

Major and Minor

You will sometimes hear the prophets divided up into the Major and the Minor prophets. The major - Isaiah, Jeremiah & Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel - the minor - all the rest. This relates not to their importance (though Isaiah has a crucial place for Christians as his prophecies so often find their final fulfilment in Jesus) but to their length.

Worst Jobs in History

Tony Robinson's series described the worst jobs in the world. The problem was that being a prophet for Yahweh should be in the top ten. The book of Hebrews says "Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated" (Heb 11:36-37) Jeremiah is thrown into a well and left to die, then put in the stocks. No wonder when Jonah gets the call he heads the other way - problem is when God is calling it is a little difficult to find somewhere he can't get to you! Even Elijah - after the great victory on Mt Carmel (1 Kings 18) - says to God "I've had enough - I want to die!" It is not easy being a prophet - speaking out against powerful people who often don't like what you might have to say - remember what happened to John the Baptist.

Exile

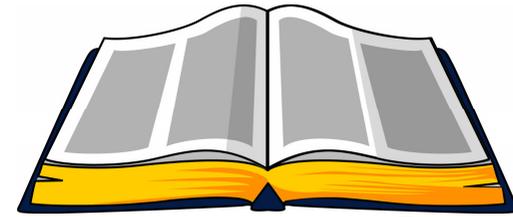
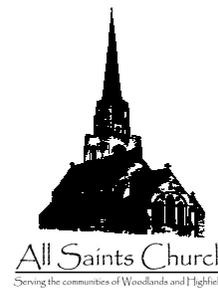
God promises through David and Solomon that if the people follow Him they will keep the land he has given them. The alternative is that they lose it. Exile is God's last resort. Time and again the prophets try to call the people back to God. In Judah occasional kings make a difference, but ultimately the sanction has to come. It is as if God is giving the people "time out" - they are on the "naughty step" for many years. Even in exile some of them still will not turn away from God - Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to forget God. The psalmist records "by the rivers of Babylon ... there we wept when we remembered Zion" Psalm 137.

Prophecy vs Fortune Telling

There is a huge difference in the Bible made between those who are prophets and those who practice "divination" - trying to tell the future by various means. Divination is strictly forbidden by God - King Saul has to cajole the Witch of Endor to summon up Samuel for him.

Prophets are not fortune tellers - sometimes their visions and words do speak of the future, but often that is obscure, only seen after the event. Often the prophets are simply speaking out what God is saying to a current situation - the prophet hears the word of God and speaks. There is no magical prediction other than the one parents use - "If you keep doing that someone is going to end up getting hurt!"

Modern day prophets regularly predict events with certainty and are then found to be wrong - that is what the Bible says about prophecy - test it out and if people are wrong again and again then perhaps it's better not to listen to them!



A YEAR WITH THE BIBLE

Part
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PROPHETS AND FALL

Solomon starts so well - blessed by God, envied by other Kings and Queens, wise and just. The problem is that deep down he is just like the rest of us - a broken human being who makes mistakes. Solomon is led away from wisdom by his hormones. He takes too many wives, some of whom worship "foreign gods" and he is snared. He ends up building an altar to one of the "gods" who demanded child sacrifice!

God is not pleased and so the kingdom is "torn", split into two - in the north 10 tribes make up the Kingdom of Israel, in the south the tribe of Judah has a kingdom all of its own. Each has a king and the desire to prove itself. As Rob Lacey, author of "The Word on the Street" puts it - "Naff King after Naff King."

Israel suffers worst - 19 kings all of whom are unfaithful - each one "more wicked than his ancestors". Ahab is about half way through the life of the Kingdom of Israel and he typifies the kings. He takes a foreign wife, Jezebel; opposes God, specifically in his opposition to Elijah; leads the people away from worshipping Yahweh the LORD and follows Baal - a fertility "god".

So what does God do? He sends messengers, couriers, ambassadors - his name for them is Prophets. They hear the cry of God's heart and share His word with their nations. Some speak to Israel, some to Judah, some to both. Their message is unyielding - God desires people who worship him with their actions as well as their words. He hates worship and offerings which do not affect the lives of the poor, the downtrodden, the widow and the orphan. "What does the Lord require of you - to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8)

Again and again the people are told - in Judah some kings repent and follow God but their reigns do not have a lasting impact. God has to take drastic action - he threatens them with exile - a whole nation on the "naughty step", and they ignore him. Israel falls first to Assyria and then 140 years later Judah falls to the Babylonian Empire. Persia becomes the new world power and under first Ezra and then Nehemiah people return to rebuild Jerusalem and re-establish the worship of Yahweh. Then the prophets fall silent. After Malachi silence falls for 400 years.

Placing the Prophets

	Pre-exilic prophets			Exilic prophets	Post-exilic prophets	
	9 th century BC	8 th century BC	7 th century BC	6 th century BC	5 th century BC	
Written to Gentile nations	Obadiah	Jonah	Nahum			
Written to Israel		Hosea Amos				
Written to Judah	Joel	Micah Isaiah	Habakkuk Zephaniah Jeremiah	Daniel Ezekiel	Haggai Zechariah	Malachi

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400 years of silence

After Malachi there is silence. There are no prophets acknowledged by the Jews. They are waiting for the promises of "Messiah" to be fulfilled. However, Israel's location means that they are not left alone to wait. After Assyria falls to Babylon and Babylon falls to Persia the Bible falls silent. The Persian empire falls to the Greeks under Alexander the Great (who established Greek as the principal language in the area, hence the New Testament is written in Greek!) After Alexander dies his empire is split, after a period of peace the Jews are enslaved again by the other half of the split kingdom and subjected to great persecution - one ruler even slaughters a pig in the temple to defile it. After a revolt led by Judas Maccabeus there is 100 years of Jewish independence, which ends when the Romans march into town. In 63BC they take over Jerusalem and so at the start of the New Testament we have a nation that is once again under foreign control, and occupied by a vicious, brutal, sacrilegious and much hated army.



Period

Prophets

Hebrew Kings



The Kings of Israel (all wicked)

- Jeroboam I (933-911) twenty-two years
- Nadab (911-910) two years
- Baasha (910-887) twenty-four years
- Elah (887-886) two years
- Zimri (886) seven days
- Omri (886-875) twelve years
- Ahab (875-854) twenty-two years
- Ahaziah (855-854) two years
- Jehoram (Joram) (854-843) twelve years
- Jehu (843-816) twenty-eight years
- Jehoahaz (820-804) seventeen years
- Jehoash (Joash) (806-790) sixteen years
- Jeroboam II (790-749) forty-one years
- Zechariah' (748) six months
- Shallum (748) one month
- Menahem (748-738) ten years
- Pekahiah (738-736) two years
- Pekah (748-730) twenty years
- Hoshea (730-721) nine years

The Kings of Judah (8 were good)

- Rehoboam (933-916) seventeen years
- Abijam (915-913) three years
- Asa (Good) (912-872) forty-one years
- Jehoshaphat (Good) (874-850) twenty-five years
- Jehoram (850-843) eight years
- Ahaziah (843) one year
- Athaliah (843-837) six years
- Joash (Good) (843-803) forty years
- Amaziah (Good) (803-775) 29 years
- Azariah (Uzziah) (Good) (787-735) fifty-two years
- Jotham (Good) (749-734) sixteen years
- Ahaz (741-726) sixteen years
- Hezekiah (Good) (726-697) 29 years
- Manasseh (697-642) fifty-five years
- Amon (641-640) two years
- Josiah (Good) (639-608) thirty-one years
- Jehoahaz (608) three months
- Jehoiachim (608-597) eleven years
- Jehoiachin (597) three months
- Zedekiah (597-586) eleven years

