when Persia defeated Babylon, but they remained under foreign rule (**Ezra – Esther**).
- g) Hundreds of years later, Jesus rode into Jerusalem hailed as king, but he was rejected—crucified as God's Christ, the king of the Jews. God vindicated him as his Son by raising him up, giving him all authority (**Matthew – John**).
- h) The gospel—the good news that God's Christ is our Lord—is being announced to all the nations of the earth. As his people, we embody his reign. One day, everyone will acknowledge him as Lord (**Acts – Revelation**).

That's the plotline for how earth is restored as a kingdom of heaven, so what God decreed in the beginning is fulfilled in the end.

But in the middle of that story, everything had fallen apart (E and F above). The kingdom split, and both parts fell to the nations. It was in those tragic times that God sent the prophets—messengers of correction and hope, calling God's people back to him.

To be more specific, the kingdom disintegrated in four stages:

- **The divided kingdom:** when Israel split from Judah (920s BC), there were two kingdoms with separate kings in the two capitals (Samaria and Jerusalem). This is the setting of **Hosea, Jonah, Amos, and Nahum**.
- **Judah alone:** after Israel fell to Assyria (722 BC), only Judah was left. This is the setting of **Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk**.
- **In exile:** after Judah fell to Babylon (586 BC), there was no kingdom left. This is the setting of **Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Obadiah**.
- **Post-exile:** after Persia conquered Babylon (539 BC), some returned to rebuild. This is the setting of **Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi**.

So, here's how the prophets fit into that story:

Date	Event	Reign	Prophets
1200s BC	Moses leads the exodus. Joshua takes the Land	The LORD is king	
1040 BC	United kingdom (Saul, David, Solomon)	The LORD's anointed	
920 BC	Kingdom splits: Israel (north), Judah (south)	Separate kings over Israel and Judah	Hosea Jonah Amos Nahum

722 BC	Israel falls to Assyria (Judah alone remains)	Kings of Judah	Isaiah 1-39 Micah Joel? Zephaniah Habakkuk
586 BC	Judah exiled to Babylon (land, temple, and kingship lost)	Babylon	Isaiah 40-66 Jeremiah Ezekiel Obadiah
515 BC	Second temple dedicated: returning from exile	Persia, Greece, Rome	Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
AD 30	Jesus the Christ is raised up with all authority	The LORD's anointed	
The goal	Earth will be fully restored to heaven's reign	The LORD is king	1 Cor 15:24

“The exile” was when Babylon captured Judah (the only part of Israel left). Babylon destroyed the temple, terminated the kingship, and took people to live in Babylon.

1.3 The message of the prophets

When we hear the prophets in their context, their message makes sense. For example:

Isaiah 39:5-6 (NIV)

⁵ Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD Almighty:

⁶ The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD.”

Isaiah 1–39 was the word of the LORD for Judah as a kingdom. This point is where God reveals that the kingdom will fall, that they’re going into exile.

Isaiah 40–66 then has a completely different context. They’ve gone into exile, so the message is that God will restore them. It begins: “*Comfort, comfort my people,*” says your God (Isaiah 40:1).

The exile to Babylon was the watershed moment in Israel’s history. 39:6 is the watershed moment in Isaiah, dividing the book into two different contexts. Understanding the two contexts is crucial to understanding the Book of Isaiah.

After exile, they remained under foreign rule. Most Jews were still scattered among the nations (the Diaspora). Haggai and Zechariah called them to return to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple, and to live as the LORD’s people:

Zechariah 1:3 (NIV)

This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD Almighty.

The word *return* has a double meaning here. God was calling them to literally come back to Jerusalem, and he was calling them to return to his leadership. Their ancestors had strayed from God’s leadership long before Babylon invaded (v. 4). God was offering to resume the covenant relationship with them if they were willing.

That is the main message of the prophets. Fee and Stuart put it like this:

As God's appointed spokesmen, they call Yahweh's people back to their covenant roots, announcing both the curses and blessings for covenant disloyalty or loyalty (see especially Deuteronomy 27–30). The exilic prophets also helped the people through their twofold loss—of the divine presence and of the promised land—thus playing the role of Moses and Joshua in reverse.

Thus the prophets constantly call God's people back to divine realities: They belong to God, God does not belong to them; God has called them into being for his purposes of redeeming what was lost in the Fall and of blessing the nations. At the heart of the prophets' message, therefore, is deep concern that Israel reflect God's character by walking in his ways and keeping covenant with him. At the same time, they are constantly reminded that Yahweh is not a local Israelite deity, but is the sovereign God of the universe—Creator and Sustainer of all things and therefore also sovereign over all the other nations.³

1.4 How do the prophets apply to us?

When we stray from God, the prophets still call us back to faithful life with God, and they do so on the basis of God's faithfulness to us. They call us to reconcile with God, and they promise restored relationship with God. That's a very relevant message.

But there's a difference. Our relationship with God is not on the basis of the Sinai covenant; it's on the basis of a new covenant established in Christ. That means that some of specifics in the prophets' message won't apply to us. For example:

Ezekiel 22:26 (NIV)

Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

The Sinai Law required Israel to eat only kosher food, and to keep the Sabbath. These requirements (along with circumcision as the marker of the covenant people) are not transferred to the new covenant established in Christ. They don't apply to all nations.

How to apply the Sinai Law was a big topic in New Testament times. The Holy Spirit said gentiles were not required to comply with Sinai Law. What the apostles expected of the nations sounds more like the covenant God established with all people than the covenant established with Israel (compare Acts 15:28-29 with Genesis 9:4-9).

Just as the Sinai covenant had established Israel as a nation under God's reign, the prophets said God would make a new covenant to restore his reign to the earth in the Messiah, e.g. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Isaiah 59:20-21; Ezekiel 34:23-25; 37:24-28.

So, as we read the Old Testament, we're always asking:

What's the same for us, and what's different?

³ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Zondervan, 2002), 171–172.

If we don't do that, we will misapply the prophets. Examples:

- We misuse the prophets when we condemn people for failing to comply with the Sinai covenant, since we're part of a different covenant.
- We misuse the prophets when we condemn politicians for failing to provide God's justice in Australia, since we're part of a different kingdom. (Unlike the kings of Israel and Judah, our politicians are not representing God's reign.)

Did you want to discuss how the prophets apply to us?

1.5 How do the prophets apply to Christ?

God promised the kingship to David forever (2 Samuel 7:8-17). But when Solomon died, most of Israel broke away from Judah as a separate nation. Israel's kings reigned in Samaria, and they worshipped golden calves in Bethel and Dan.

Into this divided kingdom, God sent **Amos**. Amos warned the northern kingdom it would fall because they'd rejected the LORD and his anointed ruler. It would be tragic, but not terminal. In his final address, Amos spoke of a time when God's reign through a descendant of David would be restored:

Amos 9:11, 15 (NIV)

¹¹ "In that day, I will restore David's fallen shelter—I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins—and will rebuild it as it used to be ...

¹⁵ I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them," says the LORD your God.

In 722 BC, Israel fell, leaving only Judah. Other prophets agreed that God would rescue the northern tribes as his kingdom, with a descendant of David reigning over them:

Isaiah 9:1-7 (NIV)

¹ In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations ...

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.



Zondervan Atlas of the Bible, (Zondervan, 2010), 156

But the kings of Judah misused the power God gave them too. Eventually God sacked them to prevent his shepherds “eating” his flock. That’s what Ezekiel said (34:10).

Once again, God promised that the exile would not be the end. God would restore his people into his reign through an anointed son of David:

Ezekiel 34:23-24 (NIV)

²³ I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

²⁴ I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

At every stage of the story, the prophets repeat the promise that God will provide a descendant of David, his anointed ruler, restoring them to be a kingdom of God.

And that’s what the word *Christ* means: the anointed one, the ruler appointed by God. The *Christ* is the descendant of David who restores heaven’s reign to the earth, just as the prophets said.

It was almost 600 years between the loss of God’s reign (the exile) and the restoration of God’s reign in his Christ. Some despaired. Others speculated about how God would restore his reign. Some imagined God giving the nations what they deserved, crushing their oppressors so God’s nation could rise again. Some imagined God would save them if they were more obedient. But the New Testament gives a different testimony.

God’s Anointed restored God’s reign to the earth not through conquest to defeat evil but by dying at the hands of evil and being raised up by God.

The gospel is God’s announcement that his anointed (the Christ) is in charge (our Lord). That’s *God’s gospel* — the good news God promised through the prophets:

Romans 1:1-5 (my translation)

From Paul, servant of Messiah Jesus, his agent assigned to announce God’s gospel, the message he promised through his prophets in the Old Testament about his Son.

He was the physical descendant of David, named “Son of the divine ruler with power” by the cleansing Spirit when he raised up Messiah Jesus from the dead.

Jesus is therefore our ruler, and we’ve received his favour—appointing us to call all the nations into trusting obedience under his authority.

At the end of the Old Testament, God’s kingdom had not been restored. The main goal of what God had promised through the prophets was only fulfilled in Christ. Ultimately, that’s what the prophets were talking about (2 Peter 1:16-21).

Did you want to discuss how the promises of the Old Testament are ultimately fulfilled in Christ Jesus our Lord?

1.6 Why do the prophets feel cryptic?

It's not just the unfamiliar setting that can make the prophets feel cryptic. It's the way they communicated too: the language they used feels foreign to us.

Language conveys feeling as well as content. "I will always love you," sang Whitney Houston. "I can't stop loving you," sang Ray Chales. But "I have an emotional commitment to you" would not work as a song because it sounds detached, unfeeling.

The Hebrew prophets used poetry when they spoke for God. It makes their message far more gripping, more impactful.

But Hebrew poetry is unfamiliar for us. We're used to songs where the words rhyme at the end of each line. Hebrew poetry uses rhyming ideas: each line has a parallel one, another way to express the same thought or feeling. It's known as **parallelism**.

Here's Jeremiah's report of God calling him to prophetic ministry:

Jeremiah 1:4–5 (NIV)

⁴ The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

The three lines of verse 5 all say the same thing in parallel ways. It's really helpful: each line helps explain the others.

The parallels are not identical. They're more like brushstrokes building up a picture:

Jeremiah 4:23 (NIV)

²³ I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty;
and at the heavens, and their light was gone.

The *earth* (in the first line) doesn't mean the same thing as the *heavens* (in line two). But both statements together create a picture of a world that's not working right.

Remember when the earth was formless and empty? Isn't that how it was before God established the earth as a realm under heaven (Genesis 1:2)? God's voice shaped it all, declaring "Let there be light!" (Genesis 1:3). But Jeremiah says the light from the heavens has gone. The world isn't working as it should: earth is formless and empty, and the heavens have gone dark.

Jeremiah was not talking about a literal eclipse. The point is that God has not given up on the world that's gone dark. The faithfulness of God in the face of a creation that resists his authority: that's the message of the Prophets.

And ultimately God restores his creation in the Messiah. The story isn't complete until God's anointed restores the authority of heaven to the earth.

See if you recognize the parallel expressions in this verse, the brushstrokes building up an image of God redeeming the earth, restoring it to his management in his Christ:

Isaiah 61:1 (NIV)

¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners ...

That's what Jesus was doing, the promise of the prophets that he was fulfilling (Luke 4:16-21).

In preparation for next week, read Isaiah chapters 6 and 40.

1.7 Resources

There are some blog posts on the OT Prophets at <https://allenbrowne.blog>, such as:

- [How to approach the Prophets](#)
- [How do the Prophets apply to Christ?](#)
- [How do the Prophets apply to us?](#)

This one book gives the background on all the Bible's books:

- Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*. (Zondervan, 2014).

For excellent videos on Bible books and themes, visit the Bible Project. Examples:

- Series on the prophets: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/the-prophets/>
- On specific books: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/book-overviews/?type=old>

If you want a straightforward commentary on a specific book of the Bible, choose from Old Testament for Everyone series, or The Bible Speaks Today series. Examples:

- John Goldingay. *Isaiah for Everyone*. Old Testament for Everyone (SPCK, 2015).
- Christopher J. H. Wright. *The Message of Jeremiah: Grace in the End*. The Bible Speaks Today (Inter-Varsity Press, 2014).

For more detail, consider the New International Commentary on the Old Testament series, or the NIV Application Commentary series. Examples:

- Daniel Isaac Block. *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. (Eerdmans, 1997).
- David W. Baker. *Joel, Obadiah, Malachi*. The NIV Application Commentary. (Zondervan, 2006).

Alternatively, if you just want a commentary that covers the whole bible, check out:

- D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham, (editors). *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. (Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).