

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETICAL BOOKS

### I. Introduction

From the time of Moses, who was himself a prophet (Deut 18), God provided prophets to reveal His character and His Word to His covenant people, and to direct them to live in accordance with His will and Word. The prophets attempted to effect faith and commitment in the hearts of their rebellious readers. Faith was essential to enable the nation to fulfill their divine mandate—to live in the promised land of Canaan as “a holy nation, a kingdom of priests,” serving as priest (mediators between men and God) by making God known to the surrounding Gentile nations.

### II. The Chronological Ministry of the Prophets

The prophetic books describe the ministry of various prophets over a period of time ranging from the eighth century, about 860 B.C. (Jonah, Amos and Hosea) to the fifth, 420 B.C. (Malachi). The prophets were prominent through three chronological periods of Israel’s history, that is, the monarchy (preexilic), the exile (exilic), and the return from exile (postexilic).

### III. Arrangement of the Prophetic Books

#### A. Arrangement in the Hebrew Bible.

The Prophetic books are found in the second major division of the Hebrew Bible and consists of the *Former Prophets* and the ***Latter Prophets***. The *Former Prophets* are actually the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These books chronicle God’s dealings with His Theocratic nation (Israel) from the time of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua to the Babylonian captivity; and thus provide a continuous witness concerning the temporary moral, spiritual, and political situation of Israel and Judah, as well as a prophetic testimony concerning the future of God’s people, the Gentile nations, and the messianic kingdom.<sup>1</sup> ***The Latter Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, [Daniel], and the twelve Minor Prophets.***

#### B. Arrangement in the English Bible.

The English Bibles have grouped the Prophetic books into a collection of seven-teen (17) books from Isaiah through Malachi. Theses books were written by sixteen different prophets, attributing Lamentations to Jeremiah. The books are classified as either “Major” or “Minor” based on the books’ relative length. There are 5 Major Prophets and 12 Minor Prophets.

a. The 5 major prophets are Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah (Lamentations), and [Daniel].

b. The 12 minor prophets are seen in the following chart:

#### **Twelve Minor Prophets<sup>2</sup>**



<sup>1</sup>Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 135.

<sup>2</sup>The Twelve Minor Prophets were originally recorded on one single scroll in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Hosea	Jonah	Zephaniah
Joel	Micah	Haggai
Amos	Nahum	Zechariah
Obadiah	Habakkuk	Malachi

#### IV. Characteristics of a Prophet

##### A. Meaning of the Term “Prophet”

1. The most common Hebrew term for prophet in the Old Testament is *nabhi*, “prophet” (used over 300 times). The root meaning behind this title refers to one who has been called or appointed by God to proclaim the message of God Himself, “Thus saith the Lord” (Exod 7:12).<sup>3</sup> The word *nabhi* stressed the *objective* or *active work* of the prophet as the duly commissioned messenger of the Lord, dispatched to speak forth God’s Word.<sup>4</sup>
2. Two other Hebrew terms similar to *nabhi*, “prophet,” are *roeh* and *hozeh*, both translated “seer.” According to 1 Samuel 9:9 the offices of prophet and seer were substantially identical:

Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he used to say, ‘Come, and let us go to the *seer*’; for he who is called a *prophet* now was formerly called a *seer*. (*italics mine*)

A seer was one who perceived things, communications from God, that are not in the realm of natural sight and hearing; whether in oral, visual (dreams [in a state of sleep] and visions [while awake]), or written form. The words *roeh* and *hozeh* emphasized the *subjective* element, that is the prophets mode of receiving God’s divine revelation, by “seeing” (seer).<sup>5</sup>

##### B. The Two Basic Types of Prophets

1. *Non-writing or oral prophets*—such as, Nathan, Ahijah, Iddo, Jehu, Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 16:29–17:8), Obed, Shemaiah, Azariah, Hanani, Jahaziel, and Huldah.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>There is no consensus among scholars as to the precise derivation of *nabhi*, however, it seems best to follow *BDB* that defines the Old Testament *nabhi* “as a speaker, a mouthpiece or a spokesman for God” (*A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2d ed., rev., 612). For a lengthy treatment of the various views refer to the excellent discussion by Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 37–40.

<sup>4</sup>Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 40.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru The Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 185.

2. *Writing prophets*—the collection of seventeen prophetic books commencing with Isaiah and running through Malachi (according to the English Bibles).

## V. Foundation of the Prophets Message (Deut 28–30)

- A. *A message of judgment.* In a very real sense, the message of the prophets can be viewed as being established on the “blessing and cursing” texts of the Mosaic Covenant (Exod 19–24; Lev 26; and Deut 4; 28–30). Rejection of God’s prophetic admonishments to repent would result in certain horrifying judgment and captivity, a theme first mentioned in Exodus 32:30-34 (cf. Deut 29–30).
- B. *A message of hope.* The prophets also delivered a message of hope which looked forward to the nation of Israel’s ultimate restoration to be brought about by God’s messianic King, the Son of David/Son of God, Jesus Christ (Jer 30:3, 9-10, 21; 31–33; Ezek 20:33-44; 36–37; Dan 7:13-14; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:12; Isa 49:9-11).

## VI. The Key to Discerning the True Prophetic “Word of the Lord”

The key to discerning the true prophetic Word from God, from that of the many false prophets (*past and present*), was that the Word delivered by God’s prophet always came to pass precisely as spoken by God to His prophet (Deut 13:1-3; 18:20-22).

## VII. The Prophets As Covenant Enforcement Mediators<sup>7</sup>

### A. Definition of the Covenant Lawsuit (“*rib*” in Hebrew)

One additional aspect concerning many of the prophet’s ministries, especially those of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. concerns their use of the imagery of a lawsuit to rebuke Israel and Judah for sin. God is in effect “taking these nations to court” for breach of covenant or contract because they have violated the terms of the Mosaic Covenant which He had entered into with them.

### B. Basis (Origin) of the Covenant Lawsuit<sup>8</sup>

The covenant lawsuit is based upon the Mosaic Covenant that God had made with Israel at Mount Sinai when He brought them out of bondage from Egypt (Exod 14–24). More specifically, it looks back to the Book of Deuteronomy

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<sup>7</sup>For additional insights into the “Covenant Lawsuit” see Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 167-69; J. Carl Laney, “The Role of the Prophets in God’s Case Against Israel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (October-December 1981):313-25.

<sup>8</sup>See the diagram “The Pentateuch and the Prophets” on the following page which depicts the foundation of the prophet’s “Covenant Enforcement Document” adapted from Charles H. Dyer, “Micah” (unpublished class notes for course #304 Old Testament Prophets, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1996).

which is structured on the basis of an ancient Near Eastern Suzerainty Treaty. Yahweh, the LORD, made a “covenant” or “treaty” with His vassal Israel, and that treaty contained a list of blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience. The kinds of blessings that were promised to Israel for obedience to God’s covenant are recorded primarily in Leviticus 26:1-13; Deuteronomy 4:32-40; and 28:1-14. In contrast to the blessings, Israel is warned of curses (punishments) that will result from disobedience to, or better, violations of God’s Law. These curses are recorded especially in Leviticus 26:14-39; Deuteronomy 4:15-28; and 28:15-68. The blessing/cursing texts are always *corporate*, referring to the nation of Israel as a whole, and not meant for *specific* individuals.

God commissioned the prophets to serve as “covenant enforcement agents”<sup>9</sup> in order to show His wayward people that while He had faithfully kept His obligations to the covenant, they, Israel and Judah had not. Thus God is completely just in bringing His threatened curses on His disobedient people.

### C. Structure of the Covenant Lawsuit —“*rib Oracle*”

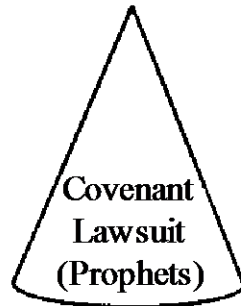
The covenant lawsuit follows a general pattern (**turn to Hosea 4:1**):

1. an identification of Israel’s sin or God’s love for her as His elect people;
2. a prediction of curses or blessings depending on the particular circumstances;
3. a promise of Israel’s future restoration and blessing when Messiah comes as the mighty Warrior-King to defeat the enemies of God and establish His Kingdom in Jerusalem.

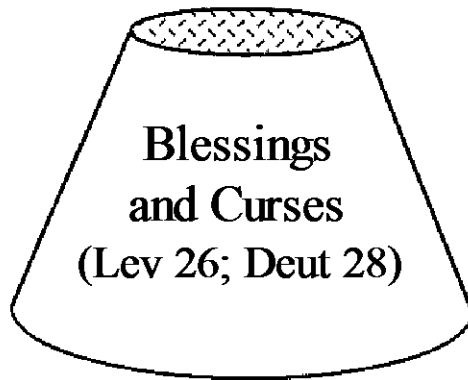
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<sup>9</sup>Fee and Stewart

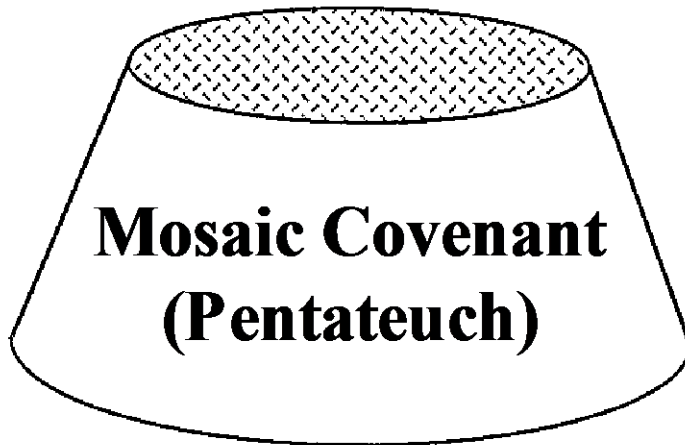
# The Pentateuch & The Prophets



**Basis for God's  
Condemnation  
of Israel**



**Basis for God's  
Response to  
Israel**



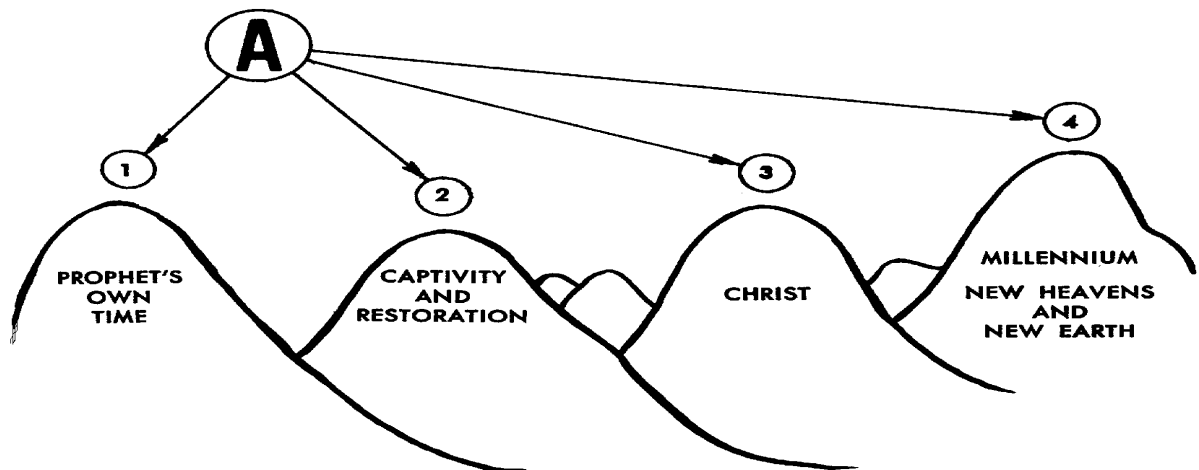
**Basis for Israel's  
Relationship  
with God**

## VIII. Prophets Were Both “Forthtellers” and “Foretellers” of God’s Revelations

- A. **Forthtellers**—disclosed God’s Word for the immediate historical context (i.e., Moses to Pharaoh, Passover, Red Sea Crossing, Jordan Crossing and capture of Jericho, Samuel’s appointment of Saul and David, etc.).
- B. **Foretellers**—disclosed God’s plans for the distant future (2 Sam 7:19; Isa 7:14; 9:6-9; 53). A great deal of prophecy is “Eschatological”—predictive of future events (i.e., Daniel recorded specific detail about the 4 great Gentile world empires and their ultimate demise in chapters 2 and 7).

## IX. Prophetic Perspective

The Prophets often viewed futuristic prophecies containing more than one referent as a single event. For example, the Prophets viewed the first and second comings of Christ as a single event. The first coming details Christ as the “Sacrificial Lamb of God” who takes away the sins of the world (Isa 53 and John 1:18); other Scriptures portray Christ as the “Conquering Warrior King” who will come to execute judgment upon the enemies of God, the majority of mankind (Dan 7; Zech 14; Matt 24:29-31; 25:31-46; Rev 19). The diagram depicts the “Four Points in Prophetic History”<sup>10</sup>



## X. Classification of the Hebrew Prophets<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Adapted from Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen Survey of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 325.

<sup>11</sup>This chart has been adapted from Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 136.

### The Hebrew Prophets May be Classified in Several Ways

1. *According to the recipient of the prophetic message:*
  - a. **to Israel:** Hosea, Amos
  - b. **to Judah:** Joel, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
  - c. **to Nineveh:** Jonah, Nahum
  - d. **to Babylon:** Daniel
  - e. **to the Exiles:** Ezekiel
  - f. **to Edom:** Obadiah
2. *According to the Hebrew text:*
  - a. Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel
  - b. Minor Prophets: The Twelve, in the following order:  
Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi (Lamentations and Daniel are put in the Hagiographa, or Writings)
3. *According to the Septuagint (LXX):*
  - a. Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah (Lamentations), Ezekiel, Daniel
  - b. Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi (this arrangement is that followed by the English translations)
4. *According to chronological periods:*
  - a. Preexilic: Obadiah, Joel, Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk
  - b. Exilic: Daniel, Ezekiel
  - c. Postexilic: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
5. *According to the periods of Gentile world power:*
  - a. Assyrian period: Obadiah, Joel, Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum
  - b. Babylonian period: Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel, Ezekiel
  - c. Persian period: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
6. *According to the dates of the prophets themselves* (suggested date of the approximate beginning of each prophet's ministry); see next chart.

## XI. Chronological Overview of the Prophets and Their Message<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>**Note:** The prophets Obadiah and Joel are generally (traditionally) placed very early, 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. even though the books themselves provide no background information that would support this dating or placement.

The Prophets and Their Message			
Book	Date	Kingdom (N) or (S)	Message
<b>Pre-Exilic Prophets</b>			
Obadiah	840/586	Southern	Judgment on Edom
Joel	830/600	Southern	“Day of the Lord” & Judgment on nations
Jonah	760	Goes to Ninevah	Nineveh Repents = “Salvation of Gentiles”
Amos	760-750	Northern	Persistent sin will bring Divine punishment
Hosea	760-720	Northern	God loves Israel & Redeemes Her
Isaiah	740-681	Southern	Coming Saviour & King of Israel = Messiah
Micah	735-700	Southern	Doom of Judah followed by Deliverance
Nahum	620	Southern	Doom & Destruction of Nineveh
Zephaniah	627	Southern	Judgment on Judah & Rescue of Remnant
Jeremiah	627-586	Southern/Egypt	Jerusalem's Judgment & Glory to Come
Habakkuk	607	Southern	The Just Shall Live by Faith
Lamentation	586	Jerusalem Destroyed	Mourning Destruct. of Jerusalem & Temple
<b>Exilic Prophets</b>			
Daniel	605-535	Babylon Prophet to Palace	Times of the Gentiles & Israel's Coming King
Ezekiel	597-570	Babylon Prophet to People	Future Restoration of Nation, Land & Temple
<b>Post-Exilic Prophets</b>			
Haggai	520	Jerusalem	Restoration of the Temple Begun
Zechariah	520	Jerusalem	Hope in the Future Return of Messiah
Malachi	444-425	Jerusalem	God challenges & Charges People to Finish Rebuilding His Temple
<p>605 ————— <b>Seventy-Year Captivity</b> —————&gt; 536</p> <p>Cyrus in 538 Issues an Edict Allowing Jews to Return to Rebuild Temple</p> <p>536 Temple Started                      520 Temple Resumed                      516 Temple Finished</p> <p>Ezra 458 - 444    Nehemiah 444-415</p>			