



PROPHETS

PROCLAMATION > PREDICTION

When the Old Testament speaks of “prophecy,” it signifies the profound responsibility of speaking on behalf of God. The prophets, in their unique role, not only instruct but also call out God’s people. Their rare predictions, often met with healthy skepticism (Deut 18:15-22), underline the weight of their divine task.

IN ONE SETTING: EXILE

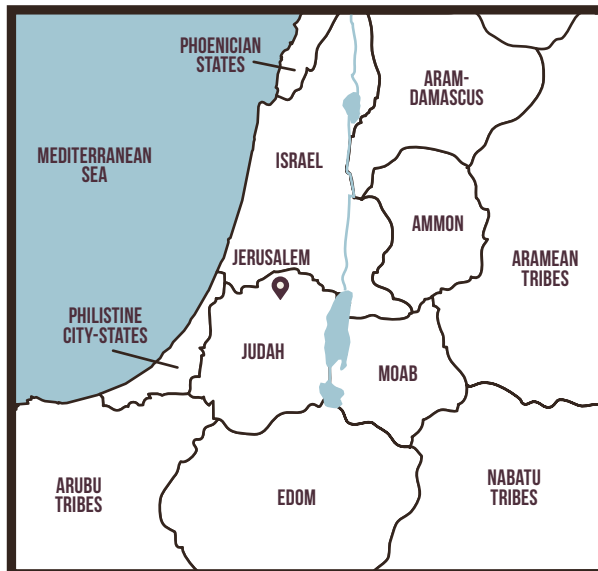
Exile, the idea of being away from God’s kingdom, is one of the most dominant themes in the Bible, especially in this section of the Old Testament. In fact, in the Torah, Moses says exile will happen if Israel chooses not to keep the covenant and disobey God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 28). With this in mind, the prophetic books ask the question all throughout, “Will Israel keep the covenant?” And if not, they will be driven from the land. Because of this, these books are situated somewhere before, during, or after exile and are written in the Northern Kingdom (Israel), the Southern Kingdom (Judah), Assyria, or Babylon.

THE LAW, THE PROPHETS, THE WRITINGS

The original ordering of the Old Testament is broken into three parts: Torah (Law), Naviim (Prophets), and Ketuviim (Writings). Within the Prophets section are two subunits: the Former Prophets (Joshua-Kings) and the Latter prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and the 12 minor prophets). This poses the question: why are Joshua - Kings categorized as “prophets” when there is little prophecy within them? The answer is in part because the Former Prophets foreshadow the major themes found in the Latter prophets: kingdom, exile, repentance, and covenant-keeping.

IN ONE COMMAND: REPENT!

At the heart of the biblical prophets' message is the call to repentance. They function as prosecutors, highlighting how and why Israel has broken their covenant with God, and what steps they need to take to restore it. Their message is not just a warning, but a plea for Israel to change their ways. At times, prophets specifically target kings and priests—God’s appointed covenant representatives—urging them to uphold the covenant, or face the consequences of judgment.



SYMBOLS CONVEY THEOLOGICAL TRUTH

The prophetic books weren’t designed to confuse. Rather, the prophetic authors use imagery and symbols pulled from their own cultural context and other Old Testament passages (especially Genesis 1-3). These images and symbols were designed to capture the reader’s imagination and demonstrate God’s rule and justice in light of their situation.

HEBREW ORDERING

I. Torah (Instruction)

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

II. Naviim (Prophets)

Former Prophets

Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings

Latter Prophets

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (Hosea - Malachi)

III. Ketuviim (Writings)

Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles

Jonah is the only “prophetic” book that is predominantly narrative and little to no prophecy—Jonah 3:4 is really the only prophecy in the book! Some scholars note this deliberate move shows how Jonah’s story is actually the story of Israel and the message of all the Prophets - their complacency towards the outsider, stubbornness towards repentance, and their eventual exile.

OBSERVATION - WHAT DOES THIS SAY?



Is this poetry, narrative, or dialogue?

Whatever the case, note the book's outline and read the context rather than cherry-picking one or two verses. This way, you can understand the overall theme. Heading and chapter breaks are good indicators of when a main idea starts and stops.

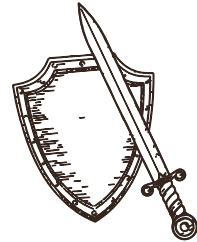
INTERPRETATION - WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?



When is this taking place?

Since kingdom and exile are dominant themes in the prophetic books, what is the historical context of the prophetic book you're reading?

- 1000 BC - The 12 tribes of Israel unite into one kingdom
- 930 BC - The kingdom divided in two: Israel to the north and Judah to the south
- 722 BC - Assyria conquers Israel and is led into exile
- 586 BC - Babylon conquers Judah and is led into exile
- 539 BC - Persia conquers Babylon
- 536 BC - Judah is allowed to return to their homeland — only some people go back
- 516 BC - Judah rebuilds their temple



Where is this taking place?

Is this taking place in Judah or Israel? Or has the exile happened already and is taking place in Babylon or Assyria?

Who is speaking?

If this is a call to repentance...

What has the king or nation done to deserve judgment?

Why does this go against God's covenant for His people?

If this is a future-telling prophecy...

Has the prophecy been fulfilled? Has it yet to be fulfilled? Or is it partially fulfilled?

HOW DO THESE BOOKS...

Point to the rest of the Old Testament?*

The Torah (Genesis - Deuteronomy)

The prophets call God's people to keep God's covenant. These covenant stipulations and consequences if they disobey are outlined in Genesis—Deuteronomy. Similarly, God says in the Torah all the good that will happen if they keep their end of the covenant (Deut. 18)

The Former Prophets (Joshua - Kings) vs. the Latter Prophets (Isaiah - Malachi)

Joshua through Kings broadly describes the rise and fall of the kingdom and how it happened. Isaiah through Malachi gets more into the why and what behind the events of Joshua through Kings. Because of this, it's helpful to read the Former and Latter prophets side-by-side.

Point forward to the New Testament?*

If the dominant theme is repentance and exile, then the goal hinted at in the prophetic books is for God to restore His people. According to the prophets, God will restore His people through...

A Davidic representative (2 Sam. 7:12-14 → Matt. 1:1, Luke 1:32-33, Acts 15:15-16, Heb. 1:5; Zech. 9:9 → Matt. 21:1-7; Micah 5:2 → Matt. 2:1-6, John 7:40-43)

Someone who will suffer on behalf of Israel's covenant breaking (Isa. 52:13-53:12 → Matt. 8:16-17, 20:28, 26:28, 27:59-60, Mark 10:45, 14:24, Luke 22:20, John 12:37-38, Acts 8:32-35, Rom. 10:16, Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 2:21-25; Zech. 12:10 → Matt. 24:30, John 19:31-37, Rev. 1:7)

A Moses-like representative who will free the people and bring in a new covenant (Jer. 31:31 → Matt. 26:28, Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6, Heb. 8:6-13, 9:15, 12:24; Isa. 61:1-2 → Luke 4:16-21; Mal. 4:5-6 → Matt. 11:14-15, 16:14, 17:9-13, Mark 6:14-16, 9:11-13, Luke 1:16-17, John 1:21; Hos. 11:1 → Matt. 2:13-15)

A prophet who will be rejected by his people (Isa. 35:5-6 → Matt. 11:4-6, Luke 7:20-23; Jer. 31:15 → Matt. 2:16-18; Zech. 11:12-13 → Matt. 26:14-15, 27:3, 27:9-10)

A child born from a virgin (Isa. 7:14 → Matt. 1:22-23, Luke 1:31-35)

Someone who will be preceded by an Elijah-like prophet (Isa. 40:3-5, Mal. 3:1 → Matt. 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-3; Luke 1:76, 3:1-6; John 1:22-23)

God Himself (Isa. 9:6-7 → Luke 1:32-33, Luke 1:79, John 14:27, Acts 10:36, Rom. 9:5, Phil. 4:7, Col. 2:3; 2 Thess. 3:3)

APPLICATION - WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?



Restoration - Is this passage offering hope?

Repentance - Is this passage calling me to turn from my sin?

Judgment - Is this passage warning me of the dangers of sin left unchecked?

*For more Old Testament connections within the Old Testament, check out *Old Testament Use of the Old Testament* by Gary Schnitjger

**For more New Testament connections referencing the New Testament, check out *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* by G.K. Beale, D.A. Carson, Benjamin Gladd, and Andrew Naselli