



**CORNERSTONE**  
CORNERSTONECOURSES.ORG

## CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

### UNIT 20: THE PROPHETS

#### TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapters 23 “Isaiah,” 24 “Jeremiah,” and 28-36 “Hosea”-“Zephaniah” in *Discovering the Bible*.

Read chapters 5 “Nathan,” 6 “Isaiah,” and 17 “Huldah” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders* as indicated.

#### BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read the specific texts in 1 and 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles as they are cited in the following material.

#### BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The prophetic books of the Bible represent the central section (the *Nevi'im*) of the Hebrew Scriptures and the final section (“the Prophets”) of the more chronologically organized Old Testament used by Christians. Unfortunately, these prophetic writings are often the least read books of the Old Testament by many Christians. This is due to the unusual and occasionally difficult “symbolic” language found in some of the prophetic books and the perception of many Bible readers that these books are mainly condemnations of those who reject God or warnings against God’s people going astray.

The matter of symbolic language can be easily overcome, and nothing could really be further from the truth that the prophets are primarily condemnatory. In fact, as we will see in this course unit, the prophetic books often contain as much *encouragement* as they do correction, and they are by far the richest source of information about the promised Messiah in the whole Old Testament. However, we need certain background information in order to fully appreciate what the prophetic books can give us.

First, we need some basic terminology. The biblical prophets are sometimes categorized as the “verbal” prophets (those like Elijah and Elisha who delivered their messages orally, but did not leave any written books) and the “writing” prophets, who composed the prophetic books that are found in the Old Testament. These books are categorized in different ways. In the Hebrew Bible, they are grouped into the “Former Prophets” (the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the “Latter Prophets” (the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve “minor” prophets (together in one book).

In the English Bible, the prophetic books are divided into the “Major Prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and the “Minor Prophets” (separated into individual books: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). Finally, the Hebrew prophets were either “earlier” or “later” and “pre-exilic,” “exilic,” or “post-exilic,” according to when they prophesied, relative to the captivity and exile of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

As we begin to look at the prophets and their work, we should realize that the Hebrew word for prophet is *nabi*, which is thought to derive either from the verb “to bubble up,” like a fountain, with the meaning “to declare,” or, alternately, to mean “one called,” or “one who calls.” The ancient Septuagint version of the Old Testament translated the Hebrew word *nabi* with the Greek word *prophetes* (from which we get our word “prophet”), meaning “one who speaks for another, especially one who speaks for a god.”

So, a prophet was primarily a messenger of God or other gods and, as the Bible affirms, there were many “false prophets” who either spoke what was not true or spoke on behalf of false gods. The Old Testament case of Balaam, the prophet who was hired to curse Israel (Numbers 22-23) provides an example of yet another type – a professional prophet who spoke in the name of the true God (Numbers 22:18; 23:1-3; etc.), but who did not seem to follow him (2 Peter 2:16; Jude 1:11).

The prophets used by God were both male and female. Jewish tradition says there were seven female prophets, of whom the greatest were Moses’ sister Miriam, the judge Deborah, and the prophet Huldah (see chapter 17 “Huldah” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*). Of the many male prophets, Moses was counted as being of great importance, yet the Bible tells us that prophecy *per se* began with Samuel (Acts 3:24), as we will soon see. Samuel was the first of the professional prophets who included Nathan and Gad in the time of the united monarchy, as well as Elijah, Elisha, and many others in the time of the divided monarchy. These prophets are the focus of this unit, and to understand them we must understand the specific roles to which they were called – and their surprisingly unique nature in the ancient Near East.

A primary role of the Hebrew prophets within the overall category of being “messengers of God” was that of being **kingmakers**. We have seen that both Saul and David were anointed king by the prophet Samuel – which is one of the reasons the prophets “began” with him and ended after the exile and the downfall of the kings. In the broader ancient Near East, no prophets are known to have played the same role as the Israelite prophet kingmakers. The prophets also acted as **royal advisors**. Until Samuel, prophets had exercised political leadership, but with the beginning of kingship the role of the prophet became an advisory one. In this capacity the Hebrew prophets guided and sometimes encouraged the kings, but also sternly rebuked them (at their own risk – Joash; etc.), as we saw with Samuel and Saul, and Nathan and David. This was a unique function. Usually, prophecies in other Near Eastern cultures simply encouraged the monarch regarding general duties such as ruling with justice or promised him good fortune such as victory in his battles.

Often the role of **correcting the people** was secondary for the prophets to the roles associated with the king, though some of the later prophets were sent primarily to the people themselves. What is clear is that the Hebrew prophets frequently criticized their own people – especially for the dual sins of elevating images to divine status (idolatry) and reducing humans to less than human status (oppression of the poor; etc.). Once again, this function was virtually unknown in other cultures in the ancient Near East.

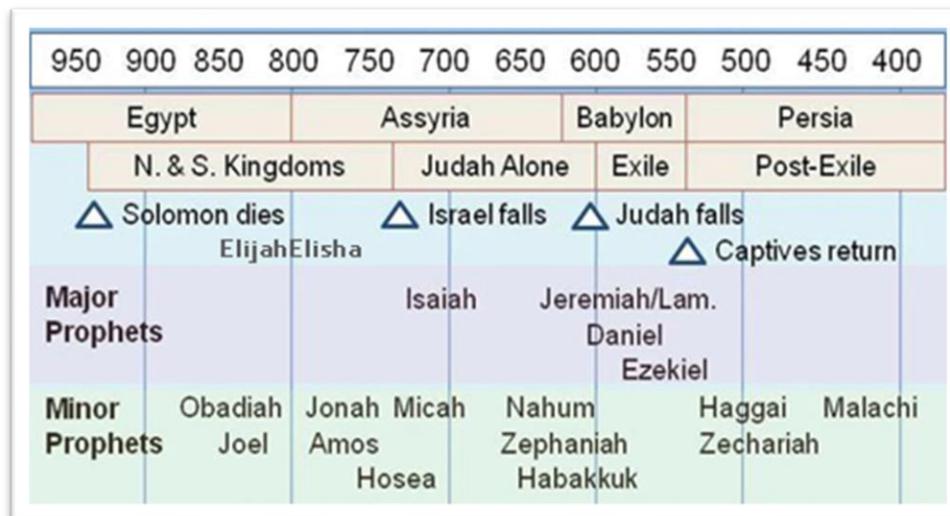
Finally, of course, in addition to the “forthtelling” of various messages of guidance and correction, the prophets were often inspired to make predictions – to participate in “**foretelling**.” This was in fact, their most lasting and important role, and although every biblical prophet gave predictive messages of this type, one of the most important things we can keep in mind is that every prophet’s message was unique in some way. We tend to think of “prophets” as being essentially similar, somewhat like the twelve disciples of the New Testament, but although many prophets condemned the same sins and warned of the same punishments, each had a unique message, as we will see.

## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

We have studied the prophet Samuel and also discussed Nathan and Gad in earlier units of the course. In this section we will look at the particular aspects that are often the key to understanding the messages of the most important prophets who ministered through the era of the divided kingdom up to the exile.

**ELIJAH**, “Yahweh is my God,” prophesied c. 850-800 BC. The narratives concerning Elijah and Elisha contain a number of unique elements, including the miracles they performed that are without parallel among the other prophets. In addition to declaring a number of predictive prophecies that came to pass (1 Kings 21:22-23; etc.), Elijah performed a number of dramatic miracles such as causing the rain to cease and start again three and a half years later (1 Kings 17:1; 18:45), calling down fire from heaven numerous times (1 Kings 18:38; etc.), parting the Jordan River (2 Kings 2:8), and the resurrection of a widow's son (1 Kings 17:22). Some of these miracles foreshadowed those of Christ (see Note 1), and the spectacular end to Elijah’s ministry – ascending in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11) – also foreshadowed Christ’s own ascension. The prophet Malachi foretold that God would send Elijah again (Malachi 4:5) and, not surprisingly, many people felt that Christ was the Elijah who was to come again (Matthew 16:13-14).

**ELISHA**, “Yahweh is my salvation,” prophesied c. 800-750 BC. The ministry of Elisha, who followed Elijah with a double portion of the “mantle” of that prophet, was also notable in that Elisha not only duplicated a number of the miracles of the earlier prophet (such as parting the Jordan, 2 Kings 2:14, and resurrecting the Shunammite woman's son, 2 Kings 4:34), but also performed *twice* as many miracles as Elijah had done. Yet Elisha also had his own clearly distinct role and message, and a number of his miracles were unique (2 Kings 6:18-20; etc.). Many of these miracles foreshadow the miracles of Christ – as when Elisha healed a man from leprosy (see Note 1). Elisha’s feeding of a crowd of people with a limited number of loaves of bread (2 Kings 4:42-44) certainly foreshadowed Jesus doing the same thing (Matthew 14:13-21).



Timeline of Elijah and Elisha and the Major and Minor Prophets. Image: Adapted from Slideplayer.com

**ISAIAH** “Yahweh is salvation,” was active c. 740-700 BC (see Note 2). Isaiah was without doubt the most significant of all the Hebrew prophets. The book of Isaiah is cited more than any other in the New Testament and is also represented among the Dead Sea Scrolls more than all the other prophetic texts combined. Isaiah still continues to be among the most influential biblical writers for Christians today.

Isaiah's superlative literary style indicates that he was from a well-educated background, and Jewish tradition says he was of royal descent and may have been a cousin of King Uzziah. This would have given Isaiah great access to the kings of Judah with whom he interacted; Isaiah served as counsel to King Hezekiah (c. 727–698 BC) during the period in which the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, waged war against Judah. Nevertheless, Isaiah often criticized the ruling classes for their corruption and oppression of the poor, and ancient records claim that he was eventually martyred in the reign of the evil king Manasseh.

Because different sections of the book of Isaiah seem to be written from different time perspectives, many scholars feel that it is actually the work of two or even three different writers: "First Isaiah" (chapters 1-39) – composed by the eighth century BC prophet Isaiah; "Second Isaiah" (chapters 40–55) – the work of an anonymous sixth century BC writer during the exile; and "Third Isaiah" (chapters 56–66) – by another anonymous individual writing after the Jews' return from exile. Ultimately, the single or multiple authorship of the book of Isaiah cannot be decisively proven (see Note 3), but in either case the importance of the work remains the same and its message is not affected.

A clear dual message of judgment and hope runs throughout Isaiah: along with warnings of punishment for Israel's sinful and rebellious ways, there is an equally strong theme of hope for the future (see chapter 6 "Isaiah" in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*). The book of Isaiah is often called the "Fifth Gospel" because no other prophet gives so many prophecies regarding a future servant of God who would suffer and die for others (Isaiah 53; etc.), but who will one day rule over a new Jerusalem and Israel and who will establish God's kingdom over all the nations of the earth, forever (Isaiah 60; etc.). Without Isaiah we would not have the clear prophetic picture of a Messiah who would be both human *and* divine, who would suffer *and* who would reign in glory! These inspiring prophecies form the very core of our understanding of the role of God's Messiah – they are the basis of works such as Handel's wonderful "Messiah" oratorio and have been a source of hope for readers of the Bible for over twenty-five centuries. No other writer of the Old Testament conveys so much hope as Isaiah.

**JEREMIAH**, "Yahweh will raise up," was active c. 630-570 BC. The son of a priest from a small rural village in Judah, Jeremiah's words were recorded by his scribe and disciple Baruch son of Neriah (see Note 4). Although simply written for the most part, Jeremiah contains some unusual aspects (see Note 5) and word-plays. For example, when God asks Jeremiah what he sees in his first vision, the prophet replies "I see the branch of an almond [Hebrew *shaqed*] tree." God replies: "You have seen correctly, for I am watching [Hebrew *shoqed*] to see that my word is fulfilled" (Jeremiah 1:11-12). This technique helped reinforce the prophet's message and is certainly unusual, but the book of Jeremiah is unique in the degree to which it gives us an insight into the emotions and feelings of the prophet himself.

Often persecuted, Jeremiah had a difficult ministry and was frequently discouraged, but – as a result – many parts of the book that bears his name are encouraging to those who suffer. Mostly, however, Jeremiah's emotions are regarding the sins of the people of Israel and the punishment they would inevitably bring upon themselves as a result. This compassion for the people to whom he was sent is clear throughout the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations (also authored by Jeremiah) and is the reason for his being referred to as "the weeping prophet." But this emotionality is not only an aspect of Jeremiah's own personality, but is also the clearest example in the Bible of God's anguish and sorrow for his wayward people. Jeremiah gives us, in this sense, a view into the mind of God regarding the punishments he must justly bring about. Equally unique is Jeremiah's detailed portrayal of the new covenant God would utilize to restore his relationship directly with his people – rather than through a temple – and to write his law within them rather than on tablets of stone (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

**THE MINOR PROPHETS.** The twelve so-called “Minor Prophets” are named so only because their books are much shorter works than those of the “Major Prophets,” such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Nine of these twelve minor prophets functioned before the exile (see chapters 28-36 “Hosea”-“Zephaniah” in *Discovering the Bible*), and each has an important and unique message, though they cannot be considered individually here. The three remaining minor prophets will be discussed in the next units.

### **KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:**

There are many theological concepts that can be drawn out from the writings of the prophets, but the most fundamental one is the principle of prophetic duality that can be found in the prophetic books we have looked at in this unit. Prophetic duality refers to the fact that a great many predictive prophecies have a prior and a later fulfillment – a near and a distant application. Thus, many of the predictions of the pre-exilic prophets regarding the future restoration of Israel after the exile saw a prior physical fulfillment in the return of the Jews to their homeland and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple, as we will see in the coming units. But there are aspects of this restoration that were not fulfilled at that time and will only be fulfilled at some future time under the reign of a divine King.

This is a basic principle, but the key to understanding the writings of the prophets is to realize that their statements can move back and forth, as it were – between the near fulfillment and the distant one – in the same chapter, the same paragraph, and even the same verse. For example, in Isaiah 32:10-14 the prophet states that in “little more than a year” the land and fortresses of Judah would be afflicted and deserted. This happened when the Assyrians invaded Judah and destroyed much of it, although the Jews were not yet taken into captivity. However, the next few verses (Isaiah 32:15-20), which continue without a break, describe a time when “the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field,” in what is clearly a distant future.

A great many of Isaiah’s oracles – and those of other prophets – jump back and forth in this way between descriptions of contemporary and soon-to-be events and a future that would see the fall of Jerusalem, the eventual end of Assyria and Babylon, the restoration of Israel and Judah from exile, and a yet further future in which full restoration would come under the rule of God. Often the prophets will speak of future events in this way while “skipping over” long sections of time. It is as if the prophets were given a view of different mountain peaks stretching into the distance; they recorded the peaks they could see, but not the valleys – no matter how wide – between them.

This concept of prior and later fulfillment is the basis of our understanding of the prophecies regarding the promised Messiah and must also be applied to prophecies in different books of the Old Testament as well as within the same books. Thus, Isaiah 53, which tells us that the Messiah would be “pierced for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53:5) is clearly speaking of the Messiah’s first coming, while in Psalm 45 we see a reference to the Messiah’s coming as a conquering King with great majesty and power (Psalm 45:4-5). It is only when we distinguish the humble servant role of the Messiah’s first coming from his role as conquering King at his second coming that we understand in proper perspective the different “peaks” of history seen by the prophets. Many of the prophets speak of both events, but generally we read of the Messiah’s first coming in books such as Micah and Isaiah and his return in the books of Zechariah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. But all the prophets give distinctive glimpses and foreshadowings of the promised Messiah in either their actions or their writings. These are the greatest things we can find in these books, and ones that can continually enrich our study of them.

\* Note 1: There are many parallels between the ministries of Elijah and Elisha and that of Jesus. Matthew 15:21-28 tells how Jesus traveled to the Phoenician area of Tyre and Sidon and healed the daughter of a gentile woman, just as Elijah had traveled to Phoenicia and raised up a widow's son in the city of Sidon (1 Kings 17:7-24). In Matthew 8:5-13, we find that Jesus also healed the servant of the Roman centurion, just as Elisha healed the Syrian king's servant Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-13). Both were not only gentiles, but Naaman was also an officer of Israel's enemy Syria, just as the centurion was an officer of Judea's enemy Rome. These two healings by Jesus – the only clearly gentile individuals recorded as being healed by him – are directly parallel to the Old Testament examples of Elijah and Elisha that Jesus himself cited regarding his own ministry (Luke 4:24-27).

\* Note 2: Isaiah is archaeologically attested in the form of a likely seal of the prophet found in excavations in Jerusalem in 2009.

\* Note 3: Although the multiple authorship view of Isaiah is widely accepted, the New Testament appears to quote the later chapters of the book as the words of the prophet (Matthew 12:17-21; Romans 10:16; etc.). There are also a number of characteristic expressions that are used throughout the book (such as "the Holy One of Israel" which occurs twenty-one times in Isaiah, yet only six times in the rest of the Old Testament). On the other hand, it is interesting that Jesus himself only referred to passages from what is called First Isaiah as written by Isaiah (Matthew 13:14-15; etc.) and when he refers to passages from what would be Second and Third Isaiah, he simply states that "It is written" (Matthew 21:13; etc.) or calls the passages "Scripture" (Luke 4:21) or describes them as "written in the Prophets" (John 6:45). It is also interesting that the "Great Isaiah Scroll" found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and dating to about 150 years before the time of Christ, has an intentional gap around the part of the scroll (chapter 40) that is the point at which First Isaiah is claimed to change to Second Isaiah – which could indicate that the copyist of the scroll was aware that the latter part of Isaiah was a separate composition.

\* Note 4: Seal impressions with the name of "Baruch son of Neriah, the scribe" have been found in Jerusalem in recent years.

\* Note 5: For example, Jeremiah contains a number of encrypted words in which the first letter of the alphabet is used to substitute for the last and so on (in English, ABC would be written ZYX). For example, Jeremiah 25:26 states that the king of "Sheshak" will drink the cup of God's wrath, where "Sheshak" is an encryption of "Babylon."

—

## **REVIEW AND REFLECTION:** (complete in your notebook)

### **Basics:**

1. Briefly explain the terms "former" and "latter" prophets and "major" and "minor" prophets.
2. In what sense did prophecy "begin" with Samuel?
3. What two prophets most frequently foreshadowed in their actions the ministry of Jesus?

### **Looking Below the Surface:**

Is moral guidance or foretelling more frequent in the prophets, and in which prophets in particular?

### **Everyday Applications:**

In what ways can we better hear and attend to God's voice when reading the prophets today?

*© Copyright CornerstoneCourses.org 2020. All rights reserved. This material is part of a free Cornerstone Bible Course and is not to be sold. Download the free course from [CornerstoneCourses.org](http://CornerstoneCourses.org).*