

## OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS PREACHED AT DIFFERENT TIMES AND PLACES<sup>1</sup>

(Michael S. Heiser)

Since the books of the prophets are grouped together in English Bibles, it appears to most Bible readers that the prophets lived and ministered at roughly the same time. That isn't the case.

The biblical prophets are divisible into two categories. First, there are the prophets who didn't write any books we have in the Old Testament. Some famous like Elijah and Elisha are in that category. They didn't write anything as far as we know. Then there are the "writing prophets," those who left us with material in the Old Testament. The writing prophets are typically categorized into the "major prophets" (the name given to lengthy books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and the "minor prophets" (short books like Micah, Habakkuk, and Obadiah).

Regardless of the organizational groupings into which any of the prophets might fall, they lived over a span of hundreds of years. They also ministered in various parts of the promised land.

Most prophetic books contain enough information to situate a prophet chronologically. For example, prophets like Elijah and Elisha lived in the tenth and ninth centuries BC (ca. 950-850 BC). We know that because their ministries overlapped with King Ahab. Isaiah lived in the second half of the eighth century BC since his life intersected with the kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

Prophets like Jeremiah, who mention the end of the line of the kings of Judah, can be safely situated just before the fall of Judah to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (ca. 586 BC).

If a prophet lived prior to 722 BC, the date of the fall of the ten-tribe northern kingdom of Israel, they may have ministered to either Israel or Judah. Solving this question depends in part on whether kings of the north or south are mentioned in their written material. It can also be resolved by mention of a hostile foreign empire, like Assyria (northern kingdom enemy) or Babylon (southern kingdom enemy), or by means of a focus on Israel/Samaria or Judah.

For example, Ezekiel's prophecy opens at the river Chebar in Babylon, allowing us to know he was among the captives taken from Judah. Hosea's book opens with the list of the same kings who reigned during Isaiah's lifetime (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah). Hosea ministered to the apostate northern kingdom, since he mentions the threat of Assyria (Hos. 8:8-9) and focuses on the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah, on the other hand, focuses on Judah and its environs.

Knowing the time and place of a prophet is important for interpreting in context. But even when certainty isn't possible, the message of loyalty to God is always clear.



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<sup>1</sup> This is taken from a book I highly recommend, *Brief Insights on Mastering the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), pp.117-118.