

SPENDING TIME WITH THE PROPHETS

Walk into any library and you will note that the books are grouped into categories. Works of fiction will be in one place while history, self-help, poetry etc. will be in different areas of the library. Many do not recognize that the Old Testament is grouped in the same way. One might prefer that the 39 books of the Old Testament were arranged chronologically, but they are not: they are grouped by literature type. In the Old Testament, you have books of history, books of wisdom (poetry) and books of prophecy.

Genesis	2 Chronicles	Daniel
Exodus	Ezra	Hosea
Leviticus	Nehemiah	Joel
Numbers	Esther	Amos
Deuteronomy	Job	Obadiah
Joshua	Psalms	Jonah
Judges	Proverbs	Micah
Ruth	Ecclesiastes	Nahum
1 Samuel	Song of Solomon	Habakkuk
2 Samuel	Isaiah	Zephaniah
1 Kings	Jeremiah	Haggai
2 Kings	Lamentations	Zechariah
1 Chronicles	Ezekiel	Malachi
Books of History	Books of Wisdom	Books of Prophecy

Our congregational reading plan for 2017 focuses on the 17 books of prophecy found in the Old Testament. They are often designated as major prophets (Isaiah through Daniel) and minor prophets (Hosea through Malachi). Those designations do not speak of their relative importance, but of their comparative length. All 17 books of prophecy were written between the division of the Israelite nation following Solomon's death (931 B.C.) and the close of the Old Testament record (~400 B.C.). While we might wish they were organized in chronological order, they are not. However, we will do our best to place them in their correct historical setting later in this lesson and as we look more closely at each book during the year.

What is a prophet?

Most times when we hear the word "prophet" we immediately think of someone who reveals events that will take place in the distant future. While the prophets of the Old

Testament certainly revealed things that would take place in the future, that was not their only function. The word “prophet” literally means “a spokesman,” so a prophet of God is one who speaks for God! As Peter wrote, “no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2Peter 1.20-21). The prophets would certainly reveal many wonderful truths concerning the future, particularly in regards to the glorious future of the Messianic Kingdom (see 1Peter 1.10-12), the major thrust of their revelations had to do with the condition of God’s people at that time.

While our study focuses on the writing prophets we should remember that God had many prophets who did not leave written records (like Nathan, Elijah and Elisha). As we come to the 17 books of written prophecy we see a determined effort to record the words of these prophecies. Perhaps this was because of the deteriorating spiritual environment of those days. As Bob Waldron proposes, “It may be that earlier in the history of Israel there were still enough who cared that they preserved the messages of Elijah and Elisha, but as the moral and spiritual climate of Israel and Judah deteriorated, God chose to have the prophets record their messages so that there would be a testimony that God did warn.”¹ Or it may be that the recording of these prophecies was to preserve the future hope God had promised. “where a revelation of God contained information relevant to the succeeding ages, the Holy Spirit inspired the authors to commit their messages to writing. These, then, are the documents which have been preserved to us as the Major and Minor Prophets.”²

The prophets in their historical context:

Before God brought Israel into the promised land of Canaan, He warned them of all the curses they would experience should they violate their covenant with Him (see Deuteronomy 28.16ff). The 17 books of prophecy at the end of the Old Testament were written during times in which God’s people were showing disregard for His covenant and were thus experiencing the curses God had threatened. The very fact that God sent these prophets was an act of mercy, for He was looking for repentance on their part so He could bless them. Sadly, Israel rarely gave heed to the prophets (see 2Kings 17.13-14; 2Chronicles 36.15-16).

<p>Pre-Captivity <i>From when Israel divided after Solomon to Babylon’s invasion of the land.</i> 931 – 605 B.C. Message of the pre-captivity prophets was that the people must repent of their sins, or else God would punish them (cf. Amos 5.4-9).</p>	<p>Jonah Amos Isaiah Hosea Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Jeremiah Joel*</p>
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¹ Waldron Bob. Truth Commentaries. Minor Prophets Volume 1. Page 13.

² Gleason Archer Jr., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction. Pages 327-328.

<p style="text-align: center;">Captivity</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>From when Babylon took the first captives from Jerusalem to Babylon's defeat by the Medo-Persians. 605-536 B.C.</i></p> <p>Message of the captivity prophets was to turn to God so that He could bless them again (cf. Jeremiah 29.10-4).</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Jeremiah** (Lamentations)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Daniel Ezekiel Obadiah*</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Return From Captivity</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>From when the first captives are allowed to return to the Promised Land to the close of the Old Testament record. 536 – 420 B.C.</i></p> <p>Message of the return prophets was that the people should wholly devote themselves to God so that they would not suffer the same fate as their fathers (cf. Zechariah 1.1-6).</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Daniel** Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p>

*Date for the book is unknown

** Prophecy overlaps multiple Bible time periods