

The Major Prophets

GOSPEL GROWTH | OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY |
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Isaiah

Historical Setting

Author: Isaiah

The opening words of the book explain that this is “the vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz” (Isa. 1:1). And there isn’t much that we know about Isaiah. Isaiah means, “Yahweh is salvation.”

Date and Context:

740 B.C. – 681 B.C.

Before the Exile

Though we’re unsure exactly when Isaiah wrote the book of Isaiah, his “call to the ministry,” was around 740BC and he lived at least until 681 BC.

Isaiah comes before the period of Exile. The kingdom is divided (northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah). He warns of the coming Assyrian invasion, which does happen, but most notably, Isaiah is prophesying about the Babylonian invasion and resultant period of Exile. And of course, he also prophesies about future things that have yet to happen as well.

Central Theme

“The central theme of the book is God himself, who does all things for his own sake (Isa. 48:11). Isaiah defines everything else by its relation to God, whether it is rightly adjusted to him as the gloriously central figure in all of reality (Isa. 45:22–25).” (ESV Study Bible)

Encapsulated version of the book in Isa. 1:2 – 2:5.

Israel has received so much from God and should be grateful, but instead they’ve played they’ve “despised the Holy one of Israel” (Isa. 1:2-4), so now, judgement is coming. And this judgement is to lead Israel to repentance or at least preserve a remnant who will repent (Isa. 1:5-9) so that one day, Israel will be a beacon of light for the whole world. Therefore, Isaiah says, “walk in the light” today!

Redemptive Storyline

Israel was to be a bright light for the whole world to see, the vehicle God would use to bring the blessing of knowing himself to the whole world. But Israel was faithless, continually turning away from God and hiding redemption’s light. Nevertheless, God’s plan could not be thwarted. He would would through great judgement to purify his people and they would one day shine as a testimony of his faithfulness, mercy and grace.

In Isaiah’s prophecies we see a new Jerusalem full of gladness (Isa. 65:17-18) and all humanity worshiping God for eternity (Isa. 66:22-23). Isaiah prophecies of a Savior who will make this vision a reality. “The Lord Jesus Christ, who is God-with-us (Isa. 7:14), the child destined to rule forever (Isa. 9:6–7), the hope of the Davidic throne (Isa. 11:1), the glory of the Lord (Isa. 40:5), the suffering servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12), the anointed preacher of the gospel (Isa. 61:1–3), the bloodied victor over all evil (Isa. 63:1–6), and more” (ESV Study Bible).

Jeremiah

Historical Setting

Author: Jeremiah

Jeremiah was from a small town outside of Jerusalem and was called to be a prophet while he was still quite young and in his parents’ house. He became a priest and lived a difficult life where preaching a message of repentance that was never heeded.

Date and Context:

627 B.C. – 550 B.C.

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet in 627 B.C. and died shortly after 550 B.C.

What was happening?

The book speaks of the Babylonian threat to the Southern Kingdom, Judah. Judah is invaded. By the end of the book, the people have been dragged away in three waves of exile (in 605, 597, and 586 BC). After the last wave, the Babylonians razed the city of Jerusalem to the ground, including Solomon's great temple (2 Kings 22-25 and 2 Chronicles 34-36). Jeremiah himself lived and prophesied through all this.

Why was it happening?

The idolatry and rampant wickedness of God's people. A broken covenant.

Central Theme

The old covenant has failed; not because it itself was defunct, but because the people were not able to keep it due to their sinful hearts. Therefore, a new covenant is needed which will involve new hearts for the people of God.

Redemptive Storyline

Jeremiah prophesies that God will "make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31), and it's going to be different this time. The new covenant people of God will not break their covenant with God because they will have the word of God deeply engraved in their new hearts through God's power and they will follow God all their lives (Jer. 31:33-34).

He says the future partners with God will be forgiven, empowered by God, and that God will "remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). Hebrews 8 actually quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 speaking of the new covenant and says that it has come through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

The book of Jeremiah presents a key clue to the answer of the Old Testament's big riddle, the big question asked by the Old Testament. Redemption and restoration will come through new hearts given by God.

Lamentations

Historical Setting

Author: Unknown

Some think it may have been multiple authors over a period of time. Others think it may have been Jeremiah. We really don't know.

Date and Context:

587 B.C. – 516 B.C.

We know Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C. Lamentations was most likely written shortly after that. So somewhere between 587 B.C. and 516 B.C.

In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Lamentations is called *Ekah*, or “how.” It’s the first word in the book and it emphasizes this feeling of utter loss.

*“How lonely sits the city
that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
she who was great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
has become a slave.”*

Lam. 1:1

Jeremiah is set right after God has destroyed His own city, Jerusalem. He has done this by allowing the Babylonians to come and raze the city to the ground. In this poem, Jerusalem is personified as a woman mourning for her lost children and has no one to comfort her.

Central Theme

Even for those who have rightly received God’s judgement, belief in God’s mercy and faithfulness is the key to a restored relationship with him (Lam. 3:19-24).

The book is a series of acrostic poems written in the rhythm of a funeral dirge. And right in the middle of the book, chapter 3, we find God’s compassion. Even in the midst of God’s most severe judgment, God’s people may still turn to him in hope, plea for mercy, and look forward to renewal. This can be a message of great encouragement and solace in the midst of suffering.

Redemptive Storyline

Lamentations is a book for those in the nation of Israel who remained faithful. It was a book for them to use in mourning for Zion’s disaster and to pray in hope for God to

restore Zion once again. And once Zion is restored, the light of redemption could shine forth for the whole world to see.

Ezekiel

Historical Setting

Author: Ezekiel (probably)

The book chronicles the life of Ezekiel and appears to be written either exclusively by him or with some editorial help of a support group that sought to preserve his writings.

Date and Context:

Ezekiel lived at the same time as Jeremiah, but his ministry was actually set in exile in Babylon. And you see that in the book. In the first twenty-four chapters, the Lord tells his people that the Babylonians will destroy Jerusalem. In chapter 24, Ezekiel hears that the siege has begun. In chapter 33 further word arrives that Jerusalem itself has fallen. From that point, Ezekiel prophesies about hope and restoration for God's people. Ezekiel's prophesies stretch over a two decade period—from around 593 to 571 b.c.

On top of this chronology, God gives Ezekiel three sequences of visions, and if you understand these, you'll understand the book. The first sequence occurs in chapters 1-3, where Ezekiel, now in Babylon, sees God coming to him in a vision. The second sequence occurs in chapters 8-11. It's a flashback, as it were, in which God shows Ezekiel how his presence departed from Jerusalem because of the idolatrous worship being practiced in the temple. The book then concludes with a long vision sequence in chapters 40-48 when God returns to his people in a rebuilt temple. We can summarize these three visions as: A Vision of God the King; A Vision of God's Departure; and A Vision of God's Coming and the Promise of Paradise.

Central Theme

God is a holy, transcendent God, deserving of all glory and will rightfully punish those who spurn him. But to those who repent, he offers forgiveness.

Redemptive Storyline

Much like the other prophets, Ezekiel explains that the reason for Israel's exile is their faithlessness to God. And Ezekiel, like others, stresses that even though God is punishing them for their sin, it's not the end. God will restore them and use them as a beacon of redemption light for the world. The nuance that Ezekiel adds is an emphasis

on the holiness of God's name. In redeeming them, God would act to vindicate his name for all to see.

Daniel

Historical Setting

Author: Daniel

Daniel, whose name means "God is my judge," was a young man of nobility taken from his home and exiled in Babylon where he lived in the Babylonian court.

Date and Context:

605 B.C. – 536 B.C.

Judging by specific references to kings mentioned in the book, Daniel was written between 605 B.C. to 536 B.C. and chronicles the life of Daniel in exile in Babylon.

Central Theme

"The central theme of the book of Daniel is God's sovereignty over history and empires, setting up and removing kings as he pleases (Dan. 2:21; 4:34–37). All of the kingdoms of this world will come to an end and will be replaced by the Lord's kingdom, which will never pass away (Dan. 2:44; 7:27). Though trials and difficulties will continue for the saints up until the end, those who are faithful will be raised to glory, honor, and everlasting life in this final kingdom (Dan. 12:1–3)" (ESV Study Bible).

The book is divided into two halves: The first half chronicles the life of Daniel in exile and points to the challenges the people of God face while in exile here on earth. The second half contains apocalyptic visions about how the people of God will suffer but in the end, God will establish his kingdom and the Son of Man will triumph over his enemies.

Redemptive Storyline

The people of Judah could have easily viewed their exile as the end of their relationship with God. But instead of reinforcing that belief, Daniel shows what it looks like to live in a manner faithful to God while still in captivity. God is sovereign over all nations. He has not abandoned his plan of redemption. He controls everything and one day he will bring his Messiah's rule to every nation.