

Reading the Prophets

We are about to embark on a journey through the prophets in our reading plan. Apart from certain messianic passages cited directly in the NT, the prophetic literature is often neglected for a variety of reasons—length, difficulty, history, imagery, poetry, and so on. However, the prophetic books make up over 20% of the whole Bible. As we seek to rightly divide the word of truth, we must consider the whole counsel of God—which means we must deal with the prophets. Here are *four* things to consider as we begin.

First, we must get our chronological bearings. The writing prophets were active roughly between the 700's and 400's BC.¹ Three key events in the history of Israel during this period help us to get our bearings and to understand the historical context of the prophets:

- Exile of the Northern Kingdom (722 BC)
- Exile of the Southern Kingdom (586 BC)
- Beginning of Restoration (Return to the Land) (538 BC)

Second, we must consider the role of the Prophets. The prophets function as 'covenant prosecutors.' They point the people back to the Law of God, calling the people to obedience, but they also point forward in terms of God's promises. There is inherent tension that builds regarding how God will fulfill His promises and bless a sinful people. The Person and work of Christ resolves this tension.

Third, we must consider the perspective of the Prophets. They speak of immediate things related to their historical context (e.g., exile and return to the land) along with more ultimate fulfillments—sometimes in the same breath. Often, their perspective is one that speaks of ultimate fulfillment of God's varied promises as all taking place together, as one complex event. The NT reveals that this ultimate fulfillment comes in two stages—related to the first and second comings of Christ.

Fourth, we must appreciate the expectations of the Prophets. The following expectations summarize the hope of the people according to God's covenant promises, which are fulfilled in Christ's first and second comings:

- Coming Redeemer
- Kingdom of God
- New Covenant
- Restoration of the people of God
- Outpouring of the Spirit
- Day of the LORD (God coming to judge and to save)
- New Heavens and New Earth

There is much treasure to be mined in these books. Ask the Lord to open your eyes to see wonderful things in the prophets, and keep reading!

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¹ For a helpful chart, see: ESV Study Bible, 1232.