

Introduction to Studying the Prophets

Understanding the message of the Prophets happens by understanding the *historical perspective*, *literary perspective*, and *thematic perspective* of the Prophets.

Historical Perspective: Most people think a prophet is someone who predicts the future. *But prophets do not so much inform us of the future, but motivate us to form the future.*

The prophets acted as the mouthpiece of God. They were sent to speak, to announce, and to tell – as a messenger of God. Often this was done by God showing the prophet something in a vision and then having the prophet announce what he saw. Prophets received their message in many different ways, and they shared their message in many different ways.

Throughout the Bible there are many people who are called “prophets.” Before the Monarchy (up to Samuel) Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Miriam, and Deborah were called prophets (Hebrew – *nabi*). Their main job was as leaders and consultants.

During the United Monarchy there were many prophets (e.g. Samuel, Gad, Nathan).

During the Divided Monarchy is the bulk of the prophets who have books of the Bible with their names on it. The role of the Monarchical prophets was holding the theocracy in check.

During the Exile, Ezekiel, Daniel, (and probably Obadiah) ministered. Their main job was to encourage hope among God’s people.

Following the Exile, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi ministered. Their main job was to instruct, warn, and guide the restoration process.

When you look at the prophets during these different periods you notice that the message of the prophets depended on the other prophets of that period and of the preceding periods. There is a progressive revelation in Scripture, as the message builds on previous revelation.

During the Monarchical Period the formal office of prophet was introduced. There was an official prophet of the king. Often they were false prophets who served as “yes” men for the king. True prophets kept the theocracy in check by applying and prosecuting the Kings, and the people of God, according to the covenant law of God.

Literary Perspective: While there are many prophets mentioned in the Old Testament, not all of them have books that are part of the Bible. Some prophets may have never written. Other prophets may have written, but their writings are lost. God has preserved the writings of only 16 books attributed to the prophets. Four are considered “Major Prophets” (because their books are longer). Twelve are considered “Minor Prophets” (because their books are shorter, but equally important).

The books of the prophets are written in prose and poetry. We need to keep this in mind to guide us in interpretation. The key is to read the book as the author originally intended it to be read. Therefore, we need to understand the *original writer*, the *original document*, and the *original audience*.

There are essentially 3 basic kinds of literary genre in the prophets: Historical Accounts, Prophetic Speeches; and Utterances to God.

Historical Accounts (eg. Amos 7:10-17; Isaiah 6) are designed to give an historical setting or to teach a lesson indirectly. They are usually in prose form.

Prophetic Speeches (eg. Most of Amos; Isaiah 1) are designed to preserve the actual words of the prophets oracles. They contain public speeches, and announcements to listeners in either prose or poetic form.

Utterances to God (eg. Amos 4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6; Isaiah 40) are designed to reveal the prophets inner life, to praise God and to appeal to God.

Within these literary genres are evident patterns, or structures, the prophets used to communicate:

The **Judgment Oracle** begins with an introduction, and then an *accusation*, followed by *sentencing*.

The **Woe Oracle** begins with an introduction (usually starting with the word “woe”), then an accusation, and sentencing.

The **Salvation Oracle** begins with an introduction, a *declaration of favor* from God, and *future promises*.

The **Lawsuit** begins with a *summons*, sometimes shares the *benevolence of God* and the people’s response to that benevolence, and then there is the accusation, sentencing, and sometimes *witnesses* called.

Other patterns, which we will look at, are the **Disputation, Parables, Prophetic Torah**, (types of prophetic speeches) along with the **Lament** and **Praise** (types of utterances of God).

Thematic Perspective: Our view of God affects our view of prophecy, and vice-versa. The better we know God the better we understand the prophets, and vice-versa.

Because God is *transcendent* (above all and over all) we must sometimes receive oracles from a God who knows, controls, and fixes history from beginning to end. These oracles are reliable and unquestionable.

Because God is *immanent* (involved with us and near us) there are times when we must understand that prophecies can also be contingent, to one degree or another, on the responses of people.

Again, ***prophets do not so much inform us of the future, but motivate us to form the future.***

The prophets were called by God to make negative prophecies (which focused on the sins of the people – leading to exile) and positive prophecies (which focused on the benevolence of God – leading to restoration). There was a *threat* of curses and an *offering* of blessings. The eventual result depended on the response to the ministry of the prophet.

Therefore, when a prophecy is made it is possible for the result to be different from what was prophesied. However, the prophecy and result will always be consistent with the character of God.

For more, search “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions” by Dr. Richard Pratt.

- Historical contingencies have bearing on the three major types of prophetic predictions
- Some predictions explicitly tell the original listeners that their actions would effect outcomes
- Some predictions would be realized, but precisely how was still subject to contingencies.
- There was always a tacit condition, significant responses had the potential to effect outcomes.

“Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he orders them to fall out, according to the nature of secondary causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. God in his ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at his pleasure” (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.2,3).

Sometimes we are not able, immediately, to understand what God is doing (amen!) because we are only human. The better we understand God, and what he has revealed, the more we will be able (sometimes immediately) to understand what God is doing and what he wants.

“The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q&A #3).