

Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures

Session 4: Prophets of Judah

Note: All scripture passages are taken from the New International Version (2011), unless otherwise specified.

Session Outline

1	Defining the Period.....	2
2	Micah	4
2.1	Dates.....	4
2.2	His Call	4
2.3	His Message.....	4
2.4	Role in God's Story	5
3	Isaiah.....	5
3.1	Dates.....	5
3.2	His Call	5
3.3	His Message.....	5
3.4	Visions of the Savior	6
3.5	Predictions about Cyrus	6
3.6	Isaiah and Revelation	6
3.7	Role in God's Story	6
4	Zephaniah	7
4.1	Dates.....	7
4.2	His Call	7
4.3	His Message.....	7
4.4	Role in God's Story	7
5	Nahum	7
5.1	Dates.....	7
5.2	His Call	7
5.3	His Message.....	8
5.4	Role in God's Story	8
6	Habakkuk	8
6.1	Dates.....	8

6.2	His Call	8
6.3	His Message.....	8
6.4	Role in God’s Story	9
7	Jeremiah	9
7.1	Dates.....	9
7.2	His Call	9
7.3	His Message.....	9
7.4	Living Illustrations	10
7.5	Baruch	10
7.6	Role in God’s Story	11
8	Obadiah	11
8.1	Dates.....	11
8.2	His Call	11
8.3	His Message.....	11
8.4	Role in God’s Story	11
9	What’s the Point?	11

1 Defining the Period

In 722 BC, Assyria destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel, deporting many of its inhabitants into other parts of the empire. At this point, the Kingdom of Judah stood alone as a remnant of God’s people, until Babylon destroyed it as well in 587/586 BC. In this session, therefore, we will look at seven prophets who ministered during the 130 years or so between these two crisis events:

- Micah
- Isaiah
- Zephaniah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- Jeremiah
- Obadiah

The following map illustrates the setting during this period:



2 Micah

2.1 Dates

c. 750–686 BC, during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

2.2 His Call

What little we know about Micah comes from the first verse in the book that bears his name:

“The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah....” Micah 1:1

Moresheth was a small frontier located some 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem, bordering on territory dominated by Philistines.

2.3 His Message

The opening words of Micah’s message are directed to the northern Kingdom of Israel shortly before its destruction. Then, his message shifts attention to the southern Kingdom of Judah, urging them to learn from the sins and judgment of their brothers. Ultimately, he works with King Hezekiah to withstand the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem. He communicates God’s promise of a miraculous salvation against overwhelming odds:

“He will deliver us from the Assyrians when they invade our land and march across our borders.” Micah 5:6

At the same time, however, Micah predicts that Jerusalem will in fact fall at some point in the future, because Judah will not heed the Word of the LORD:

“Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.” Micah 3:12; compare Jeremiah 26:17-18, which mentions Micah by name as one who predicts Jerusalem’s destruction.

Despite this predicted judgment, God remains committed to the restoration of his people:

“In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and peoples will stream to it.” Micah 4:1; compare Isaiah 2:1, which uses the same language.

As part of this restoration, Micah makes his well-known prophecy regarding the birthplace of the future deliverer:

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” Micah 5:2, cited in Matthew 2:6

Though these changes, Micah reinforces the idea that God is full of mercy, if His people are simply willing to repent and commit themselves to His ways:

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8

2.4 Role in God’s Story

Micah bridges the transition between the destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel and God’s miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah. These two historic facts demonstrate two separate options for God’s people: Continue to sin and receive judgment, or repent and be saved. Anticipating the large-scale decision to reject God’s ways, judgment is predicted, but so is a future restoration led by this deliverer from Bethlehem after that judgment.

3 Isaiah

3.1 Dates

For a couple centuries now, interpreters have widely differed regarding who wrote the biblical accounts attributed to Isaiah. Many posit the existence of two or more “Isaiah’s,” who ministered over several centuries. The course, however, assumes the traditional point of view, that the book is essentially the work of one person by the name of Isaiah, who served somewhere between 740 and 681 BC. He was a younger contemporary of Micah, and also served during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

3.2 His Call

Isaiah’s call to ministry is well documented and rivals the extensive account of Moses’s call. In that calling, Isaiah experiences a different view of heaven. The cherubim statues that surrounded the altar in the Most Holy Place come to life and descend upon him in a vision, prompting Isaiah to cry out:

“‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’” Isaiah 6:5

One of the creatures takes a hot coal from the altar and (symbolically) cleanses his lips with fire.

Then the call is clear, and Isaiah responds in obedience:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” Isaiah 6:8

Note that, unlike Moses, Isaiah does not question God’s decision to send him.

3.3 His Message

Stretching over 66 chapters, it is not possible to summarize adequately the rich and diverse content of the book. We can only offer an inadequate summary of its major story lines.

On one level, Isaiah develops the same themes found in Micah:

- The judgment of both the northern and southern kingdoms, as signs of God’s sovereignty over the whole earth.
- The justice of this judgment, because of human wickedness and disobedience

- A consistent call to repentance, with the sure and certain promise of God’s mercy and grace.
- God’s eternal commitment to His promises and His people, to restore the people and the land.
- More detailed predictions of the one through whom this deliverance would come.

Isaiah develops each of these themes in great, reflective detail.

3.4 Visions of the Savior

Isaiah is perhaps best known for the many passages cited in the New Testament as predictions about Jesus. Here is a summary list of these predictions:

- Virgin Birth of Jesus, Isaiah 7:14; compare Luke 1:23
- A child from the royal line will inherit the throne; Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 1:32-33
- A Branch will emerge from Jesse; Isaiah 4:2; 11:1-5; Matthew 2:23; Acts 13:23; Revelation 5:5; 22:16
- A messenger will come to prepare the way, Isaiah 40:3-5; Matthew 3:3-6; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23
- A servant will come whom God loves and into whom He pours his spirit, Isaiah 42:1-4; Matthew 12:18-21
- A servant will suffer for his sheep, Isaiah 53, Matthew 8:17; 27:12-14; Luke 22:37; John 1:29; 12:38; Acts 32:33; Romans 4:25; 10:16; 1 Peter 2:24-25
- The Lord’s Servant will speak good news, heal the blind and free prisoners, Isaiah 61:1-2; Matthew 11:5; Luke 4:18-19

3.5 Predictions about Cyrus

One of the most astounding prophecies concerns the coming of someone named “Cyrus,” whom God actually calls His “anointed one” (i.e., “messiah”). Isaiah 45:1; compare 44:28 and 45:13. Traditional interpreters regard this as a reference to Cyrus II, emperor of Persia, who conquered the Babylonians in 539 BC and then granted the people of Judah freedom to return and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. From this traditional perspective, this constitutes a remarkable prediction since Cyrus still lies some 200 years out in the future. This prediction is one of the primary reasons that other interpreters believe that this portion of Isaiah was written later in time, after Cyrus appears on the scene.

3.6 Isaiah and Revelation

The New Testament book of revelation borrows heavily from images and language in Isaiah. Some interpreters count more than 70 or 80 references or allusions.ⁱ Note the following example:

<i>“Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD—with the first of them and with the last—I am he.” Isaiah 41:4</i>	<i>“‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.’” Revelation 1:8</i>
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3.7 Role in God’s Story

Isaiah plays a critical and transitional role in the history of God’s people. More than any other prophet, he provides detail from God’s perspective as to why Israel is experiencing this tumultuous period in its history. So that later generations may better understand His ways, God allows Isaiah to see glimpses of the long-range outcome of their current tragedies.

4 Zephaniah

4.1 Dates

Ministered c. 640-627 BC, during the reign of King Josiah, about 40 years after Micah and Isaiah.

4.2 His Call

Zephaniah was a descendent of Hezekiah, and thus a part of the David's royal line of succession. (Zephaniah 1:1)

4.3 His Message

The book's three chapters focus on the coming "day of the LORD":

"That day will be a day of wrath— a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness— a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers." Zephaniah 1:15

That day will include destruction not only for Judah and Jerusalem, but for surrounding nations as well.

Again, there is a call for repentance:

"Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD's anger."
Zephaniah 3:3

Probably soon after Zephaniah's warnings, Josiah leads a public repentance and return to God; however, his successors soon abandoned these reforms.

Nevertheless, there remains a promise of future deliverance:

"Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder." Zephaniah 3:9

4.4 Role in God's Story

As was true with the northern kingdom of Israel, so also in the case of Judah, the message of the prophets over time start to focus more clearly on the impending judgment that Babylon, as God's agent, will inflict.

5 Nahum

5.1 Dates

Ministers around 612 BC, soon after the ministry of Zephaniah.

5.2 His Call

We know almost nothing about Nahum personally, except that he came from a town called, "Elkosh," but no one is sure where that was.

5.3 His Message

A century earlier, Jonah was called to preach a message of repentance to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Nahum is now called back to that city to proclaim judgment, since they did not remain repentant. In the end, Babylon will destroy their empire along with many other surrounding nations. The way God treats Nineveh is the same way he treats all people:

“The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into the realm of darkness.” Nahum 1:7-8

5.4 Role in God’s Story

As Nahum predicted, Babylon conquers Assyria in 612 BC. Maybe now, God’s own people will listen.

6 Habakkuk

6.1 Dates

This short book gives us no biographical details. References to Cush and Midian in 3:7 may refer to the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC in which Babylon decisively defeated the Egyptian armies. If this is the case, Habakkuk’s can be dated sometime after that battle. At the same time, the book does not refer to the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem that took place that same year (Daniel 1). Given these two parameters, some interpreters therefore place Habakkuk’s ministry in 605 BC, after the Battle of Carchemish but before the siege on Jerusalem. Given the uncertainty of these assumptions, however, other interpreters prefer a somewhat earlier date, around 610 BC.

6.2 His Call

In Habakkuk 1:1, we have only a very brief introduction: *“The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.”*

6.3 His Message

The short book consists of two “complaints” that Habakkuk makes to the Lord, followed by the LORD’s response. The book then concludes with Habakkuk’s prayer, which itself is a response to the LORD’s answers.

- The prophet’s first complaint is that God is allowing too much wickedness in the world and among His people. In response, God assures him that judgment is coming in the form of the Babylonian armies.
- This prompts the second complaint, about why God would allow such an evil nation to be the instrument of God’s judgment. God responds by letting him know that he will also judge the Babylonians in due time.
- Habakkuk’s prayer then confesses faith in God’s ways, even while the judgments fall. Somehow, God will find a way to lead faithful people through the calamity:

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.”
Habakkuk 3:17-19

6.4 Role in God's Story

Before God's justice falls, we hear the prophet express the heart of his faithful people, struggling to understand why He has allowed this devastation to occur. The LORD's responses invite His people to trust both His sovereignty and His faithfulness.

7 Jeremiah

7.1 Dates

Ministers 626-585 BC, during the reigns of five different kings: Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. He is in Judah during the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. He serves chronologically after the ministry of Zephaniah and was a contemporary of Nahum, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, and possibly Obadiah.

7.2 His Call

Jeremiah call into his prophetic ministry is often cited:

"The word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'"
Jeremiah 1:4-5

Like Isaiah before him, he is not sure that he is up for the task. Jeremiah claims that he is too young for the job. Also, echoing the scene in Isaiah, God touches Jeremiah's lips, assuring the prophet he will provide the words to say and the power to back them up. In the first of many occasions, God will require Jeremiah to actively participate in His revelations. He is asked to describe what he sees: an almond branch and a boiling pot, the former to indicate that God is watching to see His will fulfilled, and the latter to foreshadow a coming judgment from the North. (Jeremiah 1:4-14)

7.3 His Message

The book of Jeremiah contains God's most extensive revelation in this important transitional period, just as Isaiah more fully illuminated His ways in his period. Jeremiah predicated and then lived through the terrible judgment of Babylonian Exile that God ordained for His people. Through his ministry, the people hear that:

"This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. 'But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt,' declares the LORD, 'and will make it desolate forever.'" Jeremiah 25:11-12

After the city is captured and the people, exiled, Jeremiah must confirm that this tragedy is indeed a judgment of God that they cannot resist. The prophet says:

"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not

decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Jeremiah 29:4-7

This sort of message obviously brought down the wrath of the King of Judah and other authorities, but God protected the prophet.

Still, hope remained for those who lament and repent. Jeremiah is numbered among them, sometimes called the “Weeping Prophet,” and is traditionally regarded as the author of the Book of Lamentations. This often-quoted promise of God is captured in this context of judgment:

“This is what the LORD says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” Jeremiah 29:10-14.

7.4 Living Illustrations

As noted in the calling section above, Jeremiah is frequently called to experience and model God’s word, as well as speak it. Note the following:ⁱⁱ

- An almond branch and pot of boiling water (ch. 1)
- a ruined and useless belt (13:1–11)
- command not to marry and raise children (16:1–4)
- command not to enter a house where there was a funeral meal or where there was feasting (16:5–9)
- potter’s clay (18:1–10)
- a smashed clay jar (19:1–12)
- two baskets of figs (ch. 24)
- a yoke of straps and crossbars (ch. 27)
- command to buy a field in Anathoth (32:6–15)
- large stones in a brick pavement (43:8–13)

7.5 Baruch

While earlier books refer to records and schools of prophets, Jeremiah provides a unique view into the way his works were collected.

“So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll.” Jeremiah 36:4

Baruch’s name is mentioned some 25 times in the book.

7.6 Role in God's Story

As Isaiah prepared the Kingdom of Israel for judgment, and interpreted this judgment for later generations, Jeremiah fills the same role for the Kingdom of Judah in the judgment of exile it was about to experience. His words of consolation continue to provide comfort to those who are called to live through the judgment, but also provides courage when they seek to bring God's Word to bear within it.

8 Obadiah

8.1 Dates

This shortest book in the Hebrew scriptures, consisting of one chapter, gives very little information as to when it was written. Verses 11-14 refer to invaders of Jerusalem who are carrying off the people's wealth.

- Some interpreters suggest that this refers to Edom's rebellion during the reign of Jehoram, in which case, Obadiah would be contemporary of Elisha. (2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chronicles 21:8-15)
- Others see a reference to the Babylonian sacking of Jerusalem which would make Obadiah a contemporary of Jeremiah. Some point to parallels between the statements of judgment on Edom found in Obadiah 1-6 and Jeremiah 49:9-16.

8.2 His Call

While several "Obadiah's" are mentioned in scripture, none can be identified with the prophet whose book bears his name. We simply are told that this divine word is "the vision of Obadiah." (1)

8.3 His Message

Scripture traces a long feud between the descendants of Esau/Edom and Jacob/Israel. Obadiah pronounces the Lord's judgment on Edom because it is rejoicing over Judah's defeat. God will not tolerate this brotherly hatred. Edom will be judged, and God will keep His promises to Israel:

"Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom will be the LORD's." Obadiah 21

8.4 Role in God's Story

Obadiah continues the theme of God's sovereignty over all nations. A deadly rivalry among brothers began with Cain and Abel and recurs often in the people's story, even to this rivalry between Edom and Israel. As Cain is judged for not being his "brother's keeper," so now Edom will be judged. (See Genesis 4:9-16) The larger point is that none of us are free to discard the path through which God chooses to reveal His Word.

9 What's the Point?

What was not learned in the judgment of Israel should be learned now in the judgment of Judah. A failure to repent and return will bring certain judgment, but our merciful God remains ready to forgive and restore.

ⁱ Jones, D. A. (2009). Old Testament Quotations and Allusions in the New Testament. Logos Bible Software.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Barker, K. L., ed. (2020). NIV Study Bible (Fully Revised Edition, p. 1260). Zondervan.