

# THE PROPHETS OF ISRAEL IN THE BIBLICAL STORY

## OVERVIEW

Israel's prophetic tradition goes as far back as Moses. However, in the Prophets of Israel in the Biblical story, we shall be dealing with those prophets whose words were written down on scrolls bearing their names.<sup>1</sup> These prophets ministered from the breakup of Israel into two the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom up and until the end of the OT prophetic period.

There is a constant refrain in these prophecies: Israel has a covenant relationship with God, failure to keep to the terms of that covenant attracts judgement, God raised Israel to showcase His love and character to the rest of the world. God is Creator of the heavens and earth. As such He is not a local Israelite deity but is the God of all creation.

Majority of these prophets spoke pre-exilic while some spoke to the exiles in Babylon and others prophesied post-exilic.

Ours is to navigate the tension between the immediate concerns which the prophets were speaking to (historical, social and cultural contexts of their time) and relationship of those prophecies to our contexts in the 21st century.

## THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

Isaiah's ministry to the kingdom of Judah spanned for more than forty years (740 to 687 BC-- from near the end of Uzziah, king of Judah's reign through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah).

Isaiah, a contemporary of Hosea and Micah, prophesied during the last years of the Northern kingdom but his ministrations were mostly to the Southern kingdom of Judah.

Isaiah lived during a military threat to Judah by the Kingdom of Assyria which was becoming a dominant power. Under Tiglath-Pileser, Assyria had conquered many nations including Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and was threatening the Southern Kingdom (Judah).

The Book of Isaiah reads like a miniature Bible:<sup>2</sup>

- The first 39 chapters of Isaiah pronounced judgments upon an immoral and idolatrous people: Judah, the nations around them and the whole world.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 171.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Open Bible, New King James version*, 768.

- The final twenty-seven chapters proclaim a message of hope: the Messiah's coming as Saviour of humanity through the bearing of the cross and as a Sovereign wearing a crown ruling the whole world.

Isaiah warned against forming alliances with kings and countries. He exhorted the kings of Judah to put all their trust on God (Yahweh).

Following the conquest of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC by Assyria, he prophesied that the judgment of Judah, which was following in the steps of the Northern Kingdom in doing evil, would not be through an Assyrian conquest but through that of Babylon which was not yet a world power at the time.

Key verses: Isaiah 9: 6-7 and Isaiah 53:6.

Key chapters: Isaiah 58 to 66.

## THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

Jeremiah's prophecies lasted for more than forty years (627-580 B.C.). He was a contemporary of Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Daniel and Ezekiel.

Three Stages in Jeremiah's ministry:

1. 627-605 B.C.: Prophecies as Assyria and Egypt threaten Judah.
2. 605-585 B.C.: Prophecies as Babylon threatens Judah and besieges Jerusalem.
3. 586-580 B.C.: Ministering to the remnant in Jerusalem after the fall of Judah and subsequently the exiles in Egypt.

Jeremiah was despised and persecuted by his people. God did not allow Jeremiah to marry (Jer 16:2). He was publicly humiliated by the false prophet Hananiah and thrown into the pits on the king's orders. Jeremiah was a "heartbroken prophet with a heartbreaking message."<sup>3</sup>

Key Verses in Jeremiah: 7:23-24; 8:11-12;

Key Chapter: Jeremiah 31.

Jeremiah's prophecies emphasized the importance of Judah (and by extension all of humanity) surrendering to God's will to avoid calamity.

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<sup>3</sup> *The New Open Bible*, 840.

TO BE NOTED: Jeremiah had the boldness to proclaim an unpopular message that Judah's surrender to Babylon is part of divine discipline.

### THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

Ezekiel was a priest and a prophet. He was among the ten thousand hostages, which included King Jehoiachim, that were carried off to Babylon in 597 B.C. His ministry spanned 592 B.C. to 570 B.C. and overlapped the end of Jeremiah's ministry and the beginning of that of Daniel.

From 592 B.C. to the fall of Judah in 586 B.C., Ezekiel prophesied to the Jewish exiles in Babylon that there was no immediate deliverance. The exiles only abandoned their false hope of returning when they heard of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

Ezekiel preached a message of hope to the exiles--a future restoration of Israel and the judgment of the Gentiles.

Key verses: Ezekiel 36:24-26; 36:33-35

Key chapter: Ezekiel 37: (The vision of the valley of dry bones).

### THE BOOK OF DANIEL

Babylon rebelled against the Assyrian Empire in 626 B.C. and overthrew the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 B.C. After defeating the Egyptian army in 605 B.C., Babylon became the undisputed master of the whole Middle East.

Daniel was among the first to be taken captive in the first wave of exiles in 605 B.C. Daniel's prophecies encouraged the exiles, revealed God's sovereign program for Israel both during the exile and after the period of Gentile domination.

Daniel emphasizes the sovereignty and power of God over human affairs.

Key verses: Daniel 2: 20-22 and Daniel 2:44

Key chapter: Daniel 9

### THE BOOK OF HOSEA

Hosea prophesied to the Northern Kingdom between 755 B.C. to about 710 B.C. The Northern Kingdom was morally bankrupt at this time despite its prosperity and growth.

The people were in a spiritual daze and sin was rampant. The people refused to heed Hosea's warning of imminent judgment..

God instructed Hosea to marry Gomer (a woman of easy virtue) as a way of depicting the unfaithfulness of Israel.

Hosea's three-fold message is akin to those of the other prophets: God hates sin, God will punish the guilty and God is love.

Key verses: Hosea 4:1; 11: 7-9

Key chapter: Hosea 4.

## THE BOOK OF JOEL

Joel's ministry took place during the reign of King Joash of Judah (835-796 BC). Joel used the occasion of a locust invasion to warn the people that the day of judgment, which would be worse than the locust invasion, was coming if they failed to repent.

And in that day of the Lord, God will deliver His people and those who obey Him, while destroying His enemies.

Key verses: Joel 2:11, 28-29

Key chapter: Joel 2

## THE BOOK OF AMOS

Amos was a farmer turned prophet. He prophesied in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam II. He ministered just before Hosea, Micah and Isaiah. His prophecies were directed to the Northern kingdom of Israel under King Jeroboam II.

Prosperity had increased materialism and great injustice in the land. The nation was prospering as greatly as it was decaying morally.

Amos prophesied about the kingdom's quickly approaching doom and of God's grace and patience. He warned that God's justice and righteousness will not allow sin to go unpunished indefinitely.

Sadly a prosperous Northern Kingdom could not have imagined that its destruction would come three decades later.

Key verses: Amos 3:1-2; 8:11-12

Key chapter: Amos 9

## THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

Obadiah was a prophet of Judah. The Book of Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament with twenty-one verses. There are two sections of Obadiah's prophecies: the judgment of Edom (1-18) because of its cruelty to Judah and the restoration of Israel (19-21).

## THE BOOK OF JONAH

Jonah ministered after the time of Elisha and just before the time of Amos and Hosea. Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam 11, King of Israel. Jonah prophecies concerned Nineveh, the capital of Assyria (Israel's enemy).

The third chapter of Jonah is a record of probably the greatest revival of all time as an entire city Nineveh believes God, proclaims a fast and turns to God.<sup>4</sup>

Jonah shows that God is concerned about the Gentiles as represented by Nineveh and that Israel as represented by Jonah is reluctant to acknowledge God's compassion for the Gentiles. It also shows that God's mercy and grace did not stop with Israel; God's redemptive plan included the Gentiles.

Key verses: 2:8-9; 4:2

Key chapter: Jonah 3

## THE BOOK OF MICAH

Micah's prophetic activities took place between 735 and 710 B.C. in the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Micah was a contemporary of Hosea in the Northern Kingdom and Isaiah in the Southern Kingdom.

One-third of Micah's book exposes the sin of Judah while another third depicts the punishment that God is about to send and the other third is about restoration.<sup>5</sup>

Though Micah deals primarily with Judah, he predicted the fall of Samaria (1:6).

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<sup>4</sup> *The New Open Bible*, 1029.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1036.

Key verse: Micah 6:8; 7:18.

Key chapters: Micah 6, 7.

## THE BOOK OF NAHUM

Nahum prophesied sometime before the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C. This was during the period when Judah was a vassal of Assyria. Nahum prophesied God's judgment against Nineveh for her cruelty, oppression and idolatry. He concludes with prophecy that Babylon will destroy the city that no trace of it will remain.

Recall that Nineveh had repented under the preaching of Jonah many years before but had gone back to their old ways after a period.

Key verses: Nahum 1:7-8; 3:5-7

Key chapter: Nahum 1

## THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Habakkuk prophesied during the dying days of Judah, sometime between 612 B.C. and 599 B.C.

The prophet had been warning Judah several times to repent but they paid no heed to him. Habakkuk struggles in his faith when he sees men flagrantly disobey God, distort justice, and not fearing God.<sup>6</sup> He wonders why God allowed this growing iniquity to go unpunished.

When God reveals His plan to use Babylon as a chastening rod for Judah, Habakkuk is perplexed: Babylon was even more corrupt than Judah.

In God's reply, the prophet learned to trust God's wisdom, goodness and power irrespective of appearances. God is the Lord of history and the Ruler of all the nations.<sup>7</sup> He may be slow to wrath but eventually He will punish all iniquity.

Key verses: Habakkuk 2:4, 3:17-19

Key chapter: Habakkuk 3

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1050.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## THE BOOK OF ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah (sometime between 640-609 B.C.). His prophecies emphasize the coming day of God, judgment of Judah for her sins, Yahweh as God of all the nations, judgment against all the nations and the eventual salvation of a remnant of Judah.<sup>8</sup>

Key chapter: Zephaniah 3

Key verses: Zephaniah 1:14-15 and 2:3

## THE BOOK OF HAGGAI

Haggai, a post-exilic prophet, was a contemporary of Zechariah.

Date of prophetic activity: a four month period in the second year of Darius, king of Persia (520 B.C.).

His prophecies were directed on the returned exiles to complete the second temple. He exhorted the builders to a renewed faith in God, renewed of courage in God and renewed life of holiness.<sup>9</sup> He also prophesied a glorious future for the people of God and for Zerubbabel (2:23).

Key verses of Haggai: 1:7-8, 2:7-9

Key chapter: Haggai 2.

## THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH

Zechariah, a post-exilic prophet, is a contemporary of Haggai.

Date of prophetic activity: between 520 B.C. until early 400s B.C.

He had a longer ministry period than Haggai. Zechariah encourages the people to continue building the temple not just of its present use but because of the future.

He prophesied that one day the Messiah's glory will inhabit it: they were not just putting up a building but were building a future for their Messiah's coming.

Zechariah also prophesied that the Messiah will come to Jerusalem in triumph but will be killed for the sins of the people.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *How to Read the Bible*, 248.

<sup>9</sup> *The New Open Bible*, 1062.

He also prophesied that God will punish the enemies of Israel and that many nations will come to know the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

Key verses: Zechariah 8:3 and 9:9

Key chapter: Zechariah 14

## THE BOOK OF MALACHI

The temple had been completed by 516 B.C. and sacrifices were being offered in the temple. Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem in 444 BC to rebuild the city walls thirteen years after Ezra's return and reforms in 457 BC.

Malachi was a prophet in the days of Nehemiah. He prophesied from 460 B.C. just before the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah. There was a religious decline, unfaithfulness of the priests and corruption.

Malachi warns of future judgments and promises God's redemption of the faithful. God (Yahweh) is a covenant-keeping God and requires the same of His people.

Key verses: Malachi 2:17-3:1

Key chapter: Malachi 3

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<sup>10</sup> *How to Read the Bible*, 256.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*