

**God Speaks through History.**

God has spoken through history, revealing himself and his nature through actual historical events. More specifically, he has revealed himself primarily through the history of the Jews. Speaking through Abraham, he called them to be his people, and through Moses he demonstrated his power to them by delivering them from Egypt and fashioning them into a nation. Through Moses he also gave them covenants and a law, making it quite clear that he was a holy God with moral demands and that he required the obedience of his people. His power, holiness, forgiveness, guidance and love were all revealed through the actual historical events of that era. The people learned that God is a God who entered into the happenings of their lives, and in those happenings showed himself for what he is.

The times of the prophets (that is, the prophets whose writings we have in the Old Testament) belong to a later historical period in which the Jewish people had to learn a particularly hard lesson about the nature of God. It was an episode when their disobedience to God reached such a peak that, despite his desire to bless them, he had to bring upon them devastating judgements to make clear his intense hatred of evil and sin. He was holy and they could not be allowed to hold that holiness in contempt. It was a lesson they should have learned much earlier in their history, but persistently failed to do so.

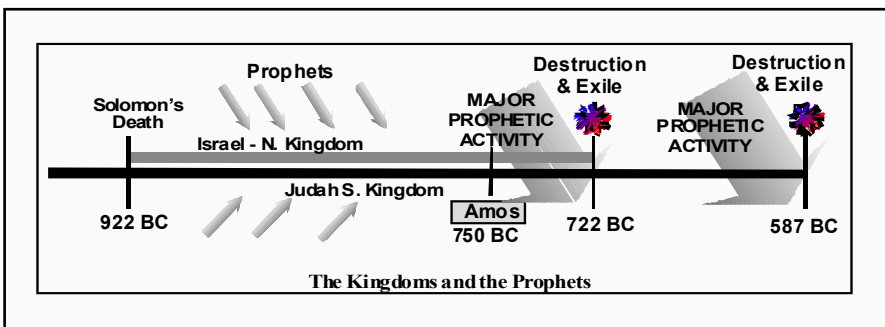
Since this lesson was worked out on a canvas of historical events it is very important to have some grasp of what those events were. Without this historical background the study of these prophets can be difficult, vague, even meaningless. True, we can always pick up a few choice encouraging texts without knowing the background, but we will gain no revelation of the main themes of the prophets.

**The Tale of Two Kingdoms.**

A good starting point for this historical context is the death of Solomon in 922 BC. In his final years Solomon was overcome by his lavish wealth, his wives and his extortions. The result was that he lost his way with God, and on his death, God caused his kingdom to split into two parts. The northern part became known as Israel (made up of most of the tribes, including Ephraim), with its capital (ultimately) at Samaria. The southern part was known as Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem. These kingdoms never got together again. Israel lasted until 722 BC when it was destroyed by Assyria. It showed nothing but a constant disobedience to God’s ways. Judah lasted for a further century or more, when the same fate overtook her in 587 BC, being destroyed by Babylon. She had been somewhat more faithful overall to Jehovah than Israel, but the last century of her existence saw her degenerate into the same disobedience as her sister state, and share her fate.

At no time during those 200 yrs of Israel’s existence and 300 years of Judah’s existence did God cease to speak to either of these nations through his prophets. The prophetic voice had been there right from the time of Abraham and was the essential way in which God guided and warned the Jews throughout their history. The prophets, therefore, were familiar figures to all the kings of Israel and their office had national recognition, even if individual prophets were often persecuted. From 922 (after the split) to 750 their warnings were frequent, and divine visitations of war, drought and plague followed when they were ignored (e.g. with Elijah).

A major watershed in prophetic activity appeared, however, with the arrival of Amos and Hosea prophesying to Israel in c. 750 BC. By 750 BC the degradations and apostasy of the northern kingdom, Israel, had reached such a peak that God’s warnings through his prophets began to take a much more severe and destructive note: the nation was not just to be punished with war etc. for its sin, but was now to be destroyed completely and even removed from its “promised land”. This sharper word (“I will spare them no longer”) that they brought to Israel was quickly brought also to Judah by Isaiah and Micah. Both nations were under



severe threat, and in a manner that they had not been before. Not only was the prophetic word sharper but there was a new and extraordinary release in the amount of prophetic activity, all designed to make both nations sit up, take notice and repent before they were destroyed. The Jews were to find such a message very difficult indeed to accept. They had been in “their” land now for some 500 years (since approx. 1200 BC), and to them it was unthinkable that God would go back on his promise and remove them. This, however, was the word God was pronouncing, and pronouncing with his full weight through some of the greatest prophets the Jews (or indeed the whole world) have ever heard.

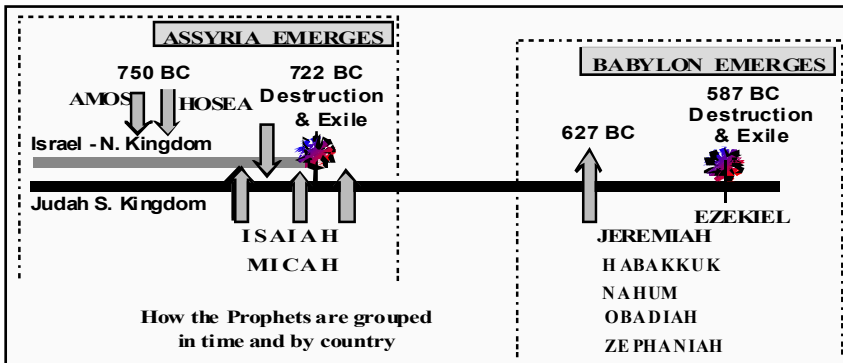
**Which Prophet Fits Where, and When?**

It helps our understanding of these prophets if we look at each and see where they fit into the overall picture of this period. We can distinguish for most of them which kingdom they were sent to and the period of time when they were sent.

As the diagram below indicates, there are two major catastrophes which form the epicentres of this historical period; the destruction of Samaria in 722 BC and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. There is, in other words, a double catastrophe among the Jewish people, a dreadful duplication of destruction, when first Israel rejects the prophets and then Judah, not heeding Israel’s fate, also rejects them. Not surprisingly we find that the prophets are most active at the peak of the two crisis points, and some prophets focus on the first destruction, and some on the second. The diagram below indicates

which prophets focused on which catastrophe. Israel's destruction in 722 BC and Judah's in 587 BC means that the historical period of these prophets is quite lengthy, and the gap between the first group of prophets and the second group is considerable (a good sixty years). The story is all of a piece, however, and forms a double witness to God's attitude to persistent sin.

**Amos and Hosea** are essentially prophets to the northern kingdom, and are, therefore, early, though Hosea continued to prophesy until the Israelite debacle. **Micah**, a contemporary of Hosea speaks both to the north and the south. **Isaiah** is also



a contemporary of Hosea, receiving his call in 742 BC, and, though having words for Israel, was primarily sent to steer Judah through the period of Israel's collapse and the Assyrian threat. Isaiah had a prophetic career of some forty years, continuing to speak to Judah long after Israel fell. He was responsible for saving Jerusalem from destruction by the Assyrians.

Just as Amos and Hosea gave a generation's warning to Israel, so **Habakkuk and Jeremiah** gave the same to Judah. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah had a prophetic career which lasted some 40 years. For the first 18 years he prophesied along-

side a reforming young king, Josiah. Josiah legislated to bring back true religion whilst Jeremiah preached to turn the hearts of the people back to the Lord. Both king and prophet eventually failed, but Jeremiah survived and was actually present at the final capture and destruction of Jerusalem. **Zephaniah** prophesied against Judah and was a contemporary both of Jeremiah and Habakkuk. His message to Judah is in the context of a huge scenario of a general "Day of the Lord" involving all the nations in a judgement from God. **Nahum** prophesied the downfall of Assyria, which took place in 612 BC with the fall of Nineveh, its capital, to the Babylonians. **Jonah** is an undated prophecy of warning to a rampant and cruel Assyria. **Obadiah**, likewise undated, is a short but devastating prophecy against Edom, one of Judah's bitter enemies.

**Ezekiel** was one of the Jewish people taken into Babylon as hostage during a preliminary deportation in 597. As a prophet in exile, he was called to strengthen the exiles but to pronounce unqualified destruction on those still left in Jerusalem, witnessing a fulfillment in 587. **Daniel**, taken into Babylon during the first deportation (609), spoke no word about the fall of Jerusalem, but became in old age the spokesman and intercessor of the return of Judah.

#### What the prophets had to say.

1. Quite obviously, then, **their main (and united) theme was one of devastating judgement.** They brought, so to speak, God's final word after centuries of disobedience. They demonstrate the awful truth that no matter how patient God may be with sin and disobedience there has to come a day of reckoning. Sin, whether in nations or individuals, will always bring pain and distress, but the blatant persistence in sin which ignores all warnings brings something much more devastating – a terrifying day of final judgement. That is what these prophets are really saying. It's a lesson we all need to understand.

At the same time the grace and patience of God is to be seen in the very fact that he sounded the warning to Israel and Judah so loudly, so clearly and so persistently. He showed himself to be always "slow to anger". On the other hand the "wrath" of God is seen in a manner which is very frightening. Death and destruction with unimaginable pain both to young and old is painted in vivid colours, but with the purpose not merely of genuine warning but in an attempt to bring repentance. God's judgement on sin was a theme all through Jewish history, but the biblical prophets speak of it with a force that is not found elsewhere. Their lesson is not one to write off as the product of undisciplined and uncouth prophetic figures, for they were not that at all: they were thinking, godly men, some of whom ranked high in society (as Isaiah and Ezekiel), and all had a very clear grasp of national and world affairs. They also heard God.

Their message is spoken out on a very big stage, the stage of national and international history. They have an understanding of history, and they have a philosophy of history which is divine in origin. They recognized that the nations are not their own masters, but are weighed in the balance by God himself. To God they are but fine dust on the balance. He determines their destinies, and he determines them on the just basis of their moral and humane behaviour. Wherever injustice, immorality, cruelty, wanton ambition are to be found there is sure to be judgement. Thus we even find that many chapters of these prophets, and indeed some complete books, are devoted not to the Jews at all but to the nations involved with them at this time in history. That is why their message is so important for us today.

2. The main target of the theme of judgement is of course Israel and Judah. The threat is total destruction. **Yet constantly breaking out is the promise of God that he will not make a complete end of either nation,** no matter what agonies they go through and how much destruction they suffer. Prophet after prophet refers to a restoration, a reuniting of Israel and Judah in a new way, purified of idolatry. In this we see something of the love and faithfulness of God that somehow even transcends his wrath. This was partly fulfilled when the Jews came back out of exile in Babylon some 70 years after the first deportation took place. There is a dimension, however, in those prophecies about restoration (some of which are detailed and extensive) which clearly goes beyond a return from Babylon. There is, in fact, an "end time" dimension to these prophecies about the Jewish nation, indicating that God has not yet finished with the Jewish people. This is a critically important dimension of their prophetic work, even if the implications of it are not as clear as we would like. It remains a guide for our own times.

3. Alongside the pointer to a restoration are **prophecies about Jesus himself.** This is remarkably clear in Isaiah, where a whole string of prophecies about the Shoot of Jesse and the Servant of the Lord provide an incredibly comprehensive picture not merely of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus but also of his divine/human nature and his ministry among the gentile world until "the latter days". These promises of a Saviour, so expressive of the love of God, provide more than anything the greatest balance in these prophets to the appalling word of wrath that is their primary mandate to the nations of their day.