

The Prophets and the Events that Shaped Their Writings

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The Hebrew Scriptures are divided into three main sections: the Law, the Wisdom literature, and the Prophets. Tonight we're going to explore all of the books that make up "the Prophets." Three of them are designated as "major prophets," because they are much longer than the others. They include Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Less well known are the twelve "minor prophets," whose collected works are short enough that they were often combined onto one scroll in ancient biblical manuscripts. They include: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. There are two more anonymous prophetic books (Lamentations and Baruch) from the exilic period. And, although the Book of Daniel is set in Babylon during the Exile, it was actually written centuries later by an anonymous author.

Catholics who attend Mass only on Sundays and holy days will know the Prophets almost exclusively from a small number of messianic prophecies, which we hear during Advent and Lent. That very limited window into the prophetic literature can leave people with a distorted view of prophecy, as if the Prophets existed outside of time and historical circumstances, and wrote primarily to testify to Jesus in later centuries. But, nothing could be further from the truth. All of the Prophets lived in particular times and circumstances, and their preaching and writing was very much directed at their own communities, although sometimes presenting their people with a vision of the future. Like any other writers, the Prophets wrote about what they knew, and they wrote from their own perspective, from a worldview shaped by the times and places in which they lived and the historical events which they witnessed. So, the more we learn about the life and times of the Prophets, the more we can appreciate how God spoke to his people through them.

Tonight we're going to look at where each of the Prophets fits into the historical timeline of the Jewish people. But, in addition to *when* each prophet lived, we also need to look at *where* that person lived, in terms of geography and cultural setting. It matters whether a prophet lived in Israel, Judah or Babylon; whether he lived in a major city or a small town; whether he was a shepherd, a farmer, a priest, a court official, etc. In fact, we will see several instances in which two prophets who were contemporaries viewed the same historical circumstances through very different lenses. We will explore all of that tonight as we get to know the Prophets. Then, at the end, we will be in a better position to consider the key question for Christians: "In what sense to the Prophets 'testify' to Jesus?"

Handout:

- Order of the prophetic books in the Catholic Bible
- Timeline of the Political Realm vs. the Prophets

The Northern Kingdom (Israel), c. 786-722

- Amos
 - Prophesied during the peaceful reign of Jeroboam II (786-746).
 - Emphasized social justice. Amos refused to turn a blind eye to injustice and suffering, just because the kingdom was strong, stable and economically prosperous. He denounced the king and the religious leaders for ignoring the plight of the poor.
 - Amos stood out from the court prophets of his day, who wanted to please the authorities for whom they worked. He was called by God to proclaim God's word honestly and to speak the truth to power. Thus, Amos became a model for many later prophets.
 - He incurred the wrath of the High Priest of Bethel, who eventually got him exiled to Judah.
- Hosea
 - Prophesied during the end of Jeroboam II's reign and the chaotic years that followed, until the Fall of Samaria (722).
 - At first, Hosea emphasized the compassion, mercy and faithfulness of Yahweh, despite the repeated infidelity of His people. He used his own experience of fidelity to an unfaithful wife as inspiration.
 - The last years of the Northern Kingdom were chaotic and violent, marked by numerous royal assassinations. During that time, Hosea's prophecy took a darker turn. He proclaimed that God's compassion had been exhausted.

The Southern Kingdom (Judah), c. 742-701

- "First Isaiah" (Isaiah 1-39)
 - An aristocrat who lived in Jerusalem and had access to the King.
 - Isaiah's main concern was the purity of the Jewish religion. He was wary of alliances with foreign powers, because of their corrupting influence. Isaiah feared this corruption more than invasion by foreign armies. He insisted that God would protect Judah, if she remained faithful to the covenant.
 - Jewish legend holds that King Manasseh executed Isaiah by having him sawed in two.
 - Scholars think that only about half of Isaiah 1-39 was written by the Prophet himself. The rest was probably added later, over a period of several hundred years.
 - Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all narrated how they were called by God to serve as prophets.
- Micah
 - A contemporary of First Isaiah, but with an entirely different worldview, because of his different cultural setting. He was from Moresheth, a rural community east of Jerusalem, in what used to be Philistine territory.
 - Micah emphasized social justice, but in a different way than Amos. The people of Moresheth were abused and forgotten by the leaders in Jerusalem, who were preoccupied with protecting the capital from the Assyrians and other foreign invaders.

- Later edits by Micah's disciples make it challenging to decipher the original text.

Judah, near the collapse of the Assyrian Empire (c. 612)

- Nahum
 - Exclusive focus on the imminent fall of the Assyrian capital, Nineveh.
 - Wrote as if he were an eyewitness living in the city.
- Zephaniah
 - Inspired by the upheavals going on throughout the Middle East at that time, he prophesied about a sweeping and apocalyptic "Day of the Lord," when all the rulers of the world would be judged by God. Despite their great power, all earthly empires would be destroyed, and their memory would be blotted out.
 - The "Day of the Lord" motif later became an important feature of both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. It also was reinterpreted in various ways by other prophets.

Between the Fall of Nineveh (612) and the First Conquest of Jerusalem (597)

- Habakkuk
 - Along with Jeremiah, Habakkuk employed a new style of prophecy, in which the prophet questioned God about the evils of the world and God's inaction to correct them.
 - The Lord's response counseled patience and assured that divine justice would triumph over the evildoers.

Jeremiah (c. 626-580)

- Jeremiah served as a prophet for 40 years or more. During his time, the Babylonian Empire arose, overthrew the Assyrian Empire (612), invaded Judah, forcing the surrender of Jerusalem in 597, and then destroyed Jerusalem completely in 587. Jeremiah continued to prophesy after the Fall of Jerusalem, but eventually was himself exiled to Egypt, where he was murdered by his own people.
- Prior to the Fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah angrily denounced idolatry, injustice and corruption among his people, and warned that these sins would lead the nation to ruin. Despite numerous threats and plots against him, he continued to speak God's word. He felt compelled to obey God, no matter the personal cost. Jeremiah's obedience, suffering and rejection by his own people remind many of Jesus. In fact, many people thought that Jesus was Jeremiah, come back to life.
- After the Fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles in Babylon (ch. 29) and composed a beautiful message of hope (chs. 30-33), foreseeing a return from exile and a new covenant with God. Many see these chapters as a messianic prophecy, fulfilled by Jesus. They may have influenced Second Isaiah, as well.

Exile in Babylon (597-538)

- Ezekiel (593-c. 573)
 - Ezekiel was in the first wave of exiles deported to Babylon in 597.

- The first three chapters are Ezekiel’s call from God, in the form of a vision dating to the year 593. The next twenty chapters warn about the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 587. Next come prophecies against various foreign nations. Then, after the Fall of Jerusalem, there are prophecies encouraging hope of restoration. Finally, there is a grand vision of a new temple and a new life for the people of Israel.
- Ezekiel’s prophecies took various forms: visions, symbolic actions that concretely dramatized a message from God, allegories, and judgment speeches.
- The main themes in Ezekiel include: individual responsibility, repentance and submission to the sovereignty of God.
- Lamentations
 - A series of five skillfully crafted lamentations about the Fall of Jerusalem and the sorrowful condition of the people in exile.
 - Originally attributed to Jeremiah.
- Baruch
 - Written for the Jews in exile. Partly an exhortation to resist idolatry and maintain the Jewish faith, partly a plea for repentance and hope.
 - From an anonymous author, but attributed to Jeremiah’s secretary, Baruch.
- “Second Isaiah” (Isaiah 40-55)
 - Written in response to the Edict of King Cyrus (538), which ended the Exile and freed the Jews to return home.
 - The return from Babylon was described in terms reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt. God “summoned” Cyrus to free the Jews from Babylon, as he had summoned Moses to free the Israelites from Egypt. God will lead his people through the desert to the Promised Land, just as he did before.
 - All four Servant Songs are in this section of Isaiah.
 - The fidelity of the Lord’s Servant, especially through his unjust suffering, will bring mercy, healing and salvation to others.
 - Christians see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Servant prophecies.
 - For Isaiah, the Servant probably represented an idealized version of Israel. God allowed his people to suffer terribly so that their redemption (returning from exile) could become a light to the nations.
 - This idea is also found in Third Isaiah and is reflected in many of the “Day of the Lord” prophecies.

Rebuilding of the Temple (520-515)

- Haggai
 - Five precisely dated oracles from August through December of 520.
 - Spoke about the rebuilding of the Temple and the restoration of Jewish society.
 - Foresaw a return of the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem.
- “First Zechariah” (Zechariah 1-8)
 - Prophesied from 520 to 518.
 - A series of eight “Night Visions” and oracles, cryptically speaking about the restoration of Israel after the exile. The style is similar to later apocalyptic writings, but the content is quite different.

After the completion of the Temple (515-460)

- Malachi
 - The author is anonymous. “Malachi” is a proper name derived from a Hebrew expression which means “my messenger.”
 - Malachi harshly critiqued the priests and civic rulers of the day, as well as the people. The leaders were accused of failing to correct various abuses, with regard to worship and social and moral issues.
 - Malachi employed the familiar “Day of the Lord” motif as a warning to the people. However, he prophesied that a forerunner like Elijah would come first to announce the coming of the Lord. Christians saw this prediction as speaking about John the Baptist and Jesus.
- “Third Isaiah” (Isaiah 56-66)
 - In response to the same problems that Malachi identified in the post-exilic community, Third Isaiah emphasized compassion and mercy for the afflicted over fasting and religious observance.
 - He also foresaw a great Restoration, in which all peoples would be drawn to the Lord. The similarities to Second Isaiah lead some scholars to speculate that the same author may have composed both sections, a few decades apart.
 - Christian authors saw Third Isaiah’s prophecies of restoration being fulfilled by Gentiles converting to Christianity, rather than being drawn to Judaism.

Two opposing 5th-century views about the relationship between Israel and its neighbors

- Obadiah
 - Part I is prophecies about the destruction of Edom (called the land of Esau), Israel’s longtime rival.
 - Part II looks forward to a “Day of the Lord,” in which Israel will take possession of the lands of all of its enemies, who occupied the Jews’ land while they were in exile.
- Jonah
 - The whole book is a story composed by an unknown author about an 8th-century prophet named Jonah.
 - The Prophet is sent reluctantly to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, to call Israel’s enemies to repentance. Jonah doesn’t want to go, because he prefers that they die rather than repent. However, God has compassion for the Ninevites.
 - The story serves as a warning against exclusivity and hatred of foreigners as the Jewish people try to reestablish their society and their identity.

4th century and later

- Joel (400-350)
 - Very similar to the structure of Obadiah.
 - Part I is a communal lamentation and a call to repentance in response to a horrible plague of locusts. A portion of this section is used in the Ash Wednesday liturgy.

- Part II promises a “Day of the Lord,” when God will restore Israel and bless them for all their misfortune.
- “Second Zechariah” (Zechariah 9-14)
 - Contains allusions to events after 333, but shows evidence of a lengthy editorial process, probably concluding by about 200.
 - Apocalyptic style, written in poetic verse, very different from Zechariah 1-8.
 - Extensive borrowing from earlier prophets, including Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel.
- Daniel
 - Contains a collection of short stories about Daniel and his three companions, set in Babylon during the Exile. Inaccuracies in the historical details suggest that it was written much later.
 - Also contains a series of apocalyptic visions attributed to Daniel. They seem to refer to the evil Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163), who persecuted the people of Judah.
 - Jesus identified himself with the heavenly “Son of Man” character in Daniel’s visions. People of Jesus’ day associated that character with the promised Messiah.

In what sense do the Prophets “testify” to Jesus?

- Christians see Jesus’ victory over sin and death as being prefigured in the Exodus from Egypt and in the Restoration after the Exile. Hence, some passages from the Pentateuch seem to “testify” to Christ. Likewise, many of the prophecies from the exilic period, though they may have referred to the people of Israel originally, seem to be fulfilled even more completely in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. This is especially true of Second Isaiah and his Songs of the Suffering Servant.
- Many of the prophets suffered rejection and scorn from their own people, in a way that seemed to prefigure the experience of Jesus. Jeremiah was the most striking example, because even his own friends turned against him. Amos and First Isaiah faced opposition primarily from the civil and religious authorities. In all cases, however, these prophets suffered for their obedience to God’s will and their persistence in proclaiming God’s word to the people, very much like Jesus.
- Jesus deliberately identified himself with the “Son of Man” in Daniel, whom first-century Jews saw as a messianic figure.
- Some of the “Day of the Lord” prophecies appear to speak of the *First Coming* of Christ. Others reflect Christians’ hopes and expectations for the *Second Coming* of Christ.

Key point:

None of the Prophets had Jesus of Nazareth in mind when they wrote. However, much of what they prophesied in response to the events of their own day has taken on a deeper meaning in the light of Christ and his revelation. Hence, many of their prophecies shed light for us on the Paschal Mystery.