

He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
FIVE

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS
OF PROPHECY



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Lesson Five

Historical Analysis of Prophecy

INTRODUCTION

I have a friend who told me a story recently. He was married just a few years ago and his wife was cleaning out one of his drawers when she found a letter that came from an old girlfriend. At first she was very upset because she thought the letter was written recently, but my friend was able to prove that the letter was written years ago by the envelope and the date on the envelope. Well, my friend looked at me and he said, “Rich, I don’t know what to tell you, because I don’t know what would have happened if I had not been able to prove when that letter was written.” Unfortunately, many times Christians misunderstand Old Testament prophecy because they are not concerned about when the prophets spoke or when the prophets wrote their books. And if we’re going to study Old Testament prophets responsibly, we must be ready to understand the dates and the times in which they ministered.

We have entitled this lesson “Historical Analysis of Prophecy,” and we’re going to examine how Old Testament history provides an essential context for properly understanding Old Testament prophecy. Our historical analysis will divide into four major periods of prophetic history: first, the early monarchy; second, the period of Assyrian judgment; third, the period of the Babylonian judgment; and then finally, we’re going to look at the restoration period. Let’s take a look first at the period of the early monarchy.

EARLY MONARCHY

We saw in an earlier lesson that prophecy rose to prominence in Israel when kingship rose to prominence. And so it will help us to begin our historical analysis of prophecy by looking at the early monarchy — the days when Israel first had kings. From the time of Abraham, who lived around 2000 B.C. until the days of Saul, Israel had no human king. But David’s kingdom was established around 1000 B.C., and his kingdom remained intact for several generations. As we explore this period of Israel’s history, we’re going to ask two important questions: what were the major events that took place in this period and how did these events shape the prophetic ministries?

MAJOR EVENTS

Let’s first consider two major events that took place in the early monarchy. In the first place we can speak of the united kingdom.

United Kingdom

Around 1000 B.C. David took the throne in Jerusalem. He united all the tribes, established relatively secure borders for the kingdom, and he brought the ark of God to Jerusalem in preparation for his son to build a temple for God. Solomon, the son of David, followed in his father's footsteps. He expanded the territories of Israel and kept the tribes united. Also, Solomon built a glorious temple and dedicated it to the worship of Yahweh. The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles make it clear that David and Solomon were not perfect kings. But still, the Bible looks at this period as a time that was ideal, when the people of God received many blessings.

Divided Kingdom

As good as conditions were in these early years, we have to remember another major event, the divided kingdom. Sadly, Solomon and his son Rehoboam did not treat the northern tribes with the respect that they deserved, so the tribes of the north broke away and formed their own nation around 930 B.C. We learn of this event in 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chronicles 11. When Rehoboam refused to treat the northern tribes justly, they broke away and formed their own nation. Jeroboam I became king of the northern tribes, and set up a capital in Samaria along with worship centers in Dan and Bethel. Now, Jeroboam went much too far in his rebellion against the south. He established idols in his worship centers at Dan and Bethel, and by doing this the northern kingdom became severely corrupt. The nation turned away from loyalty to Yahweh and refused to submit to their covenant responsibilities. Now, Judah had its ups and downs during this period as well, but for the most part they remained much more faithful than northern Israel.

So we've seen two major events in the early monarchy: first, the united kingdom under David and Solomon when the people were blessed tremendously, and then the division of the kingdom in the days of Rehoboam.

Now that we've seen two major events that took place during the early monarchy, we have to ask how these events shaped the ministries of the prophets.

PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

There are sixteen different prophets whose ministries are summarized in the major and minor prophetic books of the Old Testament. The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles make it clear that the period of the early monarchy was full of prophetic activity, but none of these books of prophecy come from that period. We may only speak of the early monarchy as providing a background to the prophets that we're studying. Now we can see this background in at least two ways.

Covenant Ideals

On the one hand, later-writing prophets looked back to the days of the united monarchy as establishing important royal covenant ideals. They based all of their hopes for the people of God on the covenant God made with David and confirmed with Solomon. They longed for the day when Israel would be reunited with Judah as in the days of David and Solomon. They looked forward to the days when the throne of David would be secure again and the borders of the land would be extended once again. So in this sense, the united monarchy provides a background for the writing prophets of the Old Testament.

Divided Kingdom

On the other hand, the division of the kingdom also provided a background to the fact that the writing prophets served two different nations. These nations had relatively separate histories. Some prophets served Yahweh in the northern kingdom, threatening covenant judgment and assuring the people of a day of great healing and blessing. Their focus was on Samaria, the capital of the northern tribes. Other prophets served Yahweh in Judah and they warned of judgments and offered blessings to the people of God in the south, but they focused on Jerusalem and the tribe of Judah.

Although no writing prophets came from the early monarchical period, we discover that this period formed an essential background to the ministries of all prophets. The period of the early monarchy established the ideals of the covenant and it also established the reality of a northern and southern kingdom.

So far we've seen the background of the early monarchy. Now we have to move into the second major period of prophetic history, the period of the Assyrian judgment.

ASSYRIAN JUDGMENT

As we've seen in the earlier lesson, the people of the covenant had responsibilities to be faithful and loyal to the Lord, and when they flagrantly violated this covenant, they found themselves in a situation where God would send judgment in war. The first time God sent major war against the people of God was during the period of the Assyrian judgment. The divine judgment of defeat in war came upon the people of God through the Assyrian empire during the years especially of 734 to 701. During the 8th and 7th centuries B.C., the Assyrian empire grew in strength and conquered many nations. At the height of its power, the Assyrian empire stretched from modern day Turkey to the Persian Gulf and as far south as Egypt. Israel and Judah could not avoid dealing with this massive and aggressive empire. To explore the period of this Assyrian judgment, we'll look at two matters again: what were the major events that took place at this time, and how did these events influence the ministries of the prophets during these centuries?

MAJOR EVENTS

What major events took place in the centuries of the Assyrian dominance that have an influence on Old Testament prophetic writings? At least three major historical events took place that are important for our study: first, the Syrian-Israelite coalition; second, the fall of Samaria; and third, the Sennacherib invasion.

Syrian-Israelite Coalition

The Syrian-Israelite coalition involved conflict among three small nations under Assyrian control at that time: Syria, northern Israel and Judah. We can read about these events in several places in the Old Testament, but one very interesting passage is Isaiah 7. Around 734, Syria and northern Israel grew tired of paying tribute to the Assyrian empire, so they decided to build a coalition to resist the Assyrians because the Assyrians were experiencing trouble in other parts of their empire. In addition to building their own coalition, Israel and Syria tried to force Judah into joining their ranks. But Ahaz, the king of Judah, refused to join them and appealed for help from Assyria. These events had many results for the people of God, but we should be aware of at least one of those major consequences. Both the North and the South were on a path of conflict with Assyria. Northern Israel had rebelled against Assyria and so the kings of Assyria came, attacked and destroyed northern Israel. Judah aligned herself with Assyria for a while and so she owed great tribute and great taxes to the empire of Assyria. Eventually, however, even Judah rebelled against Assyria and judgment was going to come against southern Judah as well.

Fall of Samaria

The second major event of the Assyrian period of judgment was the fall of Samaria. Samaria was the capital of northern Israel and became the object of Assyrian vengeance because of the rebellion of the Syrian-Israelite coalition. We read about this event in 2 Kings 17. The great Assyrian army marched against northern Israel and destroyed Samaria, and the Assyrians sent many northern Israelites into exile. Now, this event marked a new day for the people of God, but the climax of covenant judgment in large-scale exile actually took place for the first time with the destruction of northern Israel at the hands of the Assyrians.

Sennacherib Invasion

The third major event of the Assyrian judgment occurred in the Sennacherib invasion of Judah. Judah escaped the wrath of Assyria for a while because they submitted themselves to Assyria to gain protection from the northern kingdom. But later on, even

Judah eventually rebelled against Assyria, and they incurred the wrath of this great empire. Several attacks came against Judah, but the worst came around 701 B.C., the Sennacherib invasion. We can read about this event in 2 Kings 18 and 19. The Assyrians destroyed many Judaite cities and came as far as Jerusalem. In fact, it appeared that all was lost until Hezekiah, the king of Judah, turned to Yahweh for help and was miraculously delivered. Now, Judah remained a vassal state of Assyria, but she avoided total destruction in the days of Hezekiah and the Sennacherib invasion.

So we can see that there were three major events during the Assyrian judgment: first, the Syrian-Israelite coalition in 734; second, the destruction of Samaria in 722 B.C.; and finally, the Sennacherib invasion of 701.

Now that we've seen several major events that took place during the Assyrian judgment, we have to examine how these three events influenced the ministries of the prophets.

PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

The Assyrian judgment had great influence on the ministries of prophets. Of the sixteen books that we have in the Old Testament, six of them report the ministries of Yahweh's emissaries during this period: Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Nahum and Isaiah. All of these prophets ministered during the time of the Assyrian judgment. Let's briefly summarize what these prophets had to say about the Assyrian judgment.

Jonah

First we should mention the prophet Jonah. According to 2 Kings 14:25, God called Jonah to prophesy during the reign of Jeroboam II who was king in northern Israel from around 793-753 B.C. And the place of Jonah's ministry was unique among the prophets because God called him to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. He went to this capital city of the Assyrians and preached the word of Yahweh, and his central message was simple, as we read in Jonah 3:4:

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned (Jonah 3:4).

Much to Jonah's regret, the city of Nineveh repented when they heard this word from Yahweh, and God did not bring the disaster he threatened against the city. Jonah's ministry marks the mercy of God extended even to an empire as evil as the Assyrian empire.

Hosea

A second prophet who ministered during the Assyrian judgment was Hosea. Hosea 1:1 tells us that Hosea served in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Uzziah's last year to reign was around 740 B.C., and Hezekiah's first

year to reign was around 716 B.C. This range establishes a long period for the ministry of the prophet Hosea. He ministered primarily in northern Israel from around 750 B.C., at least until the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. At that time Hosea probably migrated to the South. And so we can see that Hosea prophesied in the days of prosperity before the Syrian-Israelite coalition, and he also prophesied through to the time of the fall of Samaria.

The focus of Hosea's prophecies reveals that he ministered in northern Israel. Most of his prophecies consist of warning against corruption and evil in the North. Hosea's central message was this: the northern kingdom was so corrupted by sin that God was going to judge them by bringing the Assyrians to destroy Israel and Samaria. This prediction, of course, was fulfilled with the fall of Samaria. Hosea did offer hope, however. He said that one day the covenant blessing of restoration would come, even after the exile.

Amos

The third prophet to focus on the Assyrian judgment was Amos. Amos 1:1 tells us that Amos ministered when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam was king of Israel. This verse gives us a range of dates for Amos' ministry from around 760 to 750 B.C. Amos served prior to the dates of the Syrian-Israelite coalition in 734. He served during the dates of northern Israel's prosperity and their complacency under Jeroboam II. And like Hosea, Amos ministered in northern Israel, and his main message was this — he warned the generation of his day that the Assyrian judgment was coming and that Samaria would fall and that exile was going to take place. As Amos says to the Israelites in Amos 5:27:

“Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty (Amos 5:27).

In the last chapter of his book, Amos reiterates the hope that the exile was not the end of Israel. There was going to be a restoration, the covenant blessing of restoration after exile which Moses himself promised was also reaffirmed by Amos.

Micah

The fourth prophet to deal with the Assyrian judgment was Micah. Micah 1:1 says that he ministered during the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the kings of Judah, concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. Micah served as God's prophet from at least 735 B. C., the last year of Jotham's reign, to 701, the days of the Sennacherib invasion. Unlike Hosea and Amos, Micah ministered in Judah, especially in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Put simply, Micah's message was that God was going to judge both Samaria and Jerusalem by the hands of the Assyrians. He had little hope that Samaria would escape out of destruction, and he also warned that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed. During the

Sennacherib invasion, Micah opposed false prophets who said that Jerusalem could never be destroyed by an enemy. He argued that Jerusalem would be destroyed if repentance did not take place. Even so, Micah held out hope to Israel and to Judah that even if exile occurred, one day God would retaliate against her enemies and he would free his people from the oppression of the Assyrian and bring a great king to reunite the people and to restore their covenant blessings in the land.

Nahum

The fifth prophet who ministered during the period of the Assyrian judgment was Nahum. The time of Nahum's ministry is not stated explicitly in his book, but it can be inferred from the materials in his book. His ministry took place between 663 B.C. and 612 B.C. Two verses in his book establish the range of possibilities. In 3:8 we discover that the Egyptian city of Thebes had already been conquered by the Assyrians, and this event took place in 663 B.C. Yet the prophet also foretells the destruction of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, and he speaks of it as a future event in 3:7. Nineveh's destruction took place in 612 B.C., so we know that his ministry took place before that great event.

We read in 1:15 that Nahum addressed Judah, so we may be confident that he did minister in Judah, but Nahum focuses his attention not on Judah, but on Assyria. Both Israel and Judah had suffered severely at the hands of Assyria by this time, and in the midst of this suffering, Nahum had one primary message: God was going to destroy Assyria. He assures Judah that God will punish Assyria by destroying the capital city of Nineveh. As we read in 3:5-7, Yahweh says these words:

“I am against you,” declares the Lord Almighty... “I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, ‘Nineveh is in ruins’” (Nahum 3:5-7).

Isaiah

The sixth prophet to focus on the Assyrian Judgment was Isaiah. Isaiah 1:1 mentions that Isaiah ministered during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. This registry of kings tells us that Isaiah served from around 740 B.C. at least to slightly after 701 B.C., the Sennacherib invasion. We can see that Isaiah ministered through the time of the Syrian-Israelite coalition, the fall of Samaria, and the Sennacherib invasion. The content of Isaiah's book reveals that he ministered in Judah, especially in Jerusalem. Isaiah dealt with Judah in many ways during the time of Assyrian Judgment. He called for fidelity and trust in Yahweh during the Syrian-Israelite coalition. During the Sennacherib invasion, Isaiah led King Hezekiah to trust Yahweh for the deliverance of Jerusalem. These portions of his ministry had one main message: Judah must trust Yahweh as she faced Assyrian judgments. Of course, when the Israelites did not trust Yahweh, Israel had another warning: exile will come to Judah. Yet like so

many other prophets, Isaiah affirmed that the restoration of Judah would take place after the exile.

So we've seen that the period of the Assyrian Judgment had several major events that had significant consequences for the ministries of the prophets. The prophets knew that this was going to be a time of great misery and hardship for the people of God. And they came with words of judgments, but also words of encouragement that a brighter day was on the horizon.

Now that we have explored how Old Testament prophets ministered during the period of Assyrian judgment, we must now turn to the period of the Babylonian judgment.

BABYLONIAN JUDGMENT

So far we've seen that the early monarchy formed a background for all of the writing prophets of the Old Testament. We've also seen that the Assyrian judgment of 734 to 701 B.C. formed the historical context within which Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Nahum and Isaiah ministered. Now we come to the third major period of prophetic ministry, the Babylonian judgment. This period of judgment extended from 605 B.C. to 539 B.C.

In many ways the prophet Isaiah forms a hinge between the period of Assyrian judgment and Babylonian judgment. We've already seen that Isaiah ministered to Hezekiah during the days of the Sennacherib invasion. Well, after this invasion was over, Hezekiah tried to make an alliance with the Babylonians to protect themselves from further attacks. In chapter 39 of Isaiah, the prophet discovers what Hezekiah had done. And so he says these words in 39:5-7:

Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon... Some of your descendants ... will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon (Isaiah 39:5-7).

Once again we'll divide our discussion into two concerns: first, what were the major events of the Babylonian judgment, and second, how did the prophets minister during this time? Let's look first at the major events that comprised the Babylonian judgment.

MAJOR EVENTS

To understand this period, we must identify three major events: the first Babylonian incursion of 605 B.C., the second incursion of 597 B.C., and the third incursion of 586 B.C.

First Incursion

First, in 605 B.C., there was the first incursion and deportation of Judaite leaders to Babylon. The king Jehoiakim was unfaithful to his Babylonian suzerain, Nebuchadnezzar, so Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and removed many of the leaders in Jerusalem. The prophet Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were among those deported at this time.

Second Incursion

The second major event of this period occurred in 597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar responded to continuing rebellion in Judah with a second incursion and deportation. At this time, he destroyed much of Judah and took a good number of the population into exile into Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel was taken away in this deportation. This second incursion hurt the nation of Judah in many ways, but the nation still did not repent of its evil ways.

Third Incursion

The third major event of the Babylonian period occurred 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar had enough of continuing rebellion in Judah and he made a third and final incursion and deportation. This time, the Babylonians utterly destroyed Jerusalem and its holy temple. The vast majority of people in Judah were taken into exile, and the land was left desolate, and a great exile of Judah was under way.

When we think about these three major events during the Babylonian judgment, we must remember that this was a time of utter destruction for the people of God. The son of David was taken off into exile, and the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed. It was a terrible time in the history of God's people.

Now that we've seen the major events of the Babylonian period, we should consider the ways in which Old Testament prophets ministered at these times.

PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

The Babylonian judgment provides an historical context for a number of Old Testament prophets. In fact, seven prophets served as Yahweh's emissaries at this time: Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Joel, Obadiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Jeremiah

The first prophet of the Babylonian period was Jeremiah. Jeremiah served as God's prophet in Judah throughout the three invasions and deportations. As we read in Jeremiah 1:2-3, Jeremiah ministered

... in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah ... through the reign of Jehoiakim ... down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah ... when the people of Jerusalem went into exile (Jeremiah 1:2-3).

From these verses we see that Jeremiah served from about 626 B.C., even before the Babylonians had defeated the Assyrians, and he continued to serve as Yahweh's emissary at least until shortly after 586 when the final Babylonian incursion and deportation took place.

Before the Babylonians first invaded, Jeremiah called for true repentance to forestall the invasions. As the waves of Babylonian attacks continued, Jeremiah learned that Jerusalem's doom was certain. He called for the people to repent and to prepare for years of hardship. Even so, despite his focus on the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah also affirmed that Israel would be restored some day in the future. For instance, in chapters 30–31 of his book, Jeremiah reminded the people of Judah that God would bring them back to the land and establish them in safety under a new covenant.

Zephaniah

The second prophet of the Babylonian judgment was Zephaniah. Zephaniah 1:1 tells us explicitly when he served as God's prophet. He served during the reign of Josiah, son of Amon, King of Judah. Josiah reigned over Judah from about 640 B.C. to 609 B.C., and this makes Zephaniah a contemporary of Jeremiah's early ministry. In 2:13-15, Zephaniah predicted that Nineveh would fall as it did to the Babylonians. In fact, Zephaniah predicted that the day of the Lord was coming against Assyria and other nations who had persecuted the people of God. He anticipated the Babylonian dominance over the entire region, including Judah. Even so, Zephaniah also proclaimed that the day would come when Israel and Judah would be restored to greatness. As he says in 3:20:

“At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,” says the Lord (Zephaniah 3:20).

Joel

A third prophet who appears during the Babylonian Judgment is Joel. We cannot be dogmatic about the date of Joel's ministry because his book does not give us a specific time for his ministry. Some interpreters place Joel earlier, others place him later. Yet from 1:13 and a number of other references, we can be sure that the temple and the priesthood were in operation as Joel preached. Joel also announces that the destruction of Zion will come in 2:1. So Joel probably ministered sometime during the deportations of the Judaites to Babylon. His message was straightforward — the land of Judah was going

to be ravished by foreign armies. And in chapter 2, Joel called for repentance and the hope that sincere repentance might forestall or soften the Babylonian destruction. Yet after concluding that destruction was coming, Joel did not give up entirely on God's blessing. He assured his readers that once the exile was over, God would restore his people to a time of unsurpassed covenant blessing. As he says in Joel 3:20-21:

“Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem through all generations. Their bloodguilt, which I have not pardoned, I will pardon.” The Lord dwells in Zion! (Joel 3:20-21).

Obadiah

A fourth prophet during the Babylonian judgment was Obadiah. His book is not specifically dated either, but it concentrates on how the nation of Edom took advantage of the terrible suffering of the Judaites. In all likelihood, Obadiah had in mind the troubles that came to the Judaites during the waves of invasions and deportations which Babylon inflicted on Judah during the years of 597 to 586 B.C. Obadiah announced that Yahweh will not overlook the cruelties of the Edomites. Edom will be destroyed. In fact, he announced that one day the exiles of Judah would return and take possession of Edom. As Obadiah says in verse 15 of his book:

The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head (Obadiah 15).

Obadiah proclaimed that after Judah's exile was over, God would punish the nations for their mistreatment of his people.

Habakkuk

A fifth prophet who ministered during the Babylonian judgment was Habakkuk. Once again, we don't know precisely when he ministered, yet the content of his book gives us some guidance. In the first chapter of Habakkuk, the prophet prays for the destruction of godless rulers in Judah. God's response is found in 1:6. There the Lord says:

I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own (Habakkuk 1:6).

In light of this passage, it seems likely that Habakkuk ministered sometime near the first Babylonian invasion and deportation in 605 B.C.

Habakkuk first lamented the evil of the Judaites, then he lamented the oppression of the Babylonians, but in the end of his book, Habakkuk affirmed his trust in Yahweh, no matter how long it took for God to destroy the Babylonians. In 3:17-18, we read those well-known words of faith:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Ezekiel

A sixth prophet to serve during the Babylonian period was Ezekiel. Chapter 1 verse 2 of Ezekiel tells us that the prophet was taken to Babylon in 597 B.C. He ministered in Babylon among the exiles, and as the rest of this book makes clear, Ezekiel ministered even through the great destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. So Ezekiel ministered from around 597 through the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Ezekiel spent most of his early ministry proclaiming that the Babylonians were going to destroy Jerusalem and its temple. Beyond this, much of the book of Ezekiel focuses on how the people will return to the land and how they must rebuild the temple when they return. After describing how the city and the temple will be grand beyond belief, he closed his book in this way in 48:35:

And the name of the city from that time on will be: The Lord is there (Ezekiel 48:35).

Daniel

The seventh prophet to minister during the Babylonian judgment was Daniel. Daniel was taken to Babylon in the first deportation of 605 B.C. References to events in his book make it clear that Daniel's ministry extended at least from 605 to 539 B.C. Daniel interpreted dreams and had several visions of his own that made it clear that Judah's exile was going to be extended for a long period of time. He realized that the people of God had not repented of their sins, even in the exile, so as he says in 9:13:

Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth (Daniel 9:13).

As a result, Daniel learned that the exile of God's people would extend through four kingdoms: the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and a fourth unnamed nation which we now know was the Roman Empire. Daniel encouraged repentance and

faith among the exiles and warned that continuing rebellion would only prolong separation from the land.

It would be very difficult to overemphasize the Babylonian judgment. This was a time when the people of God suffered their worst defeat; the people of God were exiled out from the land of Judah; the son of David was exiled from his throne; the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and even the temple of God was destroyed. This was the worst thing that ever happened to the people of God in the Old Testament. And during this time, the prophets offered many words of warning and judgment, but they also offered the hope that one day the Lord would restore his people even to Jerusalem and Judah.

So far in this lesson on the historical analysis of the prophets, we've seen the major events and the prophetic ministries in three periods. Now we come to the last period of Old Testament prophecy, the period of restoration.

RESTORATION PERIOD

As we've seen, the early monarchy provided the background for the writing prophets of the Bible. A number of prophets ministered during the Assyrian judgment, and even more served God during the Babylonian judgment. Now we should explore the prophets who ministered to God's people when some Israelites actually returned from exile in Babylon to the land of Judah. We may speak of this restoration period extending from 539 B.C. to around 400 B.C. We will explore this period in our usual way by focusing first on the major events of that time and then the prophetic ministries. Let's look first at the major events of the restoration period.

MAJOR EVENTS

The first thing we should mention is the return of the Israelites to the land.

Israelites Return to the Land

In 539 and 538 B.C., God did a wonderful thing for his exiled people. In fulfillment of the prophecies in Isaiah, the Persian emperor Cyrus conquered the Babylonian empire and encouraged the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild the temple of Yahweh. This initial restoration of the people from exile took place under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, who many think was Zerubbabel, the rightful heir of David's throne. The exiles who returned, however, were relatively few in number, and they were not firmly devoted to doing Yahweh's will.

Rebuilding of the Temple

Now, this fact brings us to the second major event during the restoration period, the rebuilding of the temple during the years 520 to 515 B.C. The Israelites who first

returned to the land neglected rebuilding the temple. They began the project, but soon became preoccupied with their own needs and stopped building. Because the people of God were failing in their responsibility to rebuild the temple, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah stepped onto the streets of Jerusalem around 520 B.C. to exhort the people to rebuild the temple of God. At first there was great optimism and great hope, but that optimism did not last long.

Widespread Apostasy

The third great event of the restoration period was widespread apostasy. Now, this apostasy grew after the initial rebuilding of the temple, especially during the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah. Scholars debate the precise dates of this period, so we should set a range of possibilities from around 450 to 400 B.C. Within one generation after Zerubbabel had rebuilt the temple, the people of God began to intermarry with foreign women, and as a result, the religion of Israel was mixed with the religions of other peoples. The restoration period ground to a halt. Now Ezra and Nehemiah did have a few reforms and they worked for a while, but it wasn't long even before those reforms failed. The restoration period became a period of great apostasy.

We may now turn to our second concern with the restoration period. How did these events influence the prophets who ministered at this time?

PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

Three well-known prophetic figures were Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Let's first consider the ministry of Haggai.

Haggai

The book of Haggai makes it very plain that this prophet was among those who had returned to the land. As a result, his ministry took place in Jerusalem. Beyond this, we know rather precisely when Haggai ministered. We read in Haggai 1:1 that God spoke through Haggai on the first day of the sixth month to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah. From this and other passages in the book of Haggai, we learn that all of Haggai's prophecies were given during a four-month period in 520 B.C.

Now what was Haggai's basic message? Haggai was determined to inspire the floundering Judaites to rebuild the temple. In fact, Haggai predicted that great victories and blessings would come to Zerubbabel if he and the people would repent of their sins. As he says in 2:21:

Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth (Haggai 2:21).

Haggai offered God's rich blessings to the people if the nation would sincerely turn back to the Lord and rebuild his temple.

Zechariah

The second prophet of the restoration period was Zechariah. From the content of Zechariah's prophecies, we learn that he ministered in Jerusalem alongside of Haggai. Chapter 1 verse 1 mentions that Haggai began to minister in the eighth month of the second year of Darius, in other words, in the year 520 B.C. And from the content of chapters 9–14 of Zechariah, many interpreters believe that Zechariah's ministry continued after it became clear that simply rebuilding the temple was not sufficient to bring divine blessing. In his early ministry, summarized in the first eight chapters of Zechariah, the prophet's message was very simple: great blessings will come if the people will rebuild the temple. Beyond this, however, in chapters 9–14, Zechariah predicted that full restoration would come only by a catastrophic, future, divine intervention. The prophet had visions of a great series of events in the future when God would intervene and bring victory and righteousness to his people. As he said in 14:20:

On that day "Holy to the Lord" will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar (Zechariah 14:20).

Malachi

Now, the last prophet of the Old Testament was Malachi. From his focus on the temple and the Levites, it's apparent that Malachi also ministered in the vicinity of Jerusalem. His message fits best during or after the time of Nehemiah's reforms, somewhere between 450 and 400 B.C. The temple services had become so corrupted, and the people had turned so far away from the Lord that Malachi announced a great judgment was still coming against the people of God. As we read in Malachi 3:5:

[The Lord] will come near to you for judgment (Malachi 3:5).

Yet Malachi knew that the judgment of God in the future would also lead to the final restoration for the righteous in Israel. In 4:2, Malachi offers hope for those who repent and prove to be faithful to the Lord:

For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall (Malachi 4:2).

Malachi assured Israel, even in her apostasy, that after judgment would come a time of great blessing.

The prophets of the restoration period had to deal with a great crisis. The people of God who had come back from exile continued to rebel against God, and as a result, the prophets finally concluded that the great restoration blessings would come only in the distant future. Now, as Christians, we know when this distant future came — it was when Jesus came to the earth.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored an historical analysis of Old Testament prophets. Although the history is very complex, it is helpful to summarize the events of the prophetic history in terms of four major periods: first, the early monarchy; second, the Assyrian judgment; third, the Babylonian judgment; and fourth, the post-exilic period, the time when there were high initial hopes but eventually the hopes gave way to the expectation of a further judgment followed by a distant blessing from God.

As we learn to interpret Old Testament prophecy, it's always essential to relate their words to their circumstances. As we relate the words of prophets to the historical circumstances they faced, we'll be able to understand what their words meant for the people of those days, and we'll also be able to understand what their words mean for us today.

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