THE EQUIP INSTITUTE
Theme: Christian Story
Topic: OT Survey – The Prophetic Books
Fall 2026

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and his Word for the sake of living rightly before God in his world. Our theme for this fall is Christian Story. This session is an introduction to the OT prophetic books.

An Introduction to the Prophets

Prophets were common in the Ancient Near East. Pagan prophets claimed to speak on behalf of either divine powers or earthly rulers (or sometimes both, since many pagan rulers were considered divine). Israel also had prophets, though they were called by Yahweh and spoke exclusively on His behalf.

The most common Hebrew word for "prophet" (*nabi* = "one called by God") occurs over 300 times in the OT. Prophecy can be defined as inspired proclamation of the Lord's message. Sometimes, individuals prophesied at key moments when the Holy Spirit came upon them. This included Moses, Deborah, Saul, and David. Others were called to an ongoing prophetic office. These included Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and the men whose names are attached to the various prophetic books.

The role of prophets varied at different times in Israel's history. Before the establishment of the Jewish monarchy with Saul, prophets spoke primarily to the people of Israel and sometimes served as judges who led the people. With the advent of the monarchy, prophets spoke primarily to the royal court, serving as trusted advisors or religious critics, depending upon the faithfulness of the king or queen. Following the respective falls of Israel and Judah, prophets spoke primarily to the people of God, calling for covenant renewal, rebuking injustice, and promising the restoration of Israel.

We often identify prophets with *foretelling* because they would frequently speak about the future. However, it is best to identify prophets primarily with *forthtelling* because most prophetic utterances in the OT have to do more with Israel's present at the time of the original

hearing and writing rather than the future. Even when predicting the future, the prophets were always reminding Israel of God's promises and calling them to embrace covenant faithfulness.

While prediction was not the most common form of prophecy, it certainly played an important role for Israel. When prophets predicted near events accurately, the fulfillment validated to the original hearers that the prophets spoke on behalf of God. When the prophets predicted later events, especially about the Messiah, the fulfillment validated God's promises for first-century Jews who believed in Jesus. Though some prophets have also predicted much later events that have still not been fulfilled, we can trust that God will keep those promises as well (even if He keeps them in ways we might not anticipate).

Major and Minor Prophets

The prophetic writings are divided into two groups. The Major Prophets include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. They are not "major" because they are more important, but because they are longer. Each of the Major Prophets is a standalone work. The poetic book of Lamentations is adjacent to the Major Prophets because Jeremiah probably wrote it, and it speaks prophetically about the fall of Jerusalem.

The Minor Prophets is a collection of twelve shorter prophetic writings. Unlike the Major Prophets, Jews have always considered the Minor Prophets to be a single literary unit, even though each book has a different author, because of the common themes that run throughout the books. For this reason, Jews continue to refer to the Minor Prophets as the Book of the Twelve. Christians also recognize the overall unity of the Minor Prophets, though we also tend to emphasize the uniqueness of each individual book a bit more than our Jewish friends. The Minor Prophets include the books of Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Authorship, Dating, and Provenance

Traditionally, both Jewish and Christian scholars have argued that each of the prophetic books was authored by the respective prophets to whom those books were attached. It is possible that in some cases it was someone in a prophet's inner circle who recorded the words of the

prophet and compiled them into the book shortly thereafter. Either way, the result is the same: the prophetic writings are the inspired words of the prophets whom God set apart for that task.

Since the 19th century, it has been common for critical scholars to question the traditional authorship of the books. The most famous cases are Isaiah and Daniel. Most critical scholars believe that two or even three different individuals wrote Isaiah, and two individuals wrote Daniel, because these books accurately record details that happened hundreds of years after the times of those prophets. However, this theory reflects more about the presuppositions of those scholars than it does the prophets themselves. There is no compelling reason to believe anything more than minor editing took place for any of the prophets, none of which has been demonstrated to include significant changes that affect the meaning of the earlier manuscripts.

The prophetic books were all written between 780 and 420 BC. This covers the period just prior to the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to Assyria in 722 and the exile of the Southern Kingdom of Judah to Babylon in 586, as well as the return of Judah to their homeland during the Persian Empire beginning in 538. Nearly all the dates related to the prophets can be verified independently because of the records of when various kings ruled and when certain historical events took place.

The earliest *preexilic* prophets ministered in either Israel or Judah before the respective falls of those kingdoms. Pre-exilic prophets who ministered in Israel include Amos and Hosea, both of whom were active in the mid-to-early 700s. Pre-exilic prophets who ministered in Judah include Isaiah (mid-to-early 700s), Micah (early 700s to mid 600s), Nahum (early 600s), Jeremiah (early 600s to late 500s), Zephaniah (early 600s to late 500s), Habakkuk (turn of the 6th century), and Jonah (mid 500s).

Exilic prophets ministered to Judah during her exile. Exilic prophets include Obadiah and Ezekiel, both of whom wrote in the early days of the Babylonian exile in the late 500s, and Daniel, who wrote in the early 500s during the Persian period.

The *postexilic* prophets ministered in Judah after the return from Babylon. Post-exilic prophets include Haggai (early 500s), Zechariah (early 500s), Joel (early 400s), and

Malachi (early 400s). Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries of Ezra and Nehemiah, while Joel and Malachi were probably the last books written in the OT.

Categories of Prophecy

Category	Description	Preexilic Emphasis	Postexilic Emphasis
Indictment	Statement of offense	Focus primarily on idolatry, ritualism, and social justice	Focus on not giving proper honor to the Lord
Judgment	Punishment to be carried out	Primarily political and projected for the near future	Interprets recent or current crises as divine punishment
Instruction	Expected response	General call to return to God by ending wicked conduct	Specific instructions addressed to specific situations
Encouragement	Affirmation of future hope or deliverance	Will come after an intervening period of judgment	Will come after a protracted period of time

Unifying Themes in the Prophetic Books

The prophets claim that God has spoken through them, normally with the pattern "Thus says the Lord." Sometimes God "speaks" through the prophets through symbolic actions and not just words.

The prophets remind Israel that God chose them to be in a special covenant relationship with Him, which calls for them to be a holy kingdom of priests who are a light to the Gentile nations.

The prophets report that the vast majority of Israel is unfaithful to God's covenant, as evidenced by Torah-breaking, hypocritical ritualism, idolatry, and social injustice.

The prophets report that there is a remnant in Israel that remains faithful to God's covenant, as evidenced by authentic worship and obedience to Torah.

The prophets warn that Israel as a whole faces judgment because of sin. Sometimes judgment is near (e.g. exile) while other times judgment is in the future (e.g. the Day of the Lord).

The prophets promise that on the other side of judgment there will be salvation, through a coming Messiah, who will initiate a new covenant that will include both Jews and Gentiles, who will rule all nations, and who will ultimately renew the entire earth.

Messianic Prophecies in the Prophets

Text	Prophecy
Isaiah 7:14	The Messiah will be born of a virgin
Isaiah 9:1–2	The Messiah will be from Galilee and would be a light for God's people
Isaiah 9:6–7	The Messiah will be divine, wise, mighty ruler
Isaiah 11:1; Isaiah 53:3	The Messiah will be called a Nazarene
Isaiah 35:5–6	The Messiah will perform healing
Isaiah 40:3–5; Malachi 4:5–6	The Messiah will be preceded by a forerunner
Isaiah 42:1–7	The Messiah will be a light to the gentile nations
Isaiah 52:13–53:12	The Messiah will suffer and die for the sins of the people, yet will somehow also live to see the fruit of his suffering and death and intercede for the people
Isaiah 61:1–2	The Messiah will preach good news to the poor and captives

Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 36:22–32	The Messiah will bring about a new covenant
Daniel 7:13–14	The Messiah will be the Son of Man
Daniel 9:24–27	The Messiah will come 490 years after the end of the Babylonian Exile
Hosea 11:1	The Messiah will be called out of Egypt
Micah 5:2	The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem
Zechariah 9:9	The Messiah will enter Jerusalem on a donkey
Zechariah 11:12–13	The Messiah will be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver

Recommended Resources

Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences: A Small Introduction to a Vast Topic* (InterVarsity, 2019).

Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Zondervan, 2000).

Eugene H. Merrill, Mark Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (B&H Academic, 2011).

Peter Gentry, "Introduction to the Major Prophets," in *The Gospel Coalition Commentary on the Bible*, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/introduction-to-the-major-prophets/.

Richard Alan Fuhr, "Introduction to the Minor Prophets," in *The Gospel Coalition Commentary on the Bible*, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/minor-prophets/.