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Introduction to the Prophets

Theology of Work Project

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Who Were the Prophets?

Called by God and filled with God's Spirit, a prophet spoke God's word to people who had in one way or another distanced themselves from God. In one sense, a prophet is a preacher. But in marketplace terms, a prophet is often a whistle-blower, particularly when an entire tribe or nation has turned away from God.

The prophets peopled the pages of Israel's history. Moses was God's prophet used to rescue the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, then to lead them to the land God had promised them. Again and again, these people turned away from God; Moses was God's mouthpiece to bring them back into a just relationship with God. In the Old Testament history books (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah), prophets like Deborah, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Huldah and others came forward to speak God's word to a backslidden people.

Israel's religious worship was organized around the labor of priests, first in the tabernacle, later in the temple. The day-to-day job description of priests lay in slaughtering, butchering and roasting the sacrificial animals brought by worshipers. But a priest's tasks went beyond the heavy physical work of dealing with thousands of animal sacrifices. A priest was also responsible to be a spiritual and moral guide to the people. While the priest was often seen primarily as the mediator between the people and God in the temple sacrifices, his larger duty was to teach God's law to the people (Leviticus 10:11, Deuteronomy 17:8-10, 33:10; Ezra 7:10).

In Israel's history, however, the priests themselves often became corrupt and turned away from God, leading the people in the worship of idols. Prophets arose when the priests failed to teach God's law to the people. In a sense, God called and spoke through prophets as whistle-blowers when the whole enterprise was on the brink of self-destruction.

One of the stunning tragedies of the people of God was their persistence in pursuing the worship of the many gods of their pagan neighbors. The common practices of this idolatrous worship included offering their children in the fires of Moloch and ritual prostitution with every imaginable lewd practice "on every high hill and under every green tree" (2 Chronicles 28:4). But an even greater evil in forsaking

Yahweh came in forsaking God's structure for living in community as a distinct and holy people of God. Concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger in the land was replaced by oppression. Business practices overturned God's standard so that extortion, taking bribes, and dishonest gain became commonplace. Leaders used power to destroy lives, and religious leaders despised God's holy things. Far from enriching the nation, these ungodly practices led to the downfall of the nation. The prophets were often the last voices in the land, calling people back to God and to a just and healthy community.

In most cases, the prophets were bi-vocational. God tapped them for special duty while in the midst of other professions. Some prophets (e.g., Jeremiah, Ezekiel) were priests with the duties described above. Others were shepherds, including Moses and Amos. Deborah was a judge adjudicating issues for the Israelites. Huldah was probably a teacher in the university sector of Jerusalem. The task of "prophet" overlaid their other jobs.

Situating the Prophets in Israel's History

As long as Israel was a unified nation under kings Saul, David or Solomon, the prophets' work was woven into the larger history of the people without a separate written record. This pattern continued when the kingdom split in two, with the ten northern tribes (Israel) plunging immediately into idol worship. The prophets Elijah and Elisha^[1] were called by God to challenge these idolatrous Israelites to worship Yahweh alone. The first of the writing prophets^[2] were Amos and Hosea, challenging the apostate northern kings of Israel from Jeroboam II through Hoshea. Because kings and people alike refused to return to Yahweh, in 722 B.C. God allowed the powerful empire of Assyria to overthrow the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians, cruel and merciless, not only destroyed the cities and towns of the land, taking its wealth as booty, but they also took the people captive and dispersed them throughout the empire so that all sense of nationhood would be destroyed forever (2 Kings 17:1-23).

Earlier, God had given **Jonah** a mission to Nineveh, the Assyrian capitol, calling the Assyrian people to repentance. This was a tough assignment for Jonah because as a sincere follower of Yahweh, he did not want to aid and abet the enemy. At the same time, Israel had so distanced itself from God that its destruction at the hands of the Assyrians was inevitable.

As Israel neared its destruction, the small nation of Judah in the south flip-flopped between the worship of Yahweh and the worship of foreign gods. Good kings pulled the people back from idol worship and bad business practices, but bad kings reversed that. In the southern kingdom (Judah), the first writing prophets were **Obadiah** and **Joel**. They were whistle-blowers under kings Jehoram, Ahaziah, Queen Athaliah and Joash.

Isaiah spoke for God in Judah under four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, with **Micah** also

prophesying during that period. Hezekiah was followed on the throne by Manasseh, of whom Scripture records that he did more evil in the sight of the Lord than all his predecessors (2 Kings 21:2-16).

Manasseh was followed by good king Josiah who instituted a thorough cleansing of the temple, ridding it of much pagan worship. The people cleaning the temple found an ancient scroll that spelled judgment on the land; this led to the last revival of Yahweh worship in Judah. The writing prophets in Jerusalem at this time included **Nahum**, **Jeremiah** and **Zephaniah**. (Despite their presence in Jerusalem, the high priest turned turned to none of these prophets, but to a woman prophet, Huldah, to interpret the scroll for the king). Josiah was followed by kings whose disastrous political decisions eventually brought the Babylonian conqueror Nebuchadnezzar II against Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:31-24:17). In 605, Nebuchadnezzar took 10,000 Jews into exile in Babylon. The prophet **Ezekiel** was among those captives, while **Habakkuk** joined Jeremiah and Zephaniah, continuing their prophetic work in Jerusalem. When King Zedekiah allied himself with neighbor nations to fight off Babylon in 589, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, a siege lasting more than two years (2 Kings 24:18-25:21; 2 Chronicles 36). The city capitulated in 586, mainly because of famine, and was razed to the ground with her temple and palaces totally destroyed. Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem, continuing his prophetic work among the poor remnant in Judah, until he was carted off to Egypt. Meanwhile, Ezekiel continued to prophesy in Babylon to the exiled Jews living there.

Among the Jewish captives in the first deportation (605), was the young man **Daniel** whom God used in Babylon in the court of all the Babylonian emperors. When Babylon was overthrown by the Persians in 539, the new Medo-Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild their city and its temple, first under Zerubbabel, then under Nehemiah. Daniel's prophecies span the Babylonian exile (Daniel 1:1) through Cyrus' decree ending the exile (Daniel 10:1).

Persian kings varied in their attitude toward the Jews: under Cambyses (530-522) the rebuilding of Jerusalem was stopped (Ezra 4), but under Darius I (522-486) the second temple was completed (Ezra 5-6). Here the post-exilic prophets **Zechariah** and **Haggai** challenged the Jews: "You live in paneled houses while God's house lies in ruins. Do something about it!" Darius was followed by Xerxes (486-464), whose reign was recorded in Esther 1-9. Following Xerxes came Artaxerxes (464-423), in whose reign Ezra returned to Jerusalem (458, Ezra 7-10); Nehemiah followed in 445 (Nehemiah 1-2). It was in this period that the final post-exilic prophet **Malachi** wrote.

Timeline of the Prophets

The table below shows where in time the prophets fit within the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Period	Northern Kings	Northern Prophets	Southern Kings	Southern Prophets
United kingdom under Saul, David, Solomon, c. 1030 - 931				
Divided kingdom	Jeroboam (931-910) Nadab (910-909) Baasha (909-886) Elah (886) Zimri (885) Omri (885-874) Ahab (874-853) Jehoram (852-841) Jehu (841-814) Jehoahaz (814-798) Jehoash 798-782 Jeroboam II (793-753) Zechariah (753-752) Shallum (752) Menahem 752-742) Pekahiah (742-740) Pekah (752-732) Hoshea (732-722)	Elijah Elisha Amos Hosea	Rehoboam (931-913) Abijah (913) Asa (911-870) Jehoshaphat (873-848) Jehoram (853-841) Queen Athaliah (841-835) Joash (835-796) Amaziah (796-767) Uzziah (790-740) Jotham (750-731) Ahaz (735-715) Hezekiah (715-686) Manasseh (695-642) Amon (642-640) Josiah (640-609) Jehoahaz (609) Jehoiakim (609-597) Jehoiachin (597) Zedekiah (597-586)	Obadiah Joel Jonah Isaiah Micah Nahum Jeremiah Zephaniah Habakkuk
Babylonian exile				Ezekiel Daniel
Post-exilic prophets			Zerubbabel, governor Nehemiah, governor	Haggai Zechariah Malachi

ENDNOTES

[1] Elijah and Elisha prophesied during the reigns of Kings Ahab, Ahaziah, Jehoram and Jehu.

- [2] The writing prophets were those who left a written record of their divine visions, dreams and revelations. These are the last seventeen books of the Old Testament. Four prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel) left extensive writings, and the remaining prophets left shorter accounts of their prophetic work.