
Introduction

- One emphasis of this entire series has been **the importance of understanding the various genres or types of literature** in which God has chosen to reveal Himself within the Scripture. We will potentially misunderstand, misinterpret and misapply the Bible if we do not approach each portion with a basic understanding of what kind of literature it is.
- Since we have now come to the last major section of the Hebrew Scriptures and it contains another kind of writing than we have encountered, this week we will consider an introduction of **prophetic literature** so that as we look at each book, we will be better prepared to study them.
- The term prophetic, due to the strong influence of the millennial movements of the 1800's, tends to carry the connotation of **predictions of the future**. While this is certainly one element of prophetic literature, it is not the whole.

The Function and Nature of a Prophet.

- What should be obvious about prophetic literature is that it is **written by prophets**. So what was/is a prophet?
- Most essentially, **a prophet is one who receives a message from God and then in turn communicates that message to the people of God.**

So the LORD said to Moses: "See, I have made you as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. ²"You shall speak all that I command you. And Aaron your brother shall speak to Pharaoh to send the children of Israel out of his land. (Exodus 7:1-2 NKJ)

- Here we see relationship between God giving a message, and the prophet being **a mouthpiece or spokesman** to deliver that message.

...for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:21 NKJ)

- Not only was **the message inspired by God**, but in **the delivery of the message** (in preaching or writing) as done by the work of the Holy Spirit of God in the prophet.

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, (Hebrews 1:1 NKJ)

- From this passage we see that **the manner of delivery** was varied. This included brief oral statements, longer oral messages, blessings, descriptions of visions, poems, dialogues, and symbolic actions.
- The "golden age" of the writing prophets (of the Hebrew Scriptures) was from the 8th-5th century. While there were those called prophets (and prophetesses) before this (including Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha) and those called prophets afterwards in the Greek Scriptures (John the Baptist, Jesus, Agabus), this section of Scripture includes the preserved writings of prophets who spoke to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the Southern Kingdom of Judah (before their falls), as well as the Jewish nation in exile.
- Unlike the kings and priests who were considered legitimate due to family lineage, the prophets were individually called (for a brief or an extended time) by God without connection with heritage, from various tribes and areas.

The Tests of a Prophet

- There are two key passages pointed to the **tests of a prophet**, whether they were true or false - Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:9-22. From these we see that **(1.)** any prediction must come to pass exactly as predicted, **(2.)** it must be spoken in the Name of the true God and **(3.)** he must not use the devices of the pagan nations to predict the future.
- Another mark of the false prophet is that they were willing to speak peace to people when there was no peace (Jeremiah 6:14 23:17), refusing to address sin (and sometimes even teaching it) for the sake of personal prosperity.

Key Features or Themes

- 1.) **The prophet claims to be speaking the Word of God.** This is seen in the frequently used phrase "thus says the LORD." What is said are not the miscellaneous observations of the person (like the wise man), but a claim to direct revelation from God.
- 2.) **There is a contemporary focus.** These words are not some general message, but speak specifically (and most pointedly) to the people in a specific historical setting. While they do have application for the people of God of today,

the message will be best understood if we see it in the context of when it was written. It was preeminently relevant to that people. As we go through each book, we will look at the contemporary setting of each book, asking questions about the times and people for which God originally.

- 3.) **There is a Divine evaluation and condemnation of evil.** Sins are clearly addressed, particularly the sins of those covenant nation of Israel. The sins of that pagan nations are not ignored, but the primary purpose is to call those who should know better to covenant faithfulness.
- 4.) **There is a Divine commendation and encouragement of the remnant of the faithful.** These are those who love God, who love His ways, and are seeking to live faithfully in their generation. While they are without sin, they are those who take God seriously.
- 5.) **There is a Divine promise of future wrath.** The wrath of God will come, often linked to what is termed “the day of the LORD.” No one is getting away with anything, and while evil seems to be thriving and escaping God’s notice, justice will eventually be meted out.
- 6.) **There is a Divine promise of future blessing.** The righteous need to remain so and continue to live by faith regardless of their surroundings. Some of the prophetic books more clearly mark out a day of future blessing and prosperity spoken of in glowing terms. In idealist terms, this future is described as great and glorious for the people of God.

Specific Challenges

- The books are often **not strictly chronological or systematic**, but repeated cycles of condemnation and blessing. Rather than trying to read it as a narrative, many must be considered more as prophetic fragments or anthologies (collection of literary pieces).
- Much prophetic writing is **visionary, symbolic, or poetic**. While often not strictly literal, there is always truth behind the symbols. While there are parts that are *realistic* (representation of things as they really are), much is *imaginative* (representing things through moving imagery). Whatever the form, it is most emphatically communicating God’s truth. Ultimately, it is a revealing of Himself and His disposition toward what is happening in the world.
- One of the important questions that is answered (from our historical perspective) is “Why did Israel suffer so much trouble if they were God’s chosen nation?” The prophets tell us that there was, by and large, an ongoing unfaithfulness by the people. This is true not only then, but also today.