

The Books in the Old Testament (IV): The Prophetic Books

Passages: Isaiah–Malachi

Memory Verse

“And He said to me, ‘Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you.’ Then the Spirit entered me when He spoke to me, and set me on my feet; and I heard Him who spoke to me.” (Ezekiel 2:1–2)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Works [Behavior]
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Learn a brief overview of the timeline of prophets and the overarching messages that they preached.2. Understand the duties and qualifications of God’s workers.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. God is truth.2. God desires for His people to return to Him.	Understand the qualities needed to become God’s worker.

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. An Overview of the Prophetic Books
- B. The Duties and Qualifications of God’s Prophets
 1. Chosen by God
 2. Purposed in Their Hearts
 3. Faithful to God’s Message
- C. The Messages of God’s Prophets
 1. Messages to God’s People
 2. Messages to the Gentiles
 3. Messages to Future Generations

Life Application: Qualities of God’s Workers

Memory Verse

Conclusion: The prophets existed in different eras, and their works differ greatly in style, oratory form, and message. However, all of their messages share common themes: calls to repentance and reminders of God’s faithfulness and righteousness. Ultimately, they all serve a similar purpose: to call people back to God.

Events and Spiritual Teachings

A. An Overview of the Prophetic Books

The prophetic books cover a large span of time in Israelite history, from the end of Solomon’s reign to the Israelites’ return from exile. The prophets can be roughly divided into major and minor prophets, and pre-exile and post-exile prophets. The terms “major” or “minor” simply refer to the length of the books. The events contained in the books of the major prophets took place over a long period, whereas the minor prophet books often focused on shorter time periods throughout the history of God’s people. (See Figure 01: Timeline Overview of the Prophets)

As a whole, the prophets’ messages vary greatly with different purposes and audiences, but we can briefly summarize their messages into a few categories (some prophets cover multiple categories).

God’s Judgment on Israel/Judah	God’s Judgment on the Nations	The Restoration of Israel and Messages of Hope
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Joel• Amos• Hosea• Isaiah• Micah• Zephaniah• Habakkuk• Jeremiah• Ezekiel	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jonah• Nahum• Daniel• Obadiah• Ezekiel	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Isaiah• Ezekiel• Haggai• Jeremiah• Zechariah• Malachi

The prophets existed in different eras, and their works differ greatly in style, oratory form, and message. However, all of their messages share common themes: calls to repentance and reminders of God’s faithfulness and righteousness. Ultimately, they all serve a similar purpose: to call people back to God.

B. The Duties and Qualifications of God’s Prophets

God used a variety of different workers to speak His message to the people. Among the prophets in the Old Testament, there were farmers and shepherds. Apart from holding different jobs, each prophet also had unique characteristics. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet because of how he often wept in sorrow over the prophecies that God revealed to him. Jonah was a prophet who purposefully rebelled against God and went in the opposite direction of where God instructed him. Though these prophets of God were vastly different, they were all called by the Lord to speak His message to the people.

1. Chosen by God

“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.’ ” (Jer 1:4–5)

First and foremost, the prophets were those men and women chosen by God to serve Him. Their duty was an important one. Let’s read Ezekiel 3:17. “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me.” These workers were chosen by God to serve in a capacity much greater than their own lives. Through their words and deeds, God warned individuals and nations of what was to come and gave all who listened a chance to return to Him.

2. Purposed in Their Hearts

“But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.” (Dan 1:8)

The prophets’ goals were different from the goals of those around them; instead of focusing on work, family, or on feeding themselves, their lives were focused entirely on God’s will. Sometimes His commands were straightforward and uncomplicated, such as His command for Jonah to travel to Nineveh to prophesy. Other times, they were more unusual, such as when He commanded His prophet to lie on one side for 365 days. But whatever His commands, the prophets made the determination to follow God’s will.

3. Faithful to God’s Message

“But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you.” (Ezek 2:8)

No matter what the message was, the prophets had to faithfully speak the words of God. This was not an easy task. Often, the prophets were not only ignored, but sometimes punished or even killed for the messages that they spoke (2 Chr 24:20–21; cf. Mt 23:35; Ezek 2:6; Jer 2:30). Yet despite the Israelites’ often violent response to God’s message, He strengthened His workers and helped them to withstand persecution and oppression, allowing them to remain faithful to His will (Ezek 3:8–9). With strength from God, they conveyed His words to the people, “whether they hear, or whether they refuse” (v. 11).

The prophecies from God are also translated as “burden” (Mal 1:1), as His messages were difficult to accept because they were often messages rebuking the people for their wrongdoing. Yet, these workers persevered in the burden that they were given, and boldly declared God’s words according to His will.

C. The Messages of God’s Prophets

God’s messages weren’t limited to His chosen people alone. His prophets also conveyed messages to foreign nations, the most well-known example being Jonah and Nahum’s message to Nineveh. But whether the listeners were Israelites or Gentiles, the purpose of the messages remained the same: to point all people towards God through messages of condemnation and punishment, filled with hope and deliverance.

1. Messages to God’s People

a. Pre-Exilic Message

The Israelites had fallen away from God’s laws regarding justice and righteousness, so God frequently warned them of the punishment to come should they fail to repent and return.

“O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you? For your faithfulness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away.” (Hos 6:4)

The prophets sent a very clear message to the people: unless they repented of their sins and returned to God, they would experience a punishment unlike any that they had received before—exile from the promised land. While Amos prophesied to the kingdom of Israel of the coming day of the Lord, Hosea’s message was a warning of the adultery that they had committed against God. Instead of remaining faithful, they had chosen to worship idols and

follow the traditions of men. To illustrate this point, God commanded Hosea to marry a harlot. Each time she was unfaithful, Hosea took her back, a clear parallel between God and the unfaithful Israelites.

The Israelites had also fallen away from God's laws regarding justice and righteousness. Hosea proclaimed, "Hear the word of the LORD, You children of Israel, for the LORD brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: 'There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land' " (Hos 4:1). The kingdom of Judah was no different from Israel. Joel, Micah, and Zephaniah all preached messages of God's judgment that they would experience through foreign powers. Micah emphasized the social sins of the people, the greed of the nobles, and the mistreatment of the poor (Mic 2:1–2; 3:11), giving us a clear illustration of the immorality that was rampant among the two nations at the time.

Although the prophets gave frequent messages of warning and admonition, they also gave hope. Hosea's words gave a clear illustration of what their relationship with God should be, and would be, in the future: "Then I will sow her for Myself in the earth, and I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they shall say, 'You are my God!' " (Hos 2:23). Zephaniah also conveyed hopeful messages of their return after captivity (Zeph 3:16–20).

b. Post-Exilic Message

After returning from exile, due to their short-lived zeal, God reminded the Israelites of His blessing and provision as long as they did not neglect their faith, and also told them of the Messiah to come.

"Therefore thus says the LORD: 'I am returning to Jerusalem with mercy; My house shall be built in it,' says the LORD of hosts, 'And a surveyor's line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem.' Again proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: "My cities shall again spread out through prosperity; the LORD will again comfort Zion, and will again choose Jerusalem." ' " (Zech 1:16–17)

After the Israelites' return from exile, God persistently reminded them of His presence and His care. However, those who returned faced the same struggles as the previous generations. While eager at first to rebuild the temple and the city walls, upon returning to Jerusalem, they neglected God's work and pursued their own needs. Haggai reminded them that it was God who allowed them to return, and who would provide for them—on the condition that they put Him first in their lives.

Zechariah also offered messages regarding the rebuilding of God's kingdom and the coming Messiah. He told them, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'If you will walk in My ways, and if you will keep My command, then you shall also judge My house, and likewise have charge of My courts; I will give you places to walk among these who stand here' " (Zech 3:7). His messages gave hope to the people that God would help them, so, encouraged, they resumed work on the temple.

Unfortunately, their zeal was once again relatively short-lived. During Malachi's time, the temple had been rebuilt and offerings reinstated, but the faith of the people declined. Priests had grown tired of their duties, corruption crept into the system, and the people

offered blemished animals as rote sacrifices rather than offer out of any love or genuine repentance towards God.

2. Messages to the Gentiles¹

God's calls to repentance were not limited to His chosen people but were also for Gentiles of all nations so that they too might have a chance to be saved.

"Your injury has no healing, your wound is severe. All who hear news of you will clap their hands over you, for upon whom has not your wickedness passed continually?" (Nah 3:19)

God's messages were not limited to the Israelites. Daniel had visions which famously foretold the rise and fall of Gentile nations, while Jonah and Nahum were both sent to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to declare God's words. While the Ninevites listened to Jonah, the generation of Nahum's time ignored his warnings and, as a result, experienced the downfall of the city. God also spoke warnings to foreign rulers through Daniel, and each witnessed His words clearly come to pass. The Lord's power does not stop at the Israelites; it extends to all nations, and His righteous judgment is something that all will experience, not just those who believe in Him. But God is merciful—although they were not His chosen people, He still gave these nations a chance to return to Him, through the messages of His prophets.

3. Messages to Future Generations

God also desires our repentance and return, and He has promised His blessing, protection, and salvation to His followers today.

"Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it." (Mic 4:1)

Prophecies in the Bible at times took place immediately, or days later, while other prophecies did not come to pass until many years later. However, no matter how much time they took to fulfill, we know all of them to be true. God's will carried over from generation to generation, and our own is no different. Through the prophets, we can see the shadow of the Savior and the new kingdom that God promised to His people.

Jeremiah wrote of God, "Great is Your faithfulness" (Lam 3:23). He continued by writing, "It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (v. 26). The prophets' messages give us insight into God's will, assurance of His power and faithfulness, and hope for His blessings. In this way, the messages conveyed so long ago for the Israelites and Gentiles in the Old Testament are also messages for us. This includes not only the prophecies of the apostolic church and the church today, but also of our future salvation and the blessings that God promised to those who return to Him. As Joshua told the Israelites, "And you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spoke concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one word of them has failed" (Josh 23:14).

¹ <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/introducing-the-assyrians/>

Check for Understanding

- 1. Although the prophets' messages vary greatly, what ultimate purpose did they all serve?** To call people back to God.
- 2. What are the duties and qualifications of God's prophets? Briefly explain each.**
 - a. Chosen by God: First and foremost, the prophets were those men and women chosen by God to serve Him.
 - b. Purposed in their hearts: His commands varied greatly, but regardless of how difficult they were, the prophets made the determination to follow God's will.
 - c. Faithful to God's message: No matter what the message was, the prophets had to faithfully speak the words of God.
- 3. What was the prophets' pre-exilic message?** The Israelites had fallen away from God's laws regarding justice and righteousness, so God frequently warned them of the punishment to come should they fail to repent and return. Although the prophets gave frequent messages of warning and admonition, they also gave hopeful messages of their return after captivity.
- 4. Why did God also send His prophets to foreign nations?** God's calls to repentance were not limited to His chosen people but were also for Gentiles of all nations so that they too might have a chance to be saved. His power does not stop at the Israelites; it extends to all nations. Moreover, His righteous judgment is something that all will experience, not just those who believe in Him.
- 5. What teachings do the prophets' messages have for us today?** God also desires our repentance and return, and He has promised His blessing, protection, and salvation to His followers today. The prophets' messages give us insight into God's will, assurance of His power and faithfulness, and hope for His blessings.

Life Application

Qualities of God's Workers

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be a prophet for God in the Old Testament? While God certainly empowered His prophets to do His will, it is still not easy to be a worker for God. What qualities do you think were necessary for each prophet to face the situations that they faced? Let's take some time to focus on what it must have been like to be a prophet in the Old Testament.

Activity: Putting Ourselves in a Prophet's Shoes

(Teachers: Depending on your class size and preference, you can choose one of the activities below or split the class into groups and allow them to choose one. The overall objective is to help the students to imagine what it would have been like to be a prophet in the Old Testament, and to help them understand the purpose and resolution that are needed to serve God.)

Below is a list of events that different prophets experienced while working for God. Pick one that interests you, and then proceed to your chosen activity.

Prophet	Event	Verse Reference
Daniel	Is thrown into a den of lions	Daniel 6:1–23
Daniel	Chooses not to eat the king's food	Daniel 1:3–21
Jonah	Runs from God and is swallowed by a great fish	Jonah 1:1–17
Isaiah	Is called to be a prophet, lips are cleansed with a live coal	Isaiah 6:1–8
Jeremiah	Is thrown into a well for speaking God's words	Jeremiah 38:1–13
Haggai	Calls the people to build the house of the Lord	Haggai 1:12–15

Option A: Letter

What was it like to be a prophet during the Old Testament times? If you were to write a letter to the prophet involved, what would you say? Would you ask them for advice, or give them encouragement? Write a letter to your chosen prophet about the event that interested you. If you're not sure what to write, try thinking about the following:

- How did the prophet feel while enduring the situation?
- What kind of physical hardship did the prophet have to endure?
- What qualities or characteristics do you think helped the prophet?
- How did the prophet develop the level of faith needed to face this situation?
- How would you have reacted if you were in the same situation?

Option B: Interview

If you were to interview one of the prophets, what questions would you ask them? What would you like to know about the situation that they faced? What kinds of answers do you think they would give in response? Working in groups or as a class, put together an interview. Imagine you are doing a live interview on your local news channel!

1. Pick out the event you would like to "interview" your chosen prophet about (see previous chart).
2. Put together a series of questions that you would like to ask them regarding this event. Consider questions that you would see in a regular interview, such as: how the prophet felt about the situation; what they were thinking at the time; how they endured; what kind of qualities they think were necessary to overcome the situation; what advice they would give to others facing similar situations; etc.
3. Once you've compiled your questions, use your imagination! How would the prophet answer these questions? Write down what you think they would say in response.
4. Share your "interview" with the class. If you're in a group, you can try roleplaying it! Designate one or two people as the interviewer, and one person as the interviewee.

If we were to imagine it, being a prophet during the Old Testament times was not an easy task at all. Prophets not only had to give up their personal lives for God's work, but they also faced great persecution and suffering. How did they serve God in such difficult times? After today's activity, how would you summarize the key qualities of God's prophets?

God's workers were very different people with varied backgrounds, but all of them persevered in the face of hardship and continued serving God throughout their lives because of their determination. They resolved to serve God by setting aside their own desires, humbly listening to God's word, and faithfully repeating His message. This same purpose and resolution are needed of His workers today.

Memory Verse

"And He said to me, 'Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you.' Then the Spirit entered me when He spoke to me, and set me on my feet; and I heard Him who spoke to me." (Ezekiel 2:1-2)

Meaning

God gave different commands to His prophets, but all of them had similar duties: to "stand" and to "hear" God's words. However, God did not leave His workers unassisted. Ezekiel had to take the responsibility to stand on his feet, but God also helped him to perform his responsibilities with the power of the Spirit. In much the same way, today, God expects us to rise to the occasion and perform

our duties as His children—by standing up for Him, and by listening to His word—but He will not leave us to do this on our own power. When we rely on Him, He will assist us with His Spirit, just as He did for the prophets of the Old Testament. We simply need to resolve to heed His commands.

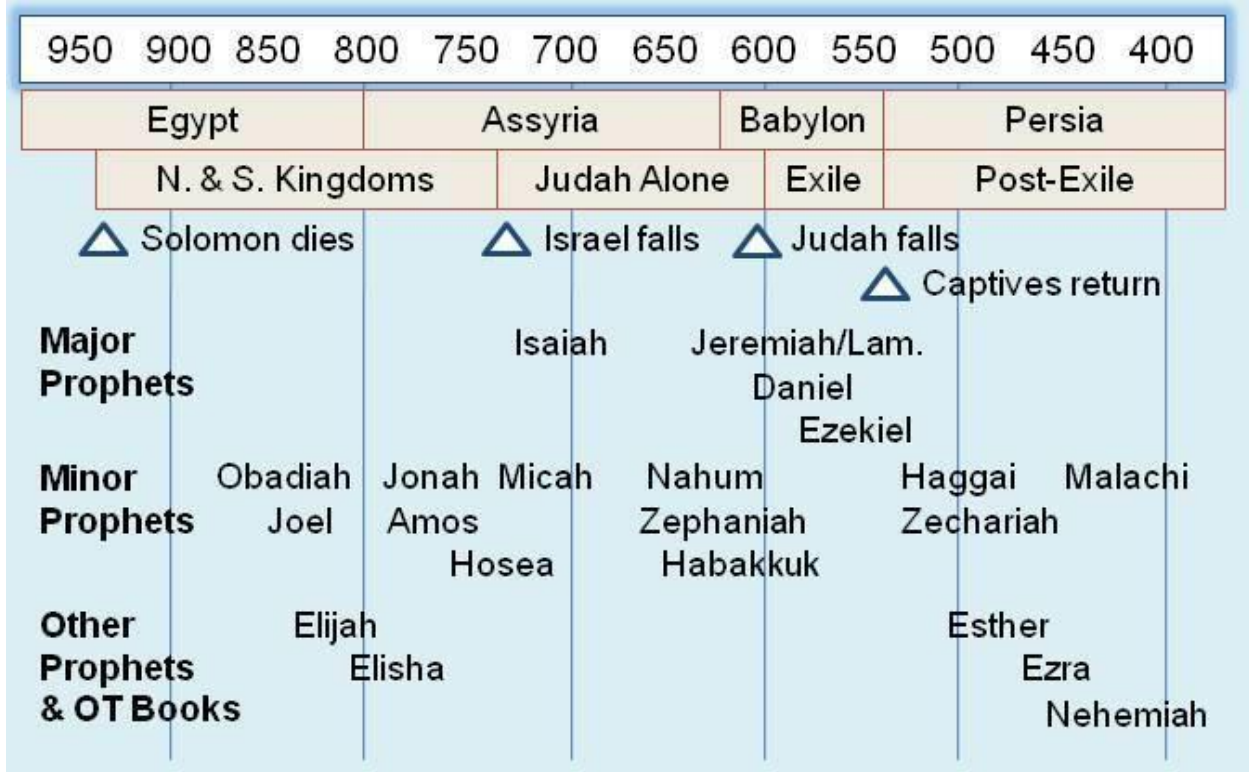
Conclusion

The prophets existed in different eras, and their works differ greatly in style, oratory form, and message. However, all of their messages share common themes: calls to repentance and reminders of God's faithfulness and righteousness. Ultimately, they all serve a similar purpose: to call people back to God.

Lesson 7 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. What important actions did the prophets have to do according to the memory verse?
They were to take the responsibility to “stand” and to “hear” God’s word.
2. What are the duties and qualifications of God’s prophets? Briefly explain each.
 - a. *Chosen by God: First and foremost, the prophets were those men and women chosen by God to serve Him.*
 - b. *Purposed in their hearts: His commands varied greatly, but regardless of how difficult they were, the prophets made the determination to follow God’s will.*
 - c. *Faithful to God’s message: No matter what the message was, the prophets had to faithfully speak the words of God.*
3. What teachings do the prophets’ messages have for us today?
God also desires our repentance and return, and He has promised His blessing, protection, and salvation to His followers today. The prophets’ messages give us insight into God’s will, assurance of His power and faithfulness, and hope for His blessings.
4. Pick one quality or characteristic of the prophets that you would like to emulate. Explain why you picked this particular one.
Personal answers.

Figure 01: Timeline Overview of the Prophets²



² Bible Questions, *A Survey of the Prophets - Introduction*, 2021, <https://www.biblequestions.org/bqar410.html>.