

# 1 Prophets – Who, What, Why, When?

## ➤ **Who were the prophets?**

- There were many prophets in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. They were called from all walks of life. Some of them were farmers before their call, some were trained as priests, some were leaders of the people before they were called. Some were considered to be prophets before they were born. Some were ‘one shot’ prophets: they were given one message and that was all. While you can find lists of prophets, some of the most famous are Moses, Deborah, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, Jonah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Nathan, and many others.

## ➤ **What type of messages did they bring?**

- While we may think of prophets as preachers, there were actually several ways that messages came from God. Moses was nearly unique in that God spoke directly to him. Other messages came in various forms: 1) Visions or dreams from God, which were interpreted by the prophet to make the meaning clear, 2) Symbolic actions, a type of performance art that had a theological meaning, 3) Prose, similar to sermons, which spoke directly and plainly of God’s message, and 4) Poetry, which often was a way to restate one of the other styles of message in a powerful, emotional format.

## ➤ **When did they speak to God’s people?**

- The time period for prophets in the Old Testament was from the time of Moses (considered the greatest of prophets) until mid-5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. While there were prophets reported in the time of the New Testament writings (Jesus himself is called a prophet), they are generally considered to be after ‘the time of the prophets’. Jesus says that John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets. Before him, there had been a very long period with no prophets.

## ➤ **Where were the prophets located?**

- If we look at the map, we can see that the prophets were in many different locations. As it happens, they usually were called during a time of political and national turmoil. Therefore, the prophets would show up in places that were either central to the current struggle, or in places that called attention to those struggles.

## ➤ **Why did they make their prophecies?**

- There were mainly four different types of messages. 1) Oracles (a divine communication from God) against foreign nations, 2) Oracles of indictment and judgment against God’s people, 3) Admonitions (scolding) against the behavior of God’s people, and 4) Oracles of promise.

## ➤ **How did they receive their messages from God?**

- Sometimes the messages came in the form of visions or dreams. Other times they seemed to be the result of the prophet’s interactions with the people, so that the prophets could speak of what they had seen and then speak of their understanding of God’s desires and plans for his people. It is clear that many of what we call books were compilations of prophetic output, and so there is a great deal of repetition.

## Where did the prophets speak and live?

Except for a brief time during the reigns of King David and King Solomon, the nation of Israel was under the control of other nations. The prophets were sent by God to give them instructions, reminders, warnings, and promises. The writings and collections of poems, sermons, visions and symbolic actions were a way for the people of God to answer the question, “Why do these things happen to us? Aren’t we the people of God?”

The prophets came to many people, all over the countryside, to both Israel and non-Israelite.



### 3 Deborah – The time of the Judges

In both early Jewish and Christian traditions, the Hebrew Bible usually has three parts: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Prophets includes Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and the Minor Prophets, also known as The Book of the Twelve. These books, which include what we would call history, show that the prophets were people who taught, corrected, and judged the people. While the majority of them were concerned with kings, some of them were speaking God's word even before there was a king in Israel.

The book of Judges was written during the early monarchy and covers the time from the death of Joshua, Moses' successor, until the establishment of the monarchy. It was a time of both religious and political turmoil as they tried to occupy the land that had been conquered and divided by lot under the leadership of Joshua. Most of the time, Israel's enemies came from outside the land. Some of them, like Moab, Midian, and Ammon, seemed happy to storm in occasionally to plunder. The Philistines, on the other hand, fought Israel for permanent possession of the land. In addition to these fairly constant attacks, the Israelites fought among themselves. Between the days of Joshua and Samuel, Israel crashed into moral and spiritual disaster. Over and over again a pattern of sin followed by oppression occurred. Sometimes God would raise up a judge to turn the people back to himself, but these revivals (sadly) never lasted long.

One such judge raised up by God was Deborah. She came to prominence as the leader after the Lord had brought in the Canaanites to punish Israel for doing evil. We don't know when the battle detailed in chapter 4 occurs, but we do know that Deborah was given a message from God to a military leader in Israel. And when Barak received her call, he came to her for orders. In fact, he wouldn't go on the mission unless she came along! Deborah's story is told both in prose (Judges 4) and poetry (Judges 5). This poem, considered to have been composed by Deborah, is one of the oldest written pieces in the Hebrew Bible. It is considered to be a masterpiece of poetry, heartfelt praise to God for leading his people in triumph over their enemies.

When people decide they need God's help, and they call out to the Lord in faith, he will send His Word through trustworthy people that He chooses to lead them.

## 4 Deborah – Judges 4 – Scripture Questions

1. Why did the Lord give the people of Israel into the control of Jabin, the king of Canaan? (vs. 1)
2. Israel was oppressed for twenty years before they cried to the Lord for help. Who was leading the people at that time? (vs. 4)
3. Who did Deborah send for, in order to bring relief to the people of Israel? (vs. 6)
4. What was Barak's condition for following the word from the Lord? (vs. 8)
5. Because of Barak's hesitation, who would receive the honor for the defeat of Sisera? (vs. 9)
6. What did Sisera, the leader of the Canaanite army, do when he heard Barak had gathered troops? (vs. 13)
7. How did the Lord handle the Canaanite army after Barak began his advance? (vs. 15)
8. Where did Sisera run for safety? (vs. 17)
9. What did Sisera ask Jael to do? (vs. 19, 20)
10. After Sisera fell asleep, what happened to him? (vs. 21)
11. Who actually achieved the victory over the Canaanites? (vs. 23)

## 5 Deborah – Judges 4 - Application Questions

1. Deborah spent many years as judge/leader for some of the tribes of Israel. The prophecy about the military event was as a result of fervent prayer by people who were in trouble. How would we react if, during a time of national trouble, one of our ministers began Sunday worship with, “I have a word from the Lord.”? Would we take it seriously and act on this word? Why or why not?
2. Barak was hesitant to act without Deborah. Given Sisera’s reputation, this may be understandable. In our congregation, we tend to want to talk a LOT about situations before acting. What are the benefits of this kind of hesitancy? What are the drawbacks?
3. This Biblical narrative about Deborah and Jael is, if not unique in the use of women, at least uncommon. In Christianity as a whole (not considering denominations), women still have far less authority and influence. Is it important to include women, men and people of all types (for instance, neurodivergent people such as people with Down’s Syndrome or Autism) in church leadership? What are the challenges with this inclusion?

## 6 Elijah – The time of the Kings of Israel, the Northern Kingdom

Though he is considered one of the great prophets of ancient Israel, it is possible to give a brief synopsis of Elijah's career: he predicted famine in Israel; he was fed by ravens; he raised a non-Israelite widow's son from the dead; he defeated prophets of Baal at Carmel; he ran from Jezebel, Ahab's Canaanite queen; he prophesied the death of Azariah (grandson of King Ahab); he was taken to heaven in a whirlwind; his return was prophesied by the last of the OT prophets; he was equated with John the Baptist; and he appeared with Moses in the transfiguration of Jesus.

His name means "The Lord is my God", and that was the central point of his life and message to the people of Israel. His primary mission was to oppose vigorously, by word and action, both Baal worship and those who engaged in it. He came from Tishbe in Gilead, which was north of the Transjordan area. His first recorded words to King Ahab spoke of God as "before whom I stand", a technical term that meant someone who served as an official representative of a king. He was telling Ahab, in other words, that he was an anointed messenger from someone greater than King Ahab.

It had been a long time since the northern kingdom had had such a priest, at least 55 years. Now, in the great crisis brought on by Ahab's promotion of Baal worship, Elijah was sent to remind the nation of Israel who their real King was. Ahab was very determined about Baal worship: he erected an altar to Baal in a temple that he built in Samaria, the capital of Northern Israel. He also built an Asharah, to worship a fertility goddess. There were nearly 1,000 state-supported prophets for Baal and Asharah. 1 Kings 16 says that Ahab did more to provoke Yahweh, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. Elijah began his prophetic career by announcing a drought on the land of Israel. This was significant because Baal was supposed to be the god of fertility, rain and harvests. Stopping the rain was a direct attack on this god, and would pointedly show the Israelites that Baal was powerless.

During the days of Elijah (and after him, Elisha), companies of prophets were located in at least three places: Bethel, Jericho, and Gilgal. While we are not certain of their function, at least part of their purpose was to keep the Word of Yahweh alive, to promote the retention of the liturgy of worship, and to promote the worship of Yahweh himself among the Israelite people. It is also possible that the growth of these communities was the source of collecting and preserving the words of prophecy.

## 7 Elijah - Scripture Questions: 1 Kings 18:16 – 40 & 1 Kings 19:9 - 18

1. King Ahab accused Elijah of troubling Israel. What did Elijah say was the real trouble in Israel? (1 Kings 18:18)
2. What did Elijah demand that the people of Israel do? How did they respond to his demand? (1 Kings 18:21)
3. Describe the competition that Elijah suggest between himself and the prophets of Baal. (1 Kings 18:22-24)
4. How did Baal respond to his prophets? (1 Kings 18:26)
5. After Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal, what did they do? Did it help? (1 Kings 18:29)
6. How did Elijah prepare his sacrifice to the Lord? (1 Kings 18:30-35)
7. Why did Elijah ask God to hear his prayer? (1 Kings 18:37)
8. After the Lord answered Elijah's prayer, what did the people do? (1 Kings 18:39)
9. Why was Elijah hiding in the cave? What did the Lord show him? (1 Kings 19:10)
10. After Elijah heard the still, small voice, what did he say—again? (1 Kings 19:14)
11. What did the Lord do instead of answering Elijah's fears and complaints? (1 Kings 19:15, 16)

## 8 Elijah - Application Questions

1. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were just the latest in a long line of Israelite rulers to combine the worship of Yahweh with the worship of other gods. What does it mean to keep worship of God pure? If it is possible, how do we accomplish it?
2. The people of Israel didn't want to acknowledge the Lord as their God until they had proof of His power. This seems sensible, since they were being asked to push back against the King and Queen themselves. What sort of proof do we have today of God's power? How can we ask for this proof without being arrogant toward Him?
3. Were you surprised that Elijah bounced back and forth from huge victory to abject fear? How is his evident humanity encouraging to you? How is it a warning?



## 9 Isaiah – Committed to The Holy One of Israel

The book of Isaiah covers a large period of time. We can tell this because of two names that appear: Uzziah (Azariah), and Cyrus. The first was a king of Judah who reigned from 783 to 742, and the second a Persian emperor who reigned from around 539 to 530. Since Isaiah 6 refers to the death of Uzziah, it seems to be a roughly two-hundred-year period. The book also refers to the life of the Judahite community after the temple had been rebuilt and rededicated, around 515. This would mean that the entire period of the book of Isaiah covers 250 years, more or less.

Given this large spread of time, it's clear that the writings, poems, warnings and visions are from different people. The first chapter seems to be an introduction to the book as a whole, rather like an overture to a musical introduces themes to the music. We will be discussing Isaiah ben Amoz, who is considered to be the writer/originator of chapters 1-39. During his lifetime the Kingdom of Judah, the southern kingdom, was under threat from multiple countries.

Isaiah means "The Lord Saves". He was married with at least two sons. Though we don't have any direct evidence about where he came from, there are two main suggestions. First, it is possible that he came from a priestly family. This idea comes from his familiarity with priestly terms and activities, and the fact that his commissioning seemed to occur in the Temple in Jerusalem. Since he often spoke with kings, it is possible that he was an aristocrat. However, any number of prophets spoke with kings and were well-informed about public affairs. The other possibility is that he came from a family or school of prophets. Isaiah is thoroughly schooled in the traditional forms and language of prophetic speech. Certainly he was educated: his language is strong and vivid, in fine classical Hebrew.

Isaiah probably spent most of his life in Jerusalem, with his greatest influence under King Hezekiah. More than any other prophet he spoke of the Lord's plan and control over the entire world, not just Israel. Whatever his family background, he was evidently familiar with poverty and its effect on people, especially when it was brought about through the reckless and careless behavior of the wealthy. He talks with great passion about the people who created misery for others: those who created laws that discriminated, greedy land grabbers, judges who took payoffs, and irresponsible leaders (both religious and civil).

## 10 Isaiah - Scripture Questions; Chapters 1, 6, 9, 14, 25, 33

1. What is the Lord's opinion of the Temple sacrifices? What does he want instead? (1:14-17)
2. In this thrilling and mysterious vision, what word does Isaiah use to describe the Lord? (6:1-3)
3. What happened to take away Isaiah's sins? (6:6, 7)
4. How did Isaiah respond to the Lord's call? (6:8)
5. What odd command did the Lord give to Isaiah, after telling him to speak a message to the people? (6:10)
6. Describe the way the people would know when the Lord had finished punishing them. (6:11-13)
7. What promise is given for the future salvation of Israel? (9:1)
8. How will the promise be fulfilled? (9:6-7)
9. How would the Lord deal with the Assyrian invaders? (14:24-27)
10. Who does the arm of the Lord control? (14:26)
11. After the punishment of Judah, what did the future hold for them? (25:6 – 9)
12. What is the difference between the Israelites who sinned against the Lord's holiness and those who lived rightly? (33:14-17)

## 11 Isaiah - Application Questions

1. What are some ways we can “live right, see that justice is done, defend widows and orphans, and help the oppressed”?
2. How does God ask us today, “Is there anyone I can send?” How do we answer, “Send me!”?
3. Some behaviors and/or sins can be extremely painful to give up (addictions, anger, resentment). How can we release these and receive forgiveness, especially when the treatment burns like hot coals?

## 12 Ezekiel – Prophet to an Exiled People

If the book of Isaiah was a work that covered a vast span of time (approximately 250 years), Ezekiel's covered about 25 years. He lived during a time of international turmoil. The Assyrians were overthrown by the Babylonians and Medes, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed; The Southern Kingdom of Judah made treaties with Egypt and then shifted loyalties to Babylon. Under Nebuchadnezzar and his successors, Babylon now dominated the international scene until it was crushed by Cyrus the Persian in 539 BC. Israel's monarchy was ended; the City of David and the Lord's temple no longer existed.

As for the people of Judah? They were exiled to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar and seemed to live fairly free lives in their new homes. Ezekiel, whose name means "God strengthens", was among these people. Everything we know about him is from this book. It was there among the exiles that he received his call to become a prophet. He was married and lived in a house of his own. He was from a priestly family and was eligible to serve as a priest. As a priest-prophet called to minister to the exiles, he was acutely aware that they were all cut off from the Temple with all the symbolism, sacrifices, and worship rituals. Because of this, his message from the Lord had much to do with the temple and its ceremonies. More than any other prophet, he was directed by the Lord to involve himself personally in the divine word by acting it out in prophetic symbolism.

For the first seven years, Ezekiel was directed to make it very clear to his fellow exiles: Jerusalem would fall, and their being God's covenant people would not save them or the Temple. The only hope he was allowed to give them was that they should live at peace with themselves and with God during the exile. Once news was received that Jerusalem had fallen, his message turned to the Lord's comforting word of hope for his people—they would experience revival, restoration and a glorious future.

The Old Testament in general and the prophets in particular assume and teach God's sovereignty over all creation, over people and nations and over history. This is most clear in the book of Ezekiel. God's intention was that he, the Lord, would be known and acknowledged by his people. Where other prophets dealt largely with Israel's idolatry and corruption which brought the judgment of the Lord, Ezekiel focuses on Israel as the holy people of the holy temple, the holy city and the holy land. Israel had made herself unclean, but God's faithfulness was so great that he would revive them and cleanse them, restoring the glory of his presence in his people.

## 13 Ezekiel - Scripture Questions

1. How is the Word of the Lord given to Ezekiel? What is he told to do? (3:3, 10, 14)
2. What does the Lord tell Ezekiel to do as a symbolic act? (4:1-5)
3. What had finally come to the unrepentant nation of Israel? (7:1-7)
4. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, what promise did God make to the exiles? (11:17)
5. What would be the renewed relationship between the people and God? (11:18-20)
6. Can sin, and the payment for that sin, be shared through families? (18:20)
7. Does the Lord want sinful people to die? (18:21-23)
8. What was the purpose of bringing destruction to Egypt? (30:10-12, 18, 19)
9. When God removed the religious leaders of the people of Israel, who would take their place? (34:10-11, 23, 30, 31)
10. Who was able to reassemble the valley of dry bones into bodies? (37:1-8)
11. What were the Israelites saying? What promise did the Lord make? (37:9-14)

## 14 Ezekiel - Application Questions

1. God was disgusted with the sins of the nation of Israel. The wicked were punished, but their consequences damaged the innocent, too. Does this seem fair, especially since he makes a point to teach that each person is responsible for their own sin? Why or why not?
2. The Lord gave Ezekiel some really odd performance pieces to get his Word to the people. What is the most creative or unusual thing you ever saw that affected your faith?
3. God's promise to the Jewish people in exile sustained their faith. What promises of God are meaningful to you? Why?