

MANual Lessons from The Prophets: Introduction

This Old Testament section of the Christian Bible is broken down into four main sections: The Books of Moses, The History of Israel, The Books of Poetry, and The Prophets. I continue my year-long journey through the Bible with this post that contains an Introduction to the Prophets. The next few posts will provide lessons from the Prophets based on my resource this year: The MANual, my NIV Bible for Men. I'll also return to using the five features (Knowing God, At Issue, Men of The Bible, Myths, and Downshift), as in other lessons and my own summary called the God Buddy Focus.

About Prophets and Prophecy

The Prophets are usually among the least popular books of the Bible to read due to their constant warnings and condemnations. Still, there is much we can learn from them. While the primary task of the prophets was to call the people of Israel back to faithfulness to their covenant with God—much like the main messages of the previous three sections, the fourth section of the Old Testament foretells upcoming events, often using visions and dreams.

In the Old Testament, prophecy – defined as an inspired utterance of a prophet, was to point forward to the mystery of God yet to be revealed. In the New Testament, prophecy is to make known the heart of God for His people, His creation, and His church through the fulfillment of His Son. The return of Christ alone is mentioned more than 300 times in the New Testament.

Who Were Prophets?

By definition, prophets are humans who were called to speak on God's behalf. Filled with God's Spirit, a prophet spoke God's

word to people who had distanced themselves from God in one way or another. In one sense, a prophet is a preacher. But in other terms, they are often a whistle-blower, particularly when an entire tribe or nation turned away from God.

In the Old Testament's section called the History (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah), many people spoke or wrote prophetic statements but not all are specifically referred to as prophets. These include prophets such as Deborah, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, Huldah, who came forward to speak God's word to a rebellious people.

Some of the most significant prophets are:

- Abraham, whom God himself calls a prophet (Genesis 20:7)
- Moses, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets (Deuteronomy 34:10)
- Samuel, who anointed two kings of Israel on God's behalf (1 Samuel 3:19–20)
- David, a king whose Psalms were considered prophetic by the Jews (Acts 2:30)
- Elijah and Elisha, who worked miracles and anointed (and denounced) national leaders on God's behalf (1 Kings 19:15–16)
- Jeremiah, who warned Jerusalem's leaders that Nebuchadnezzar would take the city (Jeremiah 1:5)
- John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:9–14)
- Jesus Christ, who was called a prophet before he was resurrected (John 7:40)

However, the words and deeds of other prophets were later preserved as separate collections that form the final books of the Old Testament called the "Latter Prophets." Also called the "literary prophets," each book was a separate piece of literature, rather than being spread through books of history like the earlier prophets.

The Role of God's Prophets

Throughout the Bible, but especially in the Old Testament, a prophet had the role of holding people accountable to their covenant with God. In Israel's history, the priests were responsible to be a spiritual and moral guide. However, they often became corrupt and turned away from God, leading the people in the worship of idols. Prophets arose when the priests failed to teach God's law to the people, and the kings and judges failed to govern the country justly. In a sense, prophets spoke as whistle-blowers whenever Israel was on the brink of self-destruction.

It's also important to note that the Bible mentions false prophets, who were/are individuals who claim to speak on God's behalf, but don't. To further complicate things, there are prophets who speak on behalf of other gods, too. The most famous example takes place in the showdown between Elijah and 450 prophets of the Canaanite god, Baal (1 Kings 18:16–39) when Elijah demonstrates he's the one who speaks on behalf of Israel's true God.

The Books of The Prophets

The sacred texts of the Old Testament on prophets are generally divided into two groups: the "Major" Prophets and the "Minor" Prophets. The books of Isaiah through Daniel are called the Major Prophets due to their relative length and the variety of topics discussed. The remaining books, Hosea through Malachi, are called the Minor Prophets because they are relatively shorter, address a particular context, or deal with a singular theme.

The books of the Prophets do not appear in chronological order; instead, are featured in order of size. Isaiah and Jeremiah come first as "Major" prophets since those are the longest books in this section by length (interestingly though, Jeremiah, the second book is longer than Isaiah, according to this post on the Longest Books of the Bible). The "Minor"

prophets such as Haggai and Malachi, are ordered last since they are shorter books. This system of ordering by length doesn't help us appreciate their historical and geographical context though, especially since some prophets overlapped each other chronologically, and some prophesied over long periods of time.

But here's where it gets a bit tricky: the list of specific books considered "the Prophets" (with a capital P) changes depending on which Bible you read. First-century Christians didn't have the New Testament we do today—it took centuries to agree on the canonization of the Bible. Instead, they only had the books of the Old Testament, or the Tanakh, which was arranged differently and contained a section called *Nevi'im* (Hebrew for "Prophets") in the middle.

Most modern Christians list the final 17 books of the Old Testament (Isaiah–Malachi) for the Prophets but there are 18 books of Prophets (that includes Baruch) in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. This chart from "The Beginner's Guide to the Prophets in the Bible" by Jeffrey Kranz best shows the groupings of the books.

	<u>Old Testament</u>	<u>Tanakh</u>
Joshua		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Judges		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Samuel		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Kings		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Isaiah	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Jeremiah	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Lamentations	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Baruch	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> *	
Ezekiel	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Daniel	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Hosea	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Joel	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Amos	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Obadiah	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Jonah	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Micah	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Nahum	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Habakkuk	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Zephaniah	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Haggai	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Zechariah	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **
Malachi	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> **

*Not included in Protestant Bibles.

** Combined into a single book called "The Twelve"



God Buddy Focus

As you read more about the Prophets, understand that everything is moving toward a culmination of events. In the Old Testament, God revealed His plans and covenant with His people. In the New Testament, God revealed His plans for the redemption of our fallen world.

But the Prophets also remind us of several realities.

First, we struggle with the same sins as the people of Israel. Idolatry, disregard for God's law, empty religious practices, and being in love with the world more than loving God. We're just as hard-hearted, greedy, lacking in concern for the poor, and our poor care for our community and creation.

The second is that we're subject to the same conditions of God's judgment. The Prophets spoke of God's wrath so we will understand the ramifications of our decisions to disobey His commands.

The third is we share the same hope for restoration and renewal when we follow the ways of our Savior. Jesus Christ came to the earth as a human and died on the cross to save us from ourselves. But He will also return again to judge and restore the World so let's heed the warnings of the prophets, repent, and become part of the new nation of believers.

This week:

- Reread the posts on MANual Lessons from Genesis, focusing on the At Issue section about Our Obedience.
- Discuss in your small group why you think it is important to understand that prophets were chosen and called by God, and not by man.
- Who might be considered the false prophets of today? Why?

The next post will provide the MANual lessons from the Major Prophets.