**INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS**

The final group of books in the Old Testament contain the writings of the prophets.

**THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY**

The prophets were men and women drawn from every walk of life who were called by God to deliver a special message to their generation. Their position was not hereditary like that of the priest and kings.

Some of them were writing prophets, in that their messages are preserved as books of the Bible. Others were speaking prophets, like Elijah and Elisha, who were not called to write books but served in the prophetic office and delivered a powerful Word from God to their generation.

The prophetic books provide instruction, correction, and prediction of future events. The messages are both negative (declaring impending judgment upon Israel and the nations for sin) and positive (foretelling the coming of the Messiah, the future restoration of Israel, etc.)

The ministry of the prophets was vital to Israel because, although God had been faithful to bring them into their own land from slavery in Egypt, they had not kept God's law and were constantly failing in their commitment to Him. With idol worship, civil war, immorality, and unconcern, Israel needed to be recalled repeatedly to repent and embrace the purpose of their existence.

The prophetic books are vital to believers today because they verify the Word of God as their predictions are fulfilled and they provide knowledge of future events so we can be prepared. The insights we gain from their messages can keep us from following false prophets and teachers and being deceived. The prophets motivate us to evangelize and reach the lost before it is too late. These books also call us to reflect upon our own commitment to God and recognize areas in which we need repentance and renewal.

**THE DIVISION OF THE PROPHETIC BOOKS**

The prophetic books are divided into the major and minor prophets based upon the length of their messages, not the content as all of the books are equally important. Several of the books were written during a time when the nation of Israel was divided into two separate kingdoms, Israel and Judah, which is noted on the charts that follow.

**THE MAJOR PROPHETS:**

The books of the major prophets include the following:

**Isaiah**: Warns of coming judgment against Judah because of their sins against God.

**Jeremiah**: Written during the decline and fall of Judah. Tells of the coming judgment and urges surrender to Nebuchadnezzar.

**Lamentations**: Jeremiah's lament over Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem.

**Ezekiel**: Warns first of Jerusalem's impending fall and then foretells its future restoration.

**Daniel**: Provides both historic and prophetic teaching which is important in understanding Bible prophecy.

The following chart shows when and to whom these prophets ministered.

**Major Prophets Of The Old Testament**

**Prophet Prophesied To Dates**

Isaiah Judah Before Captivity (800-606)

Jeremiah/Lamentations Judah Before Captivity (800-606)

Ezekiel Judah During Captivity (606-536)

Daniel Judah During Captivity (606-536)

**THE MINOR PROPHETS:**

**Hosea**: Focuses on Israel's unfaithfulness, judgment, and restoration.

**Joel**: Tells of the plagues which foreshadowed future judgment.

**Amos**: During a period of material prosperity and moral decay, Amos warns Israel and surrounding nations of God's future judgment on their sin.

**Obadiah**: God's judgment against Edom, an evil nation located south of the Dead Sea.

**Jonah**: The story of the prophet Jonah who preached repentance in Ninevah, capitol of the Assyrian empire. The book reveals God's love and plan of deliverance for the Gentiles.

**Micah**: Another prophecy against Israel's sin, this book also foretells the birthplace of Jesus 700 years before it happened.

**Nahum**: Tells of the impending destruction of Ninevah, a city which was spared some l50 years earlier through Jonah's preaching but had returned to their sin.

**Habakkuk**: Reveals God's plan to punish a sinful nation by an even more sinful one. Teaches that "the just shall live by faith".

**Zephaniah**: Predicts the judgment and restoration of Judah.

**Haggai**: Urges the Jews to rebuild the temple after a l5 year delay due to enemy resistance.

**Zechariah**: Urges the completion of the temple and foretells Christ's first and second comings.

**Malachi**: Warns against spiritual shallowness and foretells the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus.

The following chart shows when and to whom these prophets ministered.

**Minor Prophets Of The Old Testament**

**Prophet Prophesied To Dates**

Jonah Assyria Before Captivity (800-650)

Nahum Assyria Before Captivity (800-650)

Obadiah Edom Before Captivity (800)

Hosea Israel Before Captivity (750)

Amos Israel Before Captivity (750)

Joel Judah Before Captivity (800-606)

Micah Judah Before Captivity (800-606)

Habakkuk Judah Before Captivity (800-606)

Zephaniah Judah Before Captivity (800-606)

Haggai Judah After Captivity (536-400)

Zechariah Judah After Captivity (536-400)

Malachi Judah After Captivity (536-400)

**GUIDELINES FOR STUDYING PROPHECY**

Here are some guidelines for the study of prophecy.

1. Study prophecy “in the Spirit,” not with your natural reasoning because *"... the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).*

2. Accept that prophecy can be understood just as it is written without changes, additions, or speculations.

3. Do not change the literal meaning to spiritual or symbolic meanings. Accept the meaning of the words literally unless the text clearly indicates otherwise.

4. Always keep in mind the times and circumstances under which the prophet recorded God’s message. Without a knowledge of the historical background, expressions of that time may seem peculiar or difficult to understand.

5. Remember that sometimes prophets describe future events as if they were continuous and successive, but there actually may be thousands of years between. This is called “the law of prophetic perspective.”

6. Keep in mind the “law of double reference.” In some passages, two distinct meanings are indicated. For example, in Isaiah 14:4-27 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 the kings of Babylon and Tyre are addressed but these passages also refers to the fall of Satan from heaven.

7. Study passages within their context, as many times the text itself interprets a prophetic

vision or revelation. For an example see Zechariah chapter 4 where the angel explains the

meaning of the prophetic vision.

8. Remember that no prophecy is of private interpretation (2 Peter 1:20), meaning it is not to

be interpreted apart from the entire revelation of God's Word.

9. Three important questions to ask when you study a prophecy:

-Has the prophecy been fulfilled or is it yet to be fulfilled?

-Is the prophecy conditional based upon peoples' response or is it unconditional?

-Does the prophecy have an immediate fulfillment, a future fulfillment, or both

immediate and future?

10. Remember that *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine,*

*for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be*

*perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). "*All Scripture"

includes the more difficult portions, like prophecy.