

### Understanding the Prophets

Heroic visions often race through our minds at the mention of the word *prophets*. But what is a prophet? What is the job description of a prophet? What is unique about their role in Old Testament times? In this lesson we will study the Old Testament prophets in general. We will seek to understand God's purpose in selecting individuals for this sacred office. Our hope is that this introductory study will assist you in understanding the books of the Old Testament prophets.

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word prophet?

One of the most outstanding characteristics of God is that He has revealed Himself—He has spoken. Whenever we open the pages of the Bible, we encounter this exciting phenomenon. The God of the universe is communicating with the people He has created. This personal God is making Himself known through His words and through His works. Sometimes God speaks directly to a particular person, but He often uses a special messenger to relay the message that is to be transmitted from God to man. The prophets were God's messengers, His spokesmen, His mouthpiece, speaking His warnings and predictions and exhortations. They were intermediaries between God and His people.

When we think of a prophet, we often think of someone who tells what is going to happen in the future. The primary task of the Old Testament prophet however, was not to *foretell* future events but to *forthtell* the will of God. The prophets functioned as preachers who expounded and interpreted the Mosaic Law to the nation. The prophet was to teach them how to live and how to bring their lives into conformity with that revelation. They were called upon to admonish, reprove, denounce sin, threaten judgment, call for repentance, and bring consolation and encouragement. Similarly, the prophet provided explanations of why the Israelites were experiencing some of the things they were enduring.

In the process of proclaiming God's message, the prophet would sometimes reveal that which pertained to the future. One of the reasons God provides revelation of future events is to demonstrate that He is the only true God. To be able to predict the future accurately, one must be able to control the future. God's ability to predict future events with one hundred percent accuracy is a great testimony to His unique sovereignty. Predictive prophecy provides us with *evidence* of who God is, so we have a basis for rational faith—not blind faith.

Moreover, God revealed the future so that everyone would appreciate that His plans for humanity are gracious plans, involving redemption from captivity and sin. The revelation of how God would deal with the sin problem came through the greatest of all prophets: the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord. God revealed that he not only had the *ability* to save Israel, but He also had the *desire* to do so.

### A Closer Look

The Hebrew word most frequently used for prophet (*nabi*) means, “*authorized spokesman, or one who speaks forth the message which God has revealed.*”

Just before the death of Moses, we have the formal announcement of the office of the *nabi*, the prophet (Deuteronomy 18:14-22). There had always been prophets in Israel (Genesis 20:7; Jude 14), but Moses was the first prophet of the Law. From Moses through John the Baptist, justice and righteousness were measured by the standard of the Law and by the *covenant* agreement (Deuteronomy 4:32-40; 28:1-14; 28:15-68).

2. Below are several passages that illustrate the meaning of the Hebrew word, *nabi*. **Read and observe**, and give careful attention to all that is being said, checking the context. Note how each passage confirms the meaning of the word prophet. (See definition above.) Write your observations and conclusions next to each reference.

Deuteronomy 18:14-22

Exodus 6:28-7:2

Numbers 12:6-8

1 Samuel 3:19-21

3. The prophets of the Old Testament were sometimes designated by other titles. These titles provide insight into the role and responsibilities of the prophets. Study the scriptures that correspond to each title. Consult a dictionary for word meanings, if necessary. Then write a summary statement of what each title reveals about a prophet.

“seer” – 1 Samuel 9:9; 2 Samuel 24:11; Isaiah 30:10-11

“man of God” – Deuteronomy 33:1; 1 Samuel 9:6; 1 Kings 13:1; 2 Kings 1:9-17, 4:9

“my servants” – Jeremiah 26:4-6, 29:19, 35:15; Ezekiel 38:17; Zechariah 1:6

“watchman” – Ezekiel 3:17; Isaiah 52:8

4. Some of the prophets were chosen, not only to a public-speaking ministry, but also to be the authors of the inspired books of prophecy. Only eternity will reveal how far-reaching that ministry was. *List as many prophetic books as you can by memory.* Refer to the Scriptures to complete your list.

*These prophecies were written over a period of more than four centuries, from about 840 B.C. (Obadiah) to 420 B.C. (Malachi).*

**Of the Old Testament writing prophets, there are four groups:**

- Prophets of the Northern Kingdom (Israel)
- Prophets of Judah
- Prophets of Captivity
- Prophets of the Restoration

The office of a prophet was not hereditary like the priesthood and the monarchy; each one had a personal call from God. The primary object and effect of the call was an introduction into God's presence. The prophet's call was primarily to a knowledge of God. Out of this knowledge sprang the awareness of what God would do as He guided history, according to the unchangeable principles of His holy nature.

5. The following passages contain the accounts of how some of the great prophets were called. Read two or more passages and record what you learn from each account. *Moses* (Exodus 3:1-17); *Samuel* (1 Samuel 3); *Amos* (7:10-15); *Hosea* (1:1-2); *Jeremiah* (1:4-10); *Ezekiel* (1-3).

6. Around what prophetic points in history were the messages of the prophets primarily centered? (Refer to the guidelines for interpreting prophecy.)

“In giving the message to the people the prophets used almost every known method of impressing the truth: **object lessons, dramatic actions, visible representations, visions, parables, history, preaching, warnings, the facts around them, the highest eloquence, the supremest poetry, predictions and miracles.**” (Peloubet's Bible Dictionary)



## Guidelines for Interpreting Predictive Prophecy

The following guidelines provide important parameters that will assist you in accurately handling the prophecies of the Bible. The goal of interpretation is to discover the originally intended meaning of a passage—the way the original audience understood it.

- When a prophet spoke for God, the prophecy could refer to the following:
  - a present or near fulfillment*
  - a future fulfillment*
  - a twofold fulfillment: a near fulfillment and then a later, future fulfillment*
- As you study prophecy, it is important to remember that the prophets did not always indicate intervals of time between events. For example, an Old Testament prophecy could include the first and second comings of Christ without any indication of the time span between them.
- When reading the prophecies of the Bible, keep in mind that the message is centered primarily on five prophetic points in history.
  1. *The Prophet's own time*
  2. *Captivity and restoration*
  3. *The first coming of Christ*
  4. *The second-coming of Christ*
  5. *The new heavens and the new earth*
- Always approach a prophecy as literal (in its usual, ordinary meaning) unless one of the following occurs:
  - the grammatical context shows that it is figurative language by the use of similes, metaphors, parables, allegories, symbols, or types.
  - a literal interpretation violates common sense, is contrary to what the author is saying, or is contrary to what the rest of Scripture teaches.
- When a prophetic passage cannot be taken literally, look for what the author is trying to convey through his figurative or symbolic language. To discern what the author is saying, look for answers in the following places:
  - within the context of the book in which the passage appears
  - in any other writings of that author
  - in any other prophetic writings to which the author had access (for example, other prophetic books or passages in the Word of God).
- Remember, often when a prophet refers to future events, he does not use the future tense.

(Compiled from The New International Inductive Study Bible)