

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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“The prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible presents great interpretive obstacles. Its poetry, though teeming with vivid imagery that engages the imagination and emotions, challenges the reader’s understanding because of its economy of expression, rapid shifts in mood, and sometimes cryptic allusions. The reader of the prophetic literature quickly realizes that these books were written at particular points in time to specific groups of people with whom the modern reader seems to share little. Yet these books are more than just ancient documents written to a long-dead people. They contain the very word of the eternal God, the message of which transcends time and space. Like the ancient prophets, we too worship this God, and, through the mystery of inspiration, their words can provide us insight into God’s character and challenge us to love him more and to serve him with greater devotion.”

—Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets*
(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 9

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

The Latter Prophets

I. Introduction

- A. The Latter Prophets is a term used to designate those books that comprise the second half of the section of the Hebrew Bible known as “the Prophets.”
- B. Whereas the Former Prophets are written in historical narrative and explain Israel’s history from a prophetic viewpoint, the Latter Prophets record the actual messages these prophets proclaimed to the people throughout Israel’s history.
- C. In this way, the Latter Prophets represent true and real *prophecy*—“oral or written disclosure through a human mouthpiece transmitting the revelation of God and setting forth His will to man.”¹
- D. That being said, it’s important to note that very little of the prophetic activity throughout Israel’s history was actually recorded. The Former Prophets identify numerous individuals designated as prophets, yet their messages went unrecorded (e.g., Nathan, Shemaiah, Ahikah, Elijah, Micaiah, Elisha, etc.).
- E. The Latter Prophets comprise the *written* prophets—those individuals whose messages were recorded and preserved for the benefit of later generations.

¹ Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 327.

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- F. In actuality, each “book” in the Latter prophets is really a compilation of writings, some of which originated as oral messages that were later recorded (either by the prophet or by another individual), while others perhaps began as written messages that the prophet may not have ever delivered orally.
- G. Ultimately, we know very little about how these prophetic books came together. All we do know is what the books tell us. And while some prophets spoke messages that were never recorded, God spoke to some in order that they might record their messages in written form.
- H. These prophets spoke messages that “were communicated within the religious, historical, and cultural context of their times.... Their messages were spoken on account of and with the eye to the concrete circumstances and conditions of both Israel and the nations.”²

II. The Designations of the Prophets

A. “Prophet” (*nabhi*)

1. This is the predominant term (156x) used in the Latter Prophets to identify the writers of these books.
2. Scholars debate the origins of the Hebrew term *nabi*’ (“prophet”), but it most likely derives from the Akkadian term *nabu*, which means “to summon, call, or announce.”
3. Thus, a prophet was a “called one”—called by Yahweh to proclaim his message to man.
4. This reflects the use of the term in Exodus 7 when Aaron is called to be Moses’ mouthpiece and messenger before Pharaoh.
5. Similarly, Deuteronomy 18:18 speaks of Yahweh raising up an individual to speak for him. Once again, the emphasis is upon God’s sovereign calling of an individual to function as a divine spokesman to deliver God’s message to others.
6. “The prophet was not to be regarded as a self-appointed professional whose purpose was to convince others of his own opinions, but rather he was called by God to proclaim as a herald from the court of heaven the message to be transmitted from God to man.”³

B. “Man of God” (*ish elohim*)

1. The phrase carries a host of significant connotations.
2. The prophet was a “man belonging to God”—his identity and purpose were bound up in the divine plan and purpose. He belonged first and foremost to God.
3. The prophet was a man devoted to God’s cause and enjoyed personal, intimate fellowship with God. He was someone who could be trusted to deliver God’s message.

² P. A. Verhoef, “Prophecy,” in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:1076.

³ Archer, *Old Testament Introduction*, 329.

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C. “Seer” (*hozeh/ro’eh*)

1. This title doesn’t seem to refer principally to visions.
2. Rather, it seems to refer to the manner by which God’s message was revealed to the prophet.
3. In general, the term is used synonymously with “prophet” (e.g., Amos 7:12-13). “The nom. *nabi* [“prophet”] stresses the objective or active work of the messenger of the Lord in speaking forth God’s message. The terms *ro’eh* and *hozeh* emphasize the subjective element, namely, the receiving of divine revelation by seeing.”⁴

III. The Function of the Prophets

A. The word of God was central to the life and function of Israel, just as it is central to the life and function of the church. God’s word came primarily in three forms: through the Torah, through wise counsel, and through direct revelation (Jer 18:18).

B. *Torah*

1. The principal expression of God’s word in the OT came in the revelation of Torah, and it was the responsibility of the *Levitical priests* to teach the Torah to the people (Lev 10:8-11; Deut 31:9-13; 33:10).
2. As Israel’s history progressed, it became imperative that the prophets instruct Israel in the Torah and call them to obey it, because the people did not know it.
3. This, of course, was a direct indictment on the priests, who had neglected their responsibility within the nation.

C. *Counsel*

1. In addition to the Torah, Yahweh also expressed his word through wise counsel given through the “wise man,” an individual who could give pointed and specific counsel to Israel’s leaders.
2. The wise man was an individual endowed by Yahweh’s Spirit with the ability to take principles of the Torah and apply them in practical ways to life. Solomon is perhaps to most famed of the wise men, renowned for his insight into skillful living fueled by a knowledge of Torah.
3. The counsel of a wise man was so highly regarded that it “was as if one inquired of the word of God” (2 Sam 16:23).
4. However, just as the priests did not teach the Torah to the people, the wise men in Israel failed to give wise counsel, as when David’s chief counselor Ahithophel defected and became loyal to Absalom out of fear, counseling him in how to defeat David and reign as king (2 Sam 15-17).

⁴ Jacki A. Naudé, “רֹאֵה,” in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1013.

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5. This required the prophets to come and speak a word from Yahweh, interjecting wisdom and indicting the wise men as well.

D. *Word*

1. Finally, Yahweh also expressed his word through direct revelation to the people, using as his agents the prophets (Jer 18:18).
2. The prophet was one who was raised up by Yahweh to speak to the people in Yahweh's place (Deut 18:15-17).
3. The people were required to listen to the prophet and accept his words as those of Yahweh himself (Deut 18:18-19).
4. The prophet demonstrated the authenticity of his message through the foretelling of an event. This was for the benefit of the people—so that Israel would recognize a true prophet from a false prophet—as well as a warning for the prophets—so that they would not speak on behalf of God a message that he did not sanction (Deut 18:20-22).

FUNCTION OF THE PROPHETS⁵

PERIOD	FUNCTION	AUDIENCE	MESSAGE	EXAMPLE
PRE-MONARCHY	Mouthpiece-leader	People	National guidance Maintenance of Justice Spiritual overseer	Moses Deborah
				TRANSITION: Samuel
PRE-CLASSICAL	Mouthpiece-leader	King and Court	Military advice Pronouncement of rebuke or blessing	Nathan Elijah Elisha Micaiah
				TRANSITION: North—Jonah South—Isaiah
CLASSICAL	Mouthpiece-social/spiritual commentator	People	Rebuke concerning current condition of society; leads to warnings of captivity, destruction, exile, and promise of eventual restoration Call for justice and repentance	Writing prophets Best example: Jeremiah

IV. The Character of the Prophets

- A. Because the prophet was a “man of God”—a man belonging to God and dedicated to his purposes—he was also a man of the word of God, charged with delivering God's message to man (Isa 6:9; Amos 7:14-15; Jer 1:7-9).

⁵ John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 52.

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- B. Because the prophets came bearing Yahweh's very words, they were also men of authority (Isa 55:11; Hos 6:5). Thus, when the prophet spoke, God spoke, and the people were commanded to listen (Deut 18:18-19).
- C. However, just as Israel had hardened their hearts toward Yahweh in the wilderness and did not listen to the prophet Moses, so later generations responded to the prophets by closing their ears, denying their messages, and persecuting the prophets.

V. The Foundation of the Prophets

- A. The writing prophets (i.e., the Latter Prophets) stand in a strong lineage of men who were called to speak Yahweh's words to Israel. But their lineage starts with Moses, the first writing prophet of Israel.
- B. Just as the message of the Latter Prophets only makes sense when you understand the message of the Torah, the function and ministry of the prophets only makes sense when you understand the prophetic ministry of Moses.

1. The Message of Moses the Prophet

- a. As Yahweh's prophet, Moses explained and exhorted from the "what" and "why" of God's dealings with Israel (Deut 1:5-4:43). He surveyed Israel's history as a nation and all that Yahweh had done amidst the backdrop of his promise to the patriarchs.
- b. As Yahweh's prophet, Moses explained and exhorted the stipulations that Yahweh gave to Israel (Deut 4:44-28:68). Israel's history had been one of rebellion amidst much grace, and in the heart of his message he urged the nation to repent and return to God in obedience. If they obeyed, he promising blessing in the form of peace, prosperity, and security in the land (Deut 28:1-14). But if they disobeyed, he warned that they would experience cursing from God, ending in disaster and exile from the land (Deut 28:15-68).
- c. As Yahweh's prophet, Moses explained the future course of events for Israel (Deut 29:1-30:20). He explained that they would eventually turn from Yahweh, practicing idolatry (Deut 29:25-26), which would bring about their exile from the land (Deut 29:27-28). But Yahweh would restore them to the land (Deut 30:1-10) through the promise of a different covenant (Deut 29:1; 30:6 [Land Covenant]) and the promise of a coming king (Deut 4:30-31; Num 24:14-19; Gen 49:1; 8-12; cf. 2 Sam 7:12-16).
- d. As Yahweh's prophet, Moses left a witness to future generations of Israel (Deut 31:1-34:12). Moses' song became a witness to remind Israel of the judgment God would bring for their sin (Deut 31:1-32:47) and the blessing he would give them following their restoration (Deut 32:48-34:12).

2. The Characteristics of Moses the Prophet

- a. As Yahweh's prophet, Moses was chosen and prepared by God (Exod 2:1-22). The details of Moses' childhood recorded in the Torah make it clear that Yahweh had a purpose for him, and God orchestrated the events of his life to prepare him to be Yahweh's prophet.

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- b. As Yahweh's prophet, Moses was called by God (Exod 3:1-4:17). He did not volunteer to be God's prophet. Rather, he was perfectly content shepherding his flocks in the wilderness until he was sovereignly called by Yahweh to be his spokesman to the nation. That calling occurred as a dramatic event involving a real encounter with Yahweh.
 - c. As Yahweh's prophet, Moses spoke God's message (Exod 4:29-30; 5:1). He acted as God's spokesman both to Israel as well as to Pharaoh.
 - d. As Yahweh's prophet, Moses wrote God's message (Deut 31:9). At the end of his life, God directed him to write a book—a permanent record that could be read by future generations. The book includes narratives chronicling Israel's history and origins. But it also includes narratives involving Moses himself. Overall, the message of the narrative is that Yahweh revealed himself to the nation of Israel through his prophet Moses. Even though he was banned from entering the land with the people, his words would remain with them through the written record.
- C. This theological backdrop clarifies the prophetic ministries of the writing prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve are all similarly called by Yahweh to speak for him, deliver oral messages to Israel and the nations, and then directed to record their words before they died so that subsequent generations would have a written record of their message and reflect on what happened in previous generations.
- D. This is the complexity of the writing prophets: the prophets looked back to times past as they wrote, yet their messages look forward to future times and for the benefit of future generations.

VI. The Major Themes of the Latter Prophets

A. Israel's Election

1. *Abrahamic Covenant*: The biblical covenants undergird the theology and message of the Latter Prophets. Israel continues to disobey Yahweh and the law, and the prophets continue to call the nation to repentance, but his promises in the Abrahamic Covenant assuage any possibility that Yahweh will do away with them for good.
2. *Mosaic Covenant*: Nevertheless, their relationship with Yahweh is defined by the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant, and that covenant receives the most prominence. The warnings of judgment and cursing, culminating in exile from the land, all stem from that covenant.
3. *Davidic Covenant*: Key to the realization of Israel's covenant hopes is the coming of Israel's covenant king—Messiah, the son of David. It is through this individual that the Abrahamic Covenant blessings will be mediated to the nation and the world. Thus, the Davidic Covenant appears repeatedly throughout the prophets.
4. *New Covenant*: There is also an emphasis throughout the prophets that Yahweh is going to deal with Israel in a dramatically different way than he does through the old covenant of Moses.

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B. Israel's Rebellion and Covenant Treachery

1. The prophets acted not only as Yahweh's spokesman but also his prosecuting attorneys. Their messages confront Israel and Judah for their rebellion against Yahweh.
2. This rebellion is evidenced most clearly in their disregard for the stipulations of the covenant that bound Yahweh and Israel together. Their rebellion was nothing less than treachery and the prophet's job was to bring Yahweh's case against his people.

C. Yahweh's Judgment

1. The Mosaic Covenant bound Israel to Yahweh under the promise of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience (Lev 26; Deut 28).
2. The prophets warned Israel that their rebellion would be met by divine judgment just as he had promised in the covenant. This judgment would culminate in their expulsion from the land and scattering among the nations.

D. Yahweh's Compassion

1. The prophets also declared that this punishment did not mean the end of the nation.
2. Rather, while the judgment flowed out of the Mosaic Covenant framework, compassion would flow out of Israel's status as the seed of Abraham.

E. Yahweh's Plan

1. The prophets stress that Yahweh has a sovereign plan for Israel and the nations.
2. Concerning Israel, the pain of punishment under the Mosaic Covenant is designed to produce repentance, and his compassion on them will lead to their redemption.
3. Concerning the nations, the prophets predict that Yahweh's heart for Israel mirrors his heart and purpose for all the nations. Thus, the special renewal that Israel will experience after their punishment will extend to all the nations under the terms of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants. In the end, with the exception of Babylon and Edom, every nation mentioned by the Latter Prophets will reap blessing through Israel and worship Yahweh with them.

F. Yahweh's King

1. The prophets speak with much anticipation of a coming king who will reign on David's throne in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.
2. This individual will be Yahweh's instrument to ultimately both punish and blessing Israel and the nations.

VII. The Interpretation of the Latter Prophets

- A. The Latter Prophets present the reader with a new kind of literary genre that involves different rules and approaches to interpretation.
- B. Many factors come into properly interpreting the prophets, and the reader is met with imagery and styles that require thought and care.

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- C. This is where the interpreter must be careful to allow the prophets to speak for themselves. While the NT Christian can never truly interpret the OT without the knowledge and expectation of the revelation of Jesus Christ, he must attempt to allow the original historical context to drive the message of the prophets.
- D. The Latter Prophets has been the source of much interpretive abuse at the hands of Christian interpreters. It is easy to read Christ and NT realities into the text via the imagery, metaphors, and symbolism found there.
- E. However, as with any NT writing, the prophets must be read and understood the way Israel heard them, with Torah as the backdrop and exile as the impending reality.

VIII. The Historical Background of the Latter Prophets

- A. The Prophets as a whole are situated right in the middle of the Hebrew Bible. The Former Prophets chronicle Israel's history in narrative fashion right up to the point of exile. The Latter Prophets have that exile as their primary point of reflection, and focusing on what is coming for Israel in the future.
- B. "At this point the narrative storyline of the Hebrew Bible is suspended. The narrative prose of the Former Prophets shifts to the more poetic discourse of the Latter Prophets, which is continued in the poetry of the Writings. The storyline will not resume until the book of Daniel in the latter portion of the Writings, where it will continue to the end of the Tanakh. From a literary point of view the largely poetic content between the ending of Kings and the beginning of Daniel serves as commentary and reflection on the storyline."⁶
- C. Isaiah is a pre-exilic book, written by a man who lived several generations before Judah's deportation into Babylon (although the latter portions of his message are directed toward the future exiles). Jeremiah and Ezekiel are both exilic prophets, and their messages are directed toward those who are in exile. The Twelve is a post-exilic "book", written to post-exilic Israel, and giving the same message with the same hope that was given to the exiles. (Although it contains volumes written by pre-exilic prophets, its message as a whole—as a literary collection—has a post-exilic thrust.)

⁶ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 159.