

The Bible in a Nutshell: The Prophets

In the Old Testament, there are books of prophecy. There are five Major Prophets, and twelve Minor Prophets. The term “Major” and “Minor” do not refer to their importance, but rather to the length of their books.

The major books of prophecy are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Lamentations. The first four are named for their authors, and Lamentations is written by Jeremiah. All five books need to be understood in the context of the history of Judah and Israel. Isaiah is the longest and the oldest; his prophecy starts when times were still fairly good for Israel and Judah. There were threats from the foreign nations of Babylon, Assyria and Egypt, but they were still free and independent. However, Isaiah warns them of all of the problems facing their society. Isaiah is concerned that Israel and Judah are turning away from God. He praises Hezekiah’s reforms, but knows their actions, and their refusal to trust God, will lead to their destruction. In his lengthy book, he prophesies the destruction of Israel and Judah, the scattering of their people, and their eventual return.



Jeremiah, too, lived in Judah at the time prior to its destruction. Jeremiah lived through the destruction of Judah, and saw the horrifying toll that the siege took upon its people, and the terrible devastation Nebuchadnezzar wrought upon the country. Jeremiah thoroughly rips into the nation that has endorsed lies and deceit, and has turned away from God. His angry prophecy denounces the path Israel and Judah has taken—not just its government and leaders, but its people, as well. His prophecy is full of the wrath of God turned loose on a disobedient people. For all of his anger, he still cannot help but be horrified by the destruction of Jerusalem, its temple and its people. But he does speak of their eventual return to Jerusalem.



Lamentations was written by Jeremiah in response to the destruction of Jerusalem. It is a full account of the horrors of the siege and the death of many thousands in its walls, and watching their entire way of life be destroyed. The few remaining people are sent into slavery.

Ezekiel writes his book from within Babylonian slavery. The Israelites had been scattered throughout the entire empire, a strategy meant to destroy their identity as a people. Ezekiel writes his prophecy in strong allegorical images; his book is full of strange and wondrous signs and visions. In essence, he sees the Israelites holding together their religion by having it travel with them wherever they are, not just at the temple in Jerusalem. His wording is extreme and fantastical, and there is nothing else quite like it in the Bible. Much of his fantastical imagery was meant to mask the true meaning behind the words—it was not safe to speak openly while slaves in the Babylonian Empire.

Daniel was an Israelite slave in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. His gift of interpreting dreams and strong, honest character won the favor of the king, and also protection for himself and also for his people. That favor eventually allowed the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild with the permission of King Xerxes.

Hosea—Hosea had the dubious honor of having his life used as a living moral object lesson for Israel—instructed by God to marry an unfaithful wife, he spoke movingly and earnestly about God’s sorrow at Israel’s “adulterous affairs” with false gods and His willingness to forgive.

Joel—Joel’s recorded prophecies are short but direct. He described God’s coming judgment as an “invasion of locusts”—a clear and terrifying image for Iron Age Israelite society. However, Joel is best known for predicting the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit which would occur hundreds of years later at Pentecost, as described in Acts 2.

Amos—Amos was a simple shepherd called to deliver a message nobody wanted to hear: Israel had grown complacent, spiritually lazy, and hypocritical. Injustice, in the form of slavery, greed, and mistreatment of the poor, was commonplace. Amos’ criticisms still strike home two thousand years later:

Obadiah—Obadiah consists of just one chapter. Obadiah’s message is quite specific to his time, describing the judgment that awaited the nation of Edom, which had done nothing to help Judah in her hour of need. Edom’s actions would be revisited upon them: their land and wealth would be lost just as Judah’s had been.

Jonah—The most famous of the Minor Prophets, Jonah was famously swallowed by a whale while attempting to flee God’s call. Jonah’s prophetic message is directed not at Israel, but at the sin-choked foreign city of Ninevah—a reminder that God’s love and forgiveness was not limited to one nation or ethnic group. God’s endless compassion could reach even the Assyrians, whose cruelty and military power had made them the terror of the ancient world.

Micah—Micah’s was a familiar message: Israel and Judah had turned away from God to follow false prophets and hypocritical religion, and disaster was coming if they did not repent. Micah tried to remind his audience that what God truly desired from men and women was not religious ritual, but faithful living. What God wanted wasn’t hard to understand:

Nahum—One of the more obscure prophets, Nahum foretold the ruin of the mighty Assyrian empire, which had hauled Judah into slavery and exile. His words were a warning that no city or nation was so powerful as to be beyond the reach of God’s judgment.

Habakkuk—Habakkuk strikes a markedly different tone than many of the other prophets. Instead of preaching judgment, he asked questions—tough questions, like “Why does God allow evil to exist?” and “If God is sovereign, why do wicked people prosper?” He brought these questions to God in prayer and found consolation in God’s strength and power. Habakkuk shows us that ancient believers wrestled with the same difficult questions about sin, evil, and suffering that Christians ask today.

Zephaniah—Prophesying during the reign of king Josiah, Zephaniah warned Judah that if they did not turn away from false religion and pagan practices, God’s judgment would fall on them. But God’s day of judgment is portrayed not just as a day of suffering, but as a time of rejoicing, when God would return to rescue the oppressed and restore the broken. The wicked had cause to fear judgment, but the faithful could look ahead to it with hope.

Haggai—Haggai served as a prophet while a small remnant of Jews, returning from exile, were struggling to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. His message was one of encouragement and hope—God was still with His people, even though they had fallen far from the glorious days of David and Solomon.

Zechariah—Zechariah was a post-exile prophet like Haggai, and also directed his message to the surviving remnant returned from exile in Babylon. Zechariah stands out as an Old Testament messenger who spoke clearly about the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Malachi—Also preaching to the returned exiles, Malachi offered a less happy message: after all they’d been through, God’s people still fell into disobedience. Israel’s priests and leaders were leading their flock astray, and only a faithful few remained who lived in accordance with God’s law. The book of Malachi concludes the Old Testament with a reminder of humanity’s need for a Savior—and a promise that “for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays.”

(Summaries from BibleGateway.com)