

CENTRAL THEMES IN THE BIBLE

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Fall 2004 Central Themes in the OT

Dec. 9 OT Prophecy – Messiah, New Israel, New Creation
Recommended Reading: Isaiah
Ezekiel
Hosea
Amos
Micah

The OT Prophets – Part I

1. The nature of OT prophecy.

Prophetes (Greek) = "one who speaks for another," especially for God. *Nabi* (Hebrew) = "a person who communicates, or pours forth, the Divine will."

A prophet is one who speaks for God and communicates the divine will.

The task of the OT prophet: "to declare the will of God to his fellow men, to reveal God's secrets, and to announce what shall come to pass."

The OT prophets sought to pour forth the word of the Lord, to declare the will of God, to apply God's word to the situations in which they and their contemporaries lived.

Futuristic (or predictive) prophecy, the announcement of "what shall come to pass," was only one phase of the overall mission and ministry of the prophets.

The prophets' primary concern: illuminating and evaluating the conditions of their time on the basis of the word of God and with calling their fellows out of apostasy and back to faith in and obedience to the Lord.

The "prophetic call": to proclaim the divine word and will to ancient Israel.

Amos 7:14-15: "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

Isaiah 6:1-8: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts." Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin [is] purged." Also I heard the voice of the

Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

Jer 1:4-10: Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." Then the LORD put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

2. The books of the OT prophets.

19 books in the following order (in the Greek OT/the Septuagint): Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations (attributed to Jeremiah), Letter of Jeremiah (attributed to Jeremiah), Ezekiel, Daniel (with the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men; Susanna; and Bel and the Dragon).

The 17 books of prophecy contained in Protestant bibles: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations (attributed to Jeremiah), Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel sometimes referred to as the "major" prophets because these books are greater in length than those of the "minor" prophets.

It should also be noted that the Hebrew Bible does not classify Daniel as one of the prophets – the book of Daniel is placed among a collection known as "The Writings" at the end of the Jewish canon.

3. Stages in the History of OT Prophecy: "Early Prophecy" and "Classical Prophecy."

The era of "early prophecy" (13th through 9th centuries BC): Moses; the prophetic bands and lone seers of the period of the Judges; and the non-writing prophets of the early monarchical period (e.g., Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha – [see 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings – i.e., 1, 2, 3, and 4 Kingdoms]).

The era of "classical prophecy" (8th through the 2d centuries BC):

The "classical prophets" emerged during and after the period of the decline and fall of the Hebrew empire. With the late 10th century BC division of the empire into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah), the people of the old covenant entered into a long era of corruption, decadence, and social, political, and religious disorder. The nation faced a mounting cultural and spiritual crisis, as the people introduced pagan and idolatrous elements into their religious practice and as immorality increased in both the northern and southern kingdoms.

It was into this age of crisis that the prophets were sent. Their mission was to apply the word of God to the situation into which Israel had fallen, to elucidate the theological and human meaning of the grave troubles that had been visited upon the descendants of Abraham.

General message: a reiteration of the argument of the OT historical books – Israel was in danger of forfeiting her covenant relationship with the Lord, of losing the kingdom of God, because of her unrepentant faithlessness and lawlessness.

4. Three major periods of classical prophecy: the pre-exilic era; the exilic era; and the post-exilic era.

a. Classical Prophecy during the Pre-Exilic Era.

8th-7th centuries BC: the kingdoms of Israel and Judah menaced, first by the Assyrians and later by the Babylonians.

The Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom in 722 BC and were themselves destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BC.

The Babylonian empire conquered the kingdom of Judah in 586 BC and held the Jews in captivity (the "Babylonian exile") for nearly fifty years thereafter.

The major prophets of the pre-exilic era – Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk.

Sent by God to warn the kingdoms of Israel and Judah of the calamities that were to overwhelm them if they did not return from apostasy to an obedient faith in the Lord.

From a biblical standpoint, the Assyrian and Babylonian empires were instruments by which a just and angry God punished his people for their gross sinfulness.

Amos (fl. c. 750 BC).

A herdsman and cultivator of sycamore trees from the kingdom of Judah who was, however, called to prophesy in the northern kingdom.

Message: He denounced the oppression of the poor by the rich and other social injustices, as well as the pagan and idolatrous religious practices that prevailed in the kingdom of Israel, and he warned of the divine judgment and punishment that would fall upon the people of God (in both the northern and southern kingdoms) as a result of their sin.

The book of Amos contains an indictment of the sins of God's people and of other nations (chapters 1-2); an extended denunciation of the immorality and ungodliness of the kingdom of Israel in particular (chapters 3-6); and five visions of the impending judgment of the northern kingdom (chapters 7-9).

Hosea (fl. c. 740 BC).

In an age marked by gross immorality and religious apostasy, Hosea compared the relationship between God and his people to a marriage in which a faithful husband has been severely wronged by his adulterous wife (chapters 1-3 and 4-13). But should the woman (Israel) repent of her infidelity, then, the prophet predicts, her husband (God) will most surely forgive her and bless her. The woman's repentance, however, will have to be both real and constant (chapter 14).

Isaiah (c. 740-687 BC).

The book of Isaiah is divided into two main parts (chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-66), and many contemporary scholars believe that the second part was not written by Isaiah but by a later disciple of his during the 6th century BC.

The first part of Isaiah contains prophecies concerning the destiny of Judah (chapters 1-12) and other nations of the ancient Middle East (chapters 13-23); a vision of the last judgment and of the kingdom of God (chapters 24-27); and a prediction of the eventual downfall of the Assyrian empire (chapters 28-39).

The second part of the book looks forward to God's deliverance of his people from their Babylonian exile (chapters 40-48) and to the emergence of a new Israel (chapters 49-55) that will be led by the Messiah into the promised kingdom (chapters 56-66).

Micah (c. 740-687 BC).

He spoke "the word of the Lord" both to Judah and to Israel.

His book contains prophecies of doom against the two kingdoms (chapters 1-2); a promise of ultimate salvation for humanity through the advent of the Messiah and the eventual establishment of the kingdom of God (chapters 3-5); and a poetic discourse on the relationship between divine punishment and divine mercy (chapters 6-7).

Zephaniah (fl. 625 BC).

Wrote his book in Judah approximately one century after the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom.

He prophesies the Babylonian exile of the Jews and their eventual deliverance from that exile (chapters 1-2); and he looks toward the final salvation of the faithful by the Lord (chapter 3).

Nahum (late 7th century BC).

His prophecy, written c. 620 BC, predicts with amazing accuracy the Babylonian destruction of the Assyrian empire in 612 BC. His prophetic denunciation of Nineveh (the capital city of the Assyrian empire) is symbolic of God's wrath against all nations that depart from the divine law.

Habakkuk (fl. 600 BC).

Explained the impending conquest of Judah by the Babylonians as an act of God against his apostate people (chapter 1).

Habakkuk also prophesies the eventual destruction of Babylon herself (chapter 2), and he looks, in faith, for the final deliverance of all repentant sinners who turn to God for redemption (chapter 3).

b. Classical Prophecy during the Era of the Babylonian Exile.

Jeremiah (6th century BC, both before and during the exile).

His book (which he dictated at various times to his amanuensis, Baruch) predicts the fall of Judah and the Babylonian captivity (chapters 1-25); and it contains biographical material on the prophet's long and difficult ministry (chapters 26-36), a narrative account of his experiences at the time of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem (chapters 37-45), a series of prophecies against foreign nations (chapters 46-51), and an appendix reviewing the early exilic period (chapter 52).

Lamentations and the Letter of Jeremiah – been attributed to Jeremiah. Both books reflect the thought of Jeremiah, but neither was actually written by him. Lamentations (c. 540 BC) – an elegy expressing great grief over the fall of Judah. The Letter of Jeremiah (late 4th century BC) – a diatribe against the sin of idolatry.

Ezekiel (written between 593 and 573 BC).

Ezekiel describes in detail the divine call that transformed him into a prophet of God (chapters 1-3); he explains the Babylonian exile as a divine judgment against the apostasy of Judah (chapters 4-24); he prophesies against the foreign nations surrounding the Holy Land (chapters 25-32); and he predicts the future restoration, not only of the Jews to Canaan, but of all the people of God (Jew and Gentile) in the kingdom of heaven (chapters 33-48). Ezekiel 40-48 describes a mystical vision of the heavenly temple of God which awaits the faithful at the end of time.

Obadiah (written either during the Babylonian exile or shortly thereafter).

A short book, only twenty-one verses long.

Obadiah prophesies destruction for the Edomites, a tribe located in the southeastern part of the land of Canaan, and indeed for all the nations of the world that set themselves apart from the law of God.

The prophecy seems to point toward the end of days, the last judgment, when all the ungodly will be cast into the outer darkness. At that time, Obadiah tells us, only the Israel of God (i.e., those who have been faithful and obedient to the Lord) will enter into the kingdom of heaven (see verses 15-21).

c. Classical Prophecy during the Post-Exilic Era.

Haggai (late 6th century BC).

Urged the Jews of the early post-exilic period to work diligently and enthusiastically in their rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Haggai's prophecy is a collection of four highly passionate messages on the importance of the Temple in the life of God's people. His insistence upon the rebuilding of the Temple is a testimony to the human need for the presence of God, for a house of worship in which the divine might be encountered (see Haggai 1-2).

Zechariah (late 6th century BC).

Two main divisions:

Chapters 1-8: the prophet encourages the Jews to continue the work of rebuilding God's Temple in Jerusalem and warns them of the Lord's wrath toward all sinners, whether Gentile or Jew.

Chapters 9-14: Zechariah prophesies the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the kingdom of God at the end of the ages.

Malachi (mid-5th century BC).

In response to the difficult social and economic conditions of the time (drought and famine in Palestine), the Jews, once again, began to grumble that God's goodness and justice were not apparent, and they became spiritually lax and apathetic.

Malachi warned the remnant of Israel that their spiritual and moral indifference was verging upon outright apostasy from the Lord, and that such sacrilege would not be tolerated by the Almighty (chapters 1-2).

He sought to encourage his people to return to the worship of God with a resolute and enthusiastic heart; and he prophesied the advent of the Messiah and of "the great and terrible day of the Lord" when all evil-doers will be destroyed and all the righteous redeemed (chapters 3-4).

Jonah (written in the late 5th century BC, although the events it depicts are set in the 8th century BC).

The prophet Jonah, the book tells us, was called by God to warn Nineveh (the Assyrian capital) of the destruction that was to come upon her if she did not repent of her sins and turn to God for forgiveness.

Jonah, a pious Israelite, did not wish the Assyrians to repent and thus be saved; so he resisted God's call and sought to escape his prophetic responsibility. But, in the end, urged on by the Lord, Jonah confronted the people of Nineveh and delivered God's message to them. As a result of his prophecy, the Assyrians renounced their evil ways and promised to follow the law of God. Thus, the destruction of Nineveh was, for the time being, averted. (Assyria evidently returned to her spiritual and moral outlawry later on, for she was conquered by the Babylonians in 612 BC).

The purpose of the book of Jonah is to show that God's righteous condemnation of sin and his gracious forgiveness of repentant sinners is applicable not only to Israel but to all nations. Through repentance and an obedient faith, all mankind can become a part of the people of God (see Jonah 1-4).

Joel (late 5th or early 4th century BC).

Joel emphasizes the divinely ordained punishments visited upon sinners (chapter 1), and he interprets these punishments as foreshadowings of the Lord's final judgment and condemnation of all unrepentant sinners (chapter 2).

But with the coming of "the day of the Lord," the Spirit of God will be poured out on all faithful people, and they will dwell in "the house of the Lord" forever (chapters 2-3).

Like most of the classical prophets, Joel offers us both dark warnings of judgment and happy promises of redemption; and whether the warnings or the promises shall be fulfilled depends upon our response to "the word of the Lord." Faith and obedience will bring salvation; and ungodliness will bring destruction.

Daniel (probably written during the 2d century BC but may contain some material written by Daniel himself, who lived during the time of the Babylonian exile).

The book is a highly symbolic and visionary work, emphasizing the supreme power of God and his steadfast intention to redeem mankind and the world from the bondage of evil.

The central focus of the entire prophecy is the advent of the "everlasting kingdom" in which all faithful people will be ruled by God himself.

The book is divided into two sections:

Chapters 1-6: describe "the experiences of Daniel and his friends while in exile in Babylon"; and

Chapters 7-12: contain four spectacular visions of the future course of human history leading up to the establishment of the universal kingdom of God.

Baruch (named after the secretary of the prophet Jeremiah; written during the latter half of the 2d century BC).

The book interprets the sufferings of Israel as the result of the nation's apostasy from God (1:15-3:8); praises Wisdom as a divine principle which, if followed, will lead God's people to salvation (3:9-4:4); and prophesies the ultimate redemption of all faithful people (4:5-5:9).

Like the Letter of Jeremiah, the book of Baruch is a deuterocanonical text which is counted among the works of the prophets in the Greek OT (the Septuagint). The ancient Hebrew version of the OT, as pointed out earlier, did not include the deuterocanonical books in its canon of sacred scripture.

Next Week:

The OT Prophets – Part II

5. The Message of the Prophets: Six Major Themes.

- a. An Absolute and Uncompromising Monotheism.
- b. The Righteousness of God and the Meaning of Human History.
- c. The Nature of True Religion.
- d. The New Covenant and the Kingdom of God.

e. The Coming of the Messiah.

f. The Resurrection of the Dead.