

Spring 2021

The Minor Prophets: An Overview

Prophets' Role

A prophet is someone appointed by God to speak to his people.

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets..."
(Hebrews 1:1 ESV)

Generally the prophets spoke words of warning of sin and judgment, calls to repentance, and promises of consolation and salvation. Their role was essentially calling people to turn from their evil ways and live, while a priest's role was as a mediator between God and man by means of sacrifice. (It is worth noting that Jesus Christ fills the roles of both prophet and priest. And also king.) The role of the prophet could be considered an "enforcer" of God's covenant to Israel.

"Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.'" (2 Kings 17:13 ESV)

God's covenant to Israel was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai and contained essentially three aspects: 1. Promises of blessings if they would trust the Lord and obey him. 2. Promises of curses, even to the point of exile, if they rejected him. 3. Promises of restoration if and when Israel would repent. See Deuteronomy 28 and 30. These aspects of the covenant became cyclical for Israel, repeated many times from Moses' days until Christ came, a 1400-year span. So the prophets were regularly needed during that time.

Overview

God raised up many prophets in Israel over the centuries, and a small number of them wrote documents under inspiration from the Holy Spirit as Scripture.

"And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:19-21 ESV)

Today we divide them into two basic groups largely based on the size of the documents: Major and Minor Prophets. The Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) are quite long, whereas the Minor Prophets (12 books from Hosea to Malachi) are considered "minor" because they are

shorter, not because they are less important. The entire group of Minor Prophets is about the length of Ezekiel alone.

The audiences of the prophetic books vary. Some were written to just the southern kingdom of Israel's divided nation, often called Judah, while others were written to the northern kingdom, often called Samaria or Ephraim, and still others were written to both Judah and Ephraim. Jonah's and Nahum's ministries were to the pagan city Nineveh in the Assyrian empire.

The prophets wrote over a more than 400 year period. Obadiah may have been written first in approximately 850 B.C., while Malachi was written last in about 430 B.C. The twelve books do not appear chronologically in our English Bible, though the reason for their arrangement is unknown.

Message

"As prophetic books they exhibit all the characteristics of the Major Prophets. First, they employ an elevated rhetorical style that often takes the form of poetry (Jonah is the exception, being narrative). Second, they present their messages as received directly from God. Third, they use an inventory of literary forms such as lawsuit, woe, and promise. And fourth, because of the function of the prophets as "enforcers" of God's covenant, these books call for behavioral changes on the part of the disobedient covenant people...

"Recognizing the vital relationship between words of indictment, instruction, judgment, and hope in the prophets is an important step toward understanding their message. For many the word "prophecy" has only one association—"fulfillment." Students of the prophets often concentrate on the "good news" of prophetic fulfillment to the neglect of the rest of the prophet's message. Or in some cases the preference is for social critique. By all means fulfilled and yet-to-be fulfilled prophecy is an important and fruitful subject for study, as is also the divine displeasure with certain social and religious practices. But recognizing the nature of the prophetic books as behavioral exhortation has important implications. In such discourses the most prominent element is the behavioral change being advocated. All the other elements in the discourse must relate to it. Therefore it is a misuse of Scripture to listen to only one of the supplementary elements, such as predictive prophecy, without relating it to the central message of the book."

(Holman Bible Handbook)

Summary of Each Book

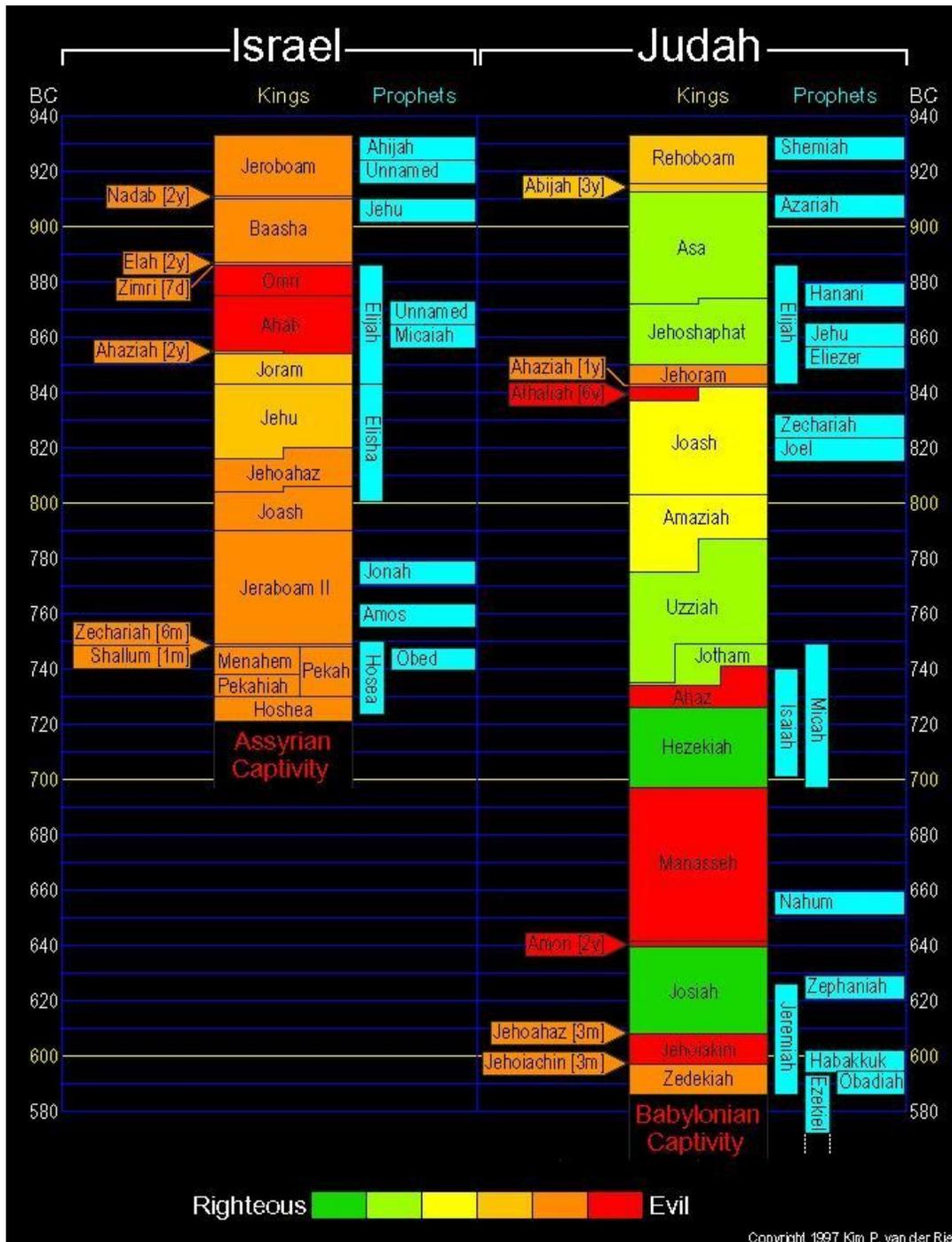
Book	Date *	Description
Obadiah	845 B.C. **	Obadiah wrote this very short book to the nation of Edom who had mistreated Israel. The date of authorship is highly speculative, ranging from the 800's to 500's B.C.
Joel	835 **	Joel spoke of the coming "day of the Lord" and urged Judah to repent. As with Obadiah, the date of authorship is speculative.
Jonah	755	Jonah is written mostly in narrative form, not poetry. His ministry was to the pagan city, Nineveh, in the Assyrian empire, but the focus of the book is more on his ministry than on his message.
<i>Written before Ephraim was exiled</i>		
Amos	752	Amos warned both Judah and Ephraim of coming disaster if they did not repent, urging them to seek the Lord and live. He also wrote of judgment against surrounding nations.
Micah	735	Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah and Hosea, spoke primarily to Judah with words of warning and hope.
Hosea	725	Hosea, a contemporary of Isaiah and Micah, was called by God to warn Israel to turn from their evil ways. Uniquely, God called Hosea to marry an immoral woman in order to provide a picture to Israel that the Lord is like a loving and faithful husband and they are his unfaithful wife.
<i>Written before Judah was exiled</i>		
Nahum	650	Like Jonah a century before, Nahum preached to Nineveh, a pagan city in Assyria.
Zephaniah	630	Zephaniah prophesied during the spiritual reforms of King Josiah of Judah.
Habakkuk	609	Habakkuk wrote this book as a prayer and complaint to God as he witnessed Israel suffering at the hands of another nation, Assyria.
<i>Written after Judah was exiled</i>		
Haggai	520	Haggai urged the people to take courage and finish the rebuilding of the temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in about 686 B.C.
Zechariah	480	In the longest of the Minor Prophets, Zechariah, a contemporary of Haggai, called Israel to repent and renew their covenant with God in preparation for the rebuilding of the temple. He also prophesied of the coming Messiah.
Malachi	432	As the last prophet before the advent of the Messiah, Malachi corrected a variety of sins in Israel: corrupt priesthood, widespread divorce, social injustice, and lack of tithing.

* Dates from James Smith, *The Minor Prophets*

** The date of authorship is uncertain.

Timeline

Though some dates in the history of the prophets and the kings of Israel and Judah are debatable, this chart gives a good feel for the flow of history over 350+ years from the division of the nation during the reign of Rehoboam, Solomon's son, until the Babylonian exile of Judah in 586 B.C.



Guidelines for Interpreting the Prophets

The books of the Bible are written in various genres, i.e., literary forms:

- narratives (e.g., Chronicles, Acts)
- epistles (e.g., Romans)
- gospels (e.g., Matthew)
- law (e.g., Exodus)
- prophets (e.g., Isaiah)
- poetry (e.g., Psalms)
- wisdom (e.g., Proverbs)
- apocalyptic (e.g., Daniel, Revelation)

While some interpretation principles are common for the whole Bible, each genre has some unique differences. Here are some guidelines to help understand and interpret the prophetic writings.

Dave Bovenmyer

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1. The prophets were covenant enforcement mediators. The prophets did not invent the blessings and curses; they announced any new doctrines that were not already contained in the law.
2. The prophets' message was not their own, but God's. They held a kind of societal office, ambassadors from a heavenly court.
3. Start by looking at the historical context of the prophet's writings. This can be obtained from Bible dictionaries, commentaries and handbooks.
4. The writings of the prophets are collections of oracles. Learn to think oracles. Each oracle was given to a specific historical situation, which may not always be discernible to us.
5. Some prophetic passages are collections of different oracles without any statements as to where one ends and another begins. It is critical for proper interpretation to ascertain this. A good commentary can be a great help here.
6. The prophets sometimes used standard forms for their oracles. Some are:
 - The lawsuit (Isaiah 3:13-26)
 - The woe (Habakkuk 2:6-8)
 - The promise (Amos 9:11-15)
7. Most prophecies are poetry, which was much more easily memorized. Hebrew poetry often employs parallelism
 - Synonymous – the second line reinforces and repeats the first
 - Antithetical – the second line contrasts the first
 - Synthetic – The second line adds further information
 - Climatic – the second line heightens the effect of the first
 - Dimorphic – one line followed by two different parallels