

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

(Danny Hays in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*)

Without doubt, the Old Testament prophetic books contain some of the most fascinating and colorful passages in the entire Bible. Many of our most favorite Bible verses are in the Prophets. What about you? Perhaps your favorite is Isaiah 40:31:

*But those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.*

Or maybe you have found Jeremiah 29:11 especially encouraging: "'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.'"

Or perhaps you have been especially touched by the powerful messianic prophecies scattered throughout the Prophets, verses like Isaiah 53:6:

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

Or perhaps you have found yourself skimming over most of the verses in the prophetic books, wondering how on earth any of these strange things have any relevance to you. Have you puzzled over the many grim texts of judgment in books like Amos and Jeremiah, or perhaps scratched your head at the bizarre images in Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah? Our goal in the pages that follow is to provide you with some basic guidelines that will enable you to truly grasp what the Prophets are saying.

### **The Context for Understanding the Prophets**

To make sense of the Prophets we must first place them into their proper context within the biblical story. Let's review the biblical story and revisit how the Prophets connect. The Bible begins in Genesis 1–2 with the wonderful story of creation, but Genesis 3–11 recounts how the people God had created repeatedly sin against him, resulting in separation from him. God's solution to this problem is presented in Genesis 12–17, where God makes a covenant promise to Abraham. God promises to make Abraham into a great nation and to give him a land, millions of descendants, and wonderful blessings. God also promises that through Abraham all the nations of the world will be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). Much of the Bible is concerned with the fulfillment of these early promises of God to Abraham.

In Exodus, God miraculously delivers his people Israel out of Egypt and enters into a covenant relationship with them (the Mosaic covenant). At the heart of this covenant was a threefold formula statement: I will be your God; you will be my people; I will dwell in your midst. Then, just prior to taking his people into the Promised Land (i.e., promised to Abraham), God presents the people with the book of Deuteronomy, which restates the Mosaic covenant relationship between God and Israel. The book of Deuteronomy states the terms whereby Israel can live in the Promised Land and be blessed by God, who will live in their midst. God makes the terms very clear in Deuteronomy 28. If they obey him and worship him alone, then they will be blessed



tremendously. But if they don't—and Deuteronomy 28 is crystal clear on this—then terrible judgments will come upon them, including the loss of the Promised Land. At the end of Deuteronomy Israel repeatedly vows to keep this covenant agreement. In the story that follows (Joshua through 2 Kings), as Israel enters into the Promised Land, the central question that drives the story is, "Will the people of Israel be faithful to their agreement with God, primarily as defined in the book of Deuteronomy?" The unfortunate answer to that question is no, they won't.

Tragically, under peer pressure from the neighboring peoples, Israel abandons her God and turns to idol worship. At the same time Israel turns away from the ethical guidelines spelled out in Deuteronomy and the nation quickly deteriorates, not only theologically, but also morally.

After several hundred years of downward spiraling (Judges through 2 Kings), interrupted only briefly by the story of Samuel and David, God's patience finally runs out. He sends the prophets to deliver a final plea to his people: repent and turn back to a true worship of God as you agreed to do in Deuteronomy. If you don't, the prophets warn, the terrible judgments spelled out in Deuteronomy 28 will come upon you. In essence, the prophets function like God's prosecuting attorneys. They stand before his judgment throne with Deuteronomy in their hand, pointing out the many ways that Israel has violated this covenant agreement. Next they announce the judgment that will come if Israel does not repent immediately. That judgment comes in the form of two terrible invasions. The Assyrians will come in 722 BC and completely destroy the northern kingdom, Israel, and the Babylonians will come in 587/586 BC to destroy Jerusalem and the southern kingdom, Judah.

Yet, while the prophets announce judgment based on the broken Mosaic covenant (especially as defined in Deuteronomy), they will also reach back to the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12, 15, 17) and to the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7) and promise a wonderful future time of restoration, a time when God will make a new and better covenant with his people. Furthermore, as the description of this new and better coming time (i.e., the messianic era) unfolds, God reveals that this plan is bigger than just a plan to restore Israel. As the prophets describe this spectacular new covenant, they reveal that it also includes all the nations of the world. Indeed, in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 12:3, God's plan of future restoration includes the solution to the global problem of sin described in Genesis 3–11. People of faith from all the nations of the world will unite together in true worship of God.

### **The Prophets in a Nutshell**

So as you can see from the discussion above, the message of the Prophets can be boiled down to three basic points:

1. *You (Judah/Israel) have broken the Mosaic covenant; you had better repent!*
2. *No repentance? Then judgment!*
3. *Yet there is hope beyond the judgment for a glorious, future restoration, both for Israel/Judah and for the nations.*

The prophetic books are very repetitive. Thus these three themes repeat over and over throughout the Prophets. The specific sins listed under Point 1 ("You [Judah/Israel] have broken the Mosaic covenant") are also repeated over and over throughout the Prophets. These sins, or covenant violations, can be grouped into three basic indictments against Israel: (1) idolatry, (2) social injustice, and (3) reliance on religious ritual to cover the idolatry and injustice. The prophets will accuse Israel of these three central sins throughout the prophetic books.