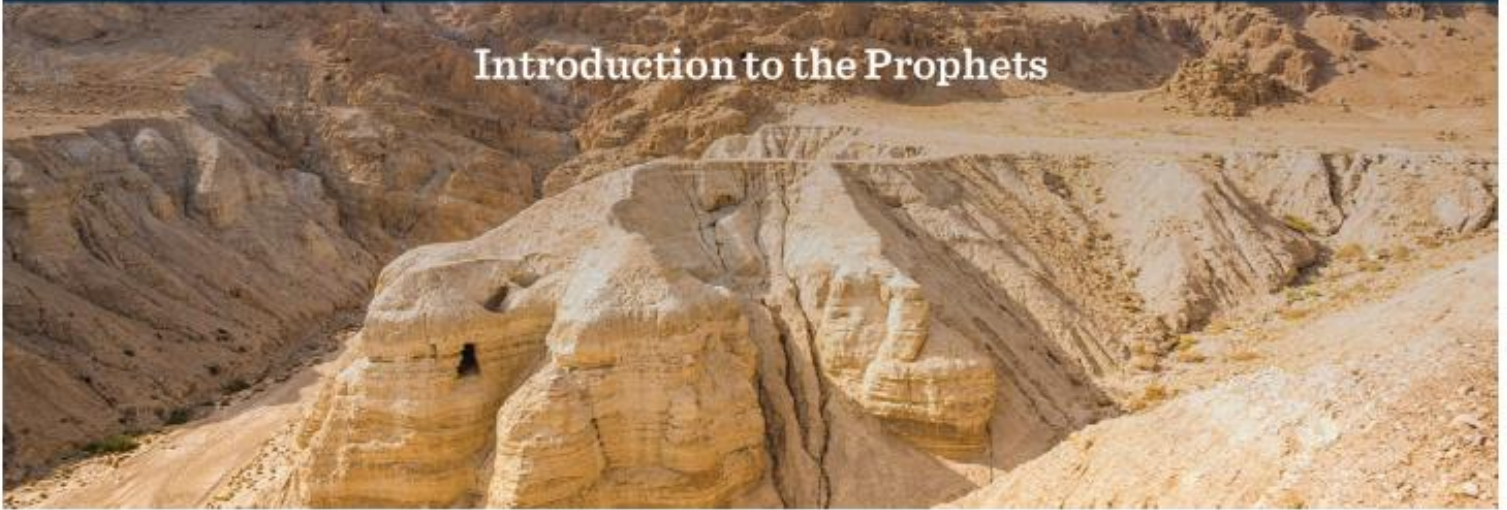


## Session One

### Introduction to the Prophets



Cave in Qumran where Dead Sea Scrolls were found

*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets;  
but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son ...  
– Hebrews 1:1-2*

There are sixteen prophetic books in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Taken as a whole, their length is equal to the entire New Testament. The importance of the prophetic books is incalculable, as it is nearly impossible to understand the work and message of Jesus without them.

Who were the prophets? What was their role in their own day? How should we read and understand their prophetic messages? These are some of the questions this study will answer.

As with other *Great Adventure* Bible studies, *The Prophets: Messengers of God's Mercy* strives to provide the “big picture”—the historical and theological context that prompted their messages—necessary to read and understand the prophets of the Old Testament. In ten sessions, we cannot study every prophet in depth, but we hope to stimulate your interest and lay out a clear road map for future study.

**A key to understanding the prophets is to “read with the heart” and not just the mind.** This is especially so for the prophetic books because they do not fall easily into any one particular literary genre. Some are anthologies or collections of oracles, narratives, and visions. All use poetic language, parallelism, hyperbole (i.e., exaggeration), symbols, and metaphors. At times, the prophets “act out” their messages. So we must be prepared to find meaning on multiple levels, particularly as we read about them in light of the person and work of Christ and the promise of his second coming.

#### WHAT IS A PROPHET?

The common Hebrew word for prophet is *nabi*,<sup>2</sup> which can mean one who is “called by the mouth” of God to “speak forth” his Word to the people of Israel.

<sup>1</sup> This number includes the book of Daniel, which is not listed among the prophets in the Old Testament; it is considered part of the “Writings.”

There are different kinds of prophets represented in the Old Testament, but they all speak on behalf of God to his people in some way. God calls and equips each of them specifically for an individual task, and the prophets are often compelled to speak deeply unpopular messages.

*A prophet speaks on behalf of God to his people.*

If God's people had stayed close to him, there might have been no need for the prophets. The prophets are sent at critical times to call the people back to their covenant relationship with God. Since the prophets speak to the "spiritually hard-of-hearing," they frequently have to shout or act in dramatic and startling ways. They proclaim the future consequences of continued sin, call people to repentance, and declare God's faithful love. They speak of the future in order to shed light on current events and to reveal God's plans and purposes.

### CATEGORIES OF PROPHETS: FORMER AND LATTER, MAJOR AND MINOR

In the Hebrew Scriptures "the Prophets" (*Nevi'im*) refers not to a group of people but to the eight books that cover the time the people of God lived in the land of Israel, from their entry into Canaan through the Babylonian captivity.<sup>2</sup> Christian tradition classifies some of these books in the genre of history, but in the Jewish tradition, history itself has a prophetic character. The prophets of that time are not so much seers of the future as they are seers of the present—they look at what is happening around them in light of Israel's history with God; they discern lessons from that history; and they hear God's Word and convey it to the people. This history reminds the people of their covenant with God and the importance of keeping this covenant if they are to be blessed and remain in the Land of Promise. The telling of this history is therefore considered "prophetic."

You may have heard of the "former" and "latter" prophets, which is a way of dividing the prophets of the Hebrew canon. In this division, the term "former prophets" refers not to specific prophets but to the earlier books among the *Nevi'im*. They are easy to remember because these books are more historical in character. They are Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. These books contain stories about prophets such as Elijah and Elisha, who do not have books named for them. The "latter prophets" are those classified in Christian tradition as the "prophets." Each book bears the name of a single prophet who is called by God to deliver a particular message. Therefore, these are also called the "writing prophets."

In this study, we will focus on the latter (or "writing") prophets. The latter prophets, in turn, are classified as "major" or "minor" prophets, based on the length of each one's prophetic book.

In Christian tradition, the major prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The books of the twelve minor prophets are shorter and may originally have been meant to be read as single books. These prophets are collectively known as "the Twelve" or "the Book of the Twelve."<sup>3</sup> In Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic Bibles, the minor prophets are placed after the major prophets and are arranged in the following order:<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> These eight books are divided further in Christian Bibles. Samuel and Kings are two books each, and the final "Book of the Twelve" minor prophets is divided into twelve separate books.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Sirach 49:10 says, "May the bones of the twelve prophets revive from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope."

<sup>4</sup> In the Hebrew canon, the book of Daniel is placed before Esther in the "Writings." Some Orthodox and Catholic Bibles follow a different arrangement of the minor prophets in accordance with the Septuagint.



MAJOR PROPHETS	MINOR PROPHETS ("THE TWELVE")
Isaiah	Hosea
Jeremiah	Joel
Ezekiel	Amos
Daniel	Obadiah
	Jonah
	Micah
	Nahum
	Habakkuk
	Zephaniah
	Haggai
	Zechariah
	Malachi

### THE BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PROPHETS

We have already learned about the prophetic nature of the history of Israel. Knowing the broad outlines of that history will help us understand the message of the prophets and their place in the Bible.

At its heart, Israel's history—and, in fact, the entire narrative of the Bible—is a love story. It is the story of God reaching out to humanity and drawing us into a familial relationship with himself. After the relationship between God and man is broken in the Fall, God sets out to redeem mankind and restore them to his family through a series of covenants.

As Christians, we are members of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Before that, however, there was the Old Covenant (also called the Mosaic covenant), which was a binding agreement made by God with Israel and sealed with blood. By that covenant:

- God established the nation of Israel as his own people under his loving rule.
- God promised abundant blessings for those who kept its requirements.
- The people promised to keep God's Law or pay the price of breaking it.

The Mosaic covenant is later expanded when God establishes David as king and promises that he and his heirs will reign forever.

After the reigns of David and his son, Solomon, ten tribes split off from Judah, forming a kingdom based to the north of Jerusalem. The resulting "Northern Kingdom" keeps the name "Israel," while the "Southern Kingdom"—still ruled by the Davidic monarchy from Jerusalem—is thereafter called "Judah."

## THE DIVIDED KINGDOM AT A GLANCE

	NORTHERN KINGDOM	SOUTHERN KINGDOM
Name	Israel <sup>5</sup> ("Ephraim" or "Jacob")	Judah
Number of Tribes	Ten	Two
Ruler	Succession of kings, dynasties	Royal line of David
Center of Worship	Golden calves at Dan and Bethel	Temple at Jerusalem
Capital	Samaria	Jerusalem

Following this division, first Israel and then Judah—desiring to be like the nations around them—stray from God and begin to worship foreign gods. It is during the time of the Divided Kingdom that God begins to send the prophets. These “mouthpieces” (messengers of God) call Israel and Judah to return to their covenant relationship with God. In particular, the prophets do three things:

1. They call the people to repentance.
2. They warn of judgment that will follow as a consequence of not returning to the LORD and his covenant.
3. They point to a future restoration that will unite not just all of Israel but also, eventually, all the nations under the just reign of God and his anointed King (the Messiah).

*The Great Adventure Bible Timeline Chart* (included with this study) divides the biblical narrative into twelve distinct time periods to make it easy to get the “big picture” of salvation history before studying any part of the Bible. If you are not familiar with *The Bible Timeline Chart*, take a moment now to get your bearings.

The prophets we will study fall within three time periods of *The Bible Timeline*: the Divided Kingdom, the Exile, and the Return. As a memory aid, each section is color-coded: The black of the Divided Kingdom represents Israel's darkest period; the baby blue of the Exile evokes the people “singing the blues” in captivity; and yellow is used to signify the “brighter days” of the Return. Open the Chart so you can see these periods. Read the panel entitled, “Key to Understanding *The Bible Timeline Chart*.”

In the band at the top of the Chart, you will find the “narrative books” of these three time periods: 1 and 2 Kings, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Together, these provide the basic historical context of the prophets. Toward the bottom of the Chart are other, “supplemental” books of the Bible that pertain to those periods.<sup>6</sup> Nearly all are the books of the writing prophets (for example, Amos and Hosea in the Divided Kingdom).

The band at the bottom of the Chart shows which nation is the world power at a particular time. This is crucial to know, as those nations have a strong influence on Israel and Judah both politically and spiritually.

The center of the Chart shows the progression of events and the key people in the biblical narrative. It also has a geographical aspect to it. The center band represents the land of Canaan (Israel's home, the Promised Land). Events related to countries north of Israel (Assyria and Babylon, for example) are in the band above the center. Below are events related to countries to the south.

<sup>5</sup> “Israel” can refer to the Northern Kingdom or to the twelve tribes. The meaning must be inferred from the context.

<sup>6</sup> The books called “supplemental” on *The Bible Timeline Chart* should not be considered less important than the fourteen “narrative books” that tell the story. They are placed on the Chart to show how they fit into the overall narrative.

As for the people:

- Names listed along the red line are people in Jesus' genealogy.
- Names attached by lines to the bars in the middle of the Chart are the kings of the "Northern Kingdom" and "Southern Kingdom."
- Italicized names are prophets. Each is positioned near the kingdom or nation to which the individual prophet's message is directed (this will become clearer during the course of the study).

The following chart lists the "writing" prophets of the Divided Kingdom, the Exile, and the Return, along with the primary audiences of their messages, the years they speak, and where you can read about them in the Bible. (Prophets included in this study are in bold.)

### WRITING PROPHETS OF THE DIVIDED KINGDOM, EXILE, AND RETURN

BIBLE TIMELINE PERIOD	AUDIENCE AND CONTEXT (Israel exiled to Assyria, Judah to Babylon)	PROPHET	YEARS (BC)	SCRIPTURE VERSES
Divided Kingdom (North)	Israel (Pre-Exile)	Amos	760–753	Amos 2 Kings 14:23–15:7
		Hosea	750–715	Hosea 2 Kings 14:23–18:12
Divided Kingdom (South)	Judah (Pre-Exile)	Isaiah	740–680	Isaiah 2 Kings 15:1–20:21 2 Chronicles 26:16–32:33
		Micah	735–700	Micah 2 Kings 15:32–19:37 2 Chronicles 27:1–32:23
		Zephaniah	632–628	Zephaniah 2 Kings 22:1–2 2 Chronicles 34:1–7
	Judah (Pre-Exile, Exile)	Jeremiah	625–580	Jeremiah 2 Kings 22:3–25:30 2 Chronicles 34–36
	Judah (Pre-Exile)	Habakkuk	610–605	Habakkuk 2 Kings 23:31–24:7 2 Chronicles 36:1–8

*continued*



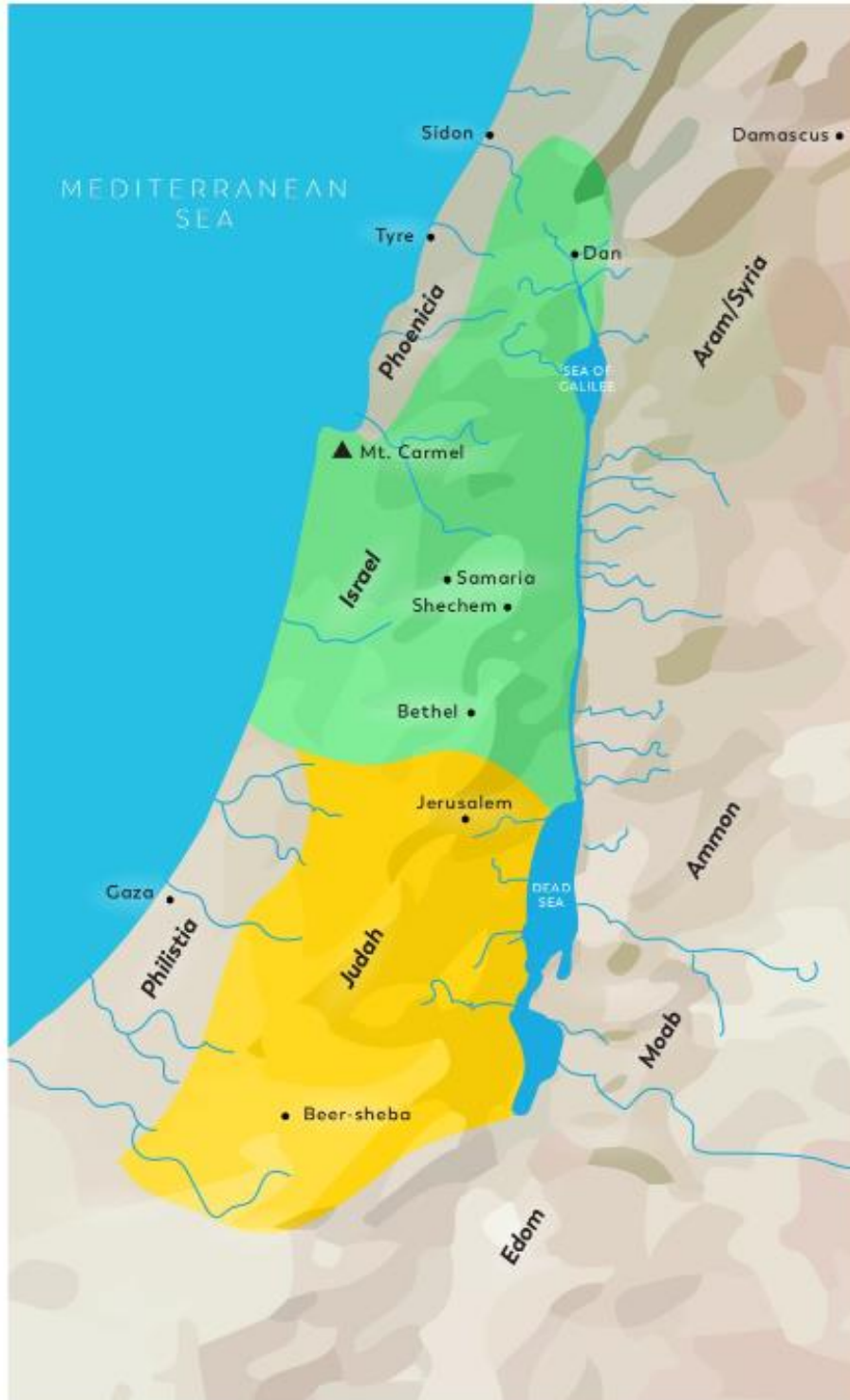
WRITING PROPHETS OF THE DIVIDED KINGDOM, EXILE, AND RETURN

Table continued

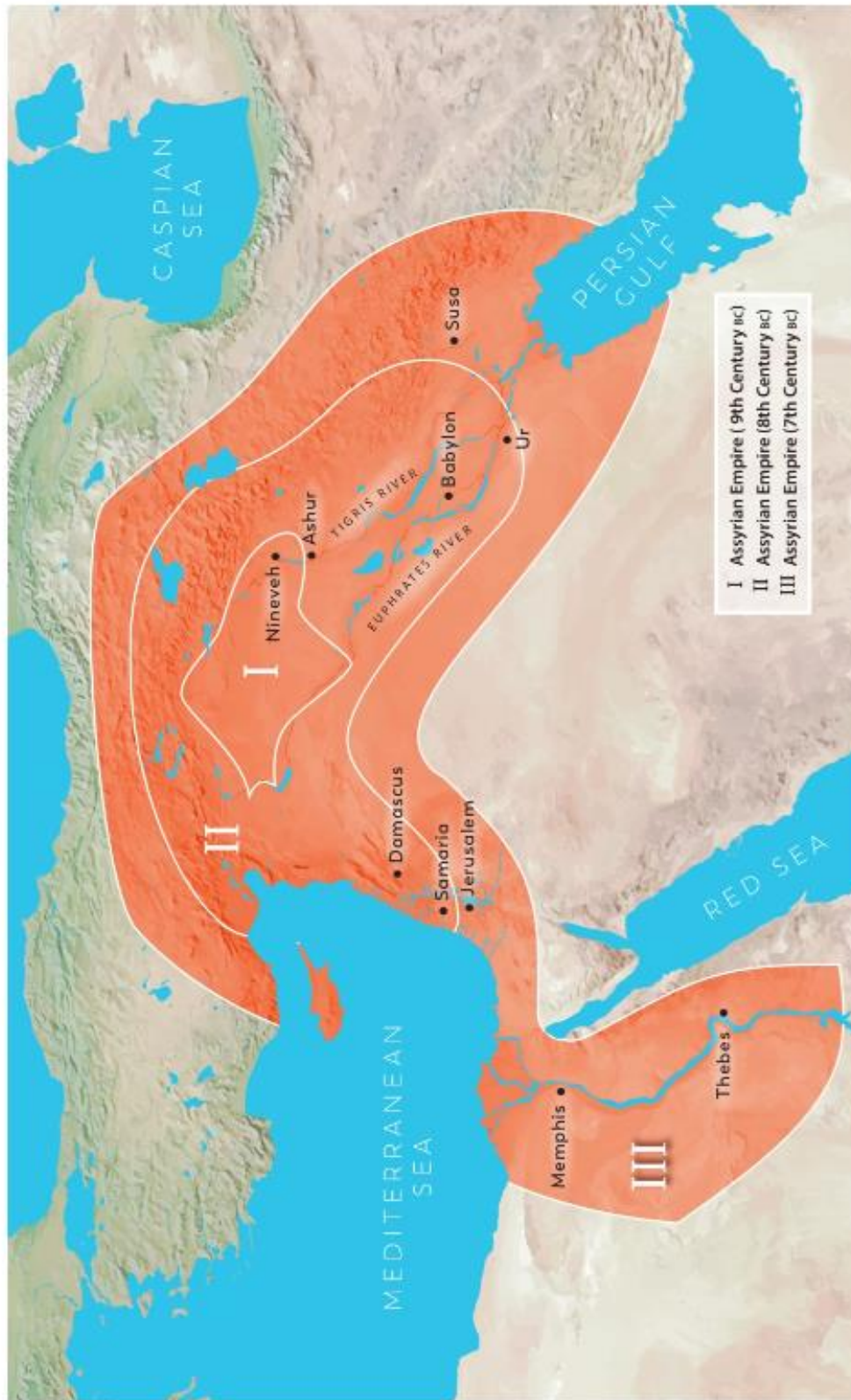
BIBLE TIMELINE PERIOD	AUDIENCE AND CONTEXT (Israel exiled to Assyria, Judah to Babylon)	PROPHET	YEARS (BC)	SCRIPTURE VERSES
Divided Kingdom (Other)	Assyria	Jonah	800–753	Jonah 2 Kings 13:10–25, 14:23–29
Exile	Judah (Pre-Exile)	Joel	722–701	2 Kings 17–22 2 Chronicles 29–33
	Assyria	Nahum	664–654	Nahum 2 Kings 21:1–18 2 Chronicles 33:1–20
	Judah (Exile)	Daniel	605–535	Daniel 2 Kings 23:34–25:30 2 Chronicles 36:4–23
	Judah (Exile)	Ezekiel	590–571	Ezekiel, Obadiah 2 Kings 24:8–25, 24:30 2 Chronicles 36:9–21
	Edom	Obadiah	c. 586	
Return	Judah (Post-Exile)	Haggai	520	Haggai Ezra 5:1–6:15
		Zechariah	520–480	Zechariah Ezra 5:1–6:15
		Malachi	432–424	Malachi Nehemiah 13:1–31

# Maps

## The Divided Kingdom

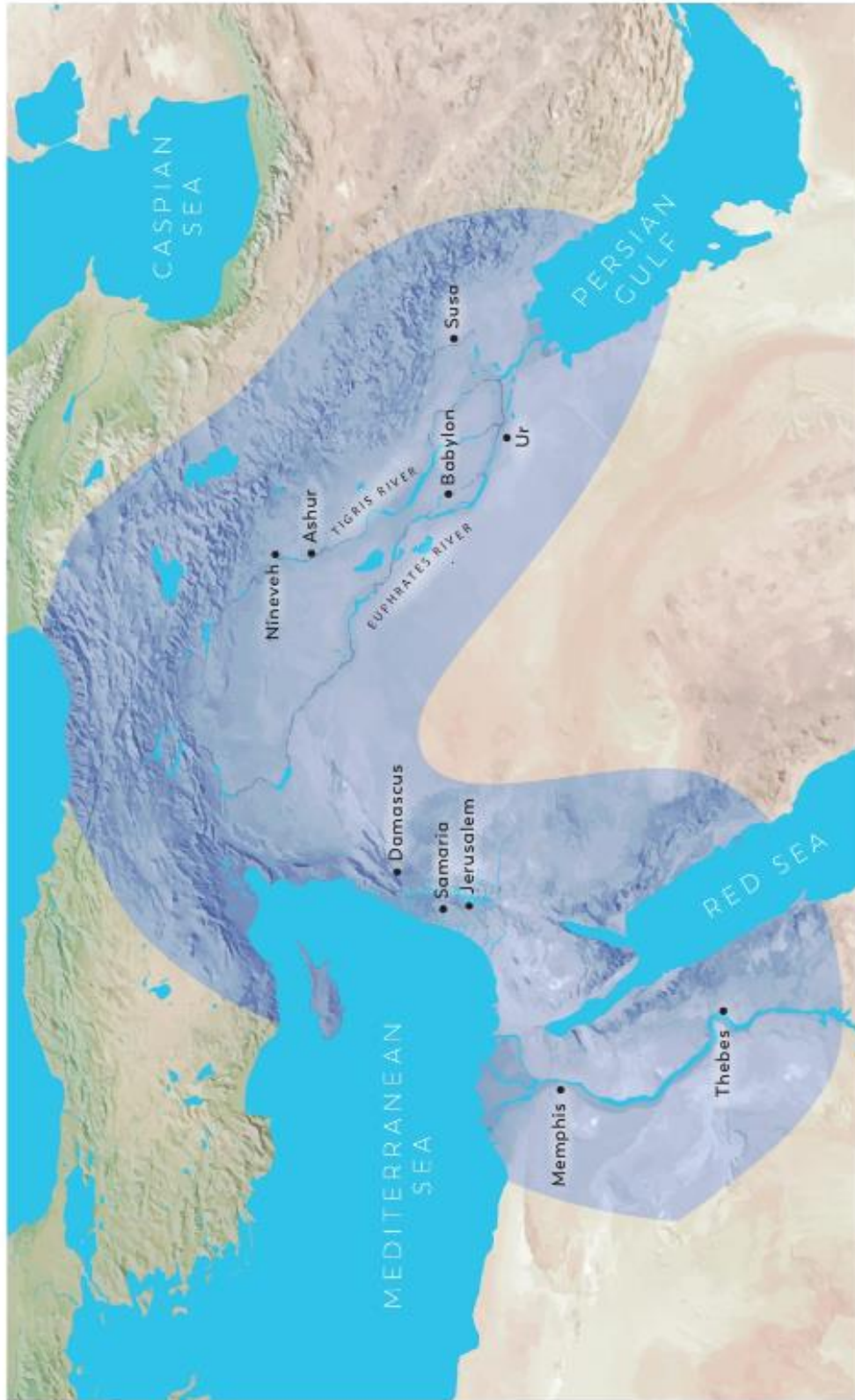


**Assyrian Empire (c. 722 BC)**





**Babylonian Empire (c. 600 BC)**



**Persian Empire (c. 500 BC)**



## MESSIANIC PROPHECIES FROM THE PROPHETS AND THEIR FULFILLMENT

PROPHECY ABOUT THE MESSIAH	PROPHET	FULFILLED IN JESUS
A prophet like Moses ("the Prophet")	Deuteronomy 18:15, 18:18	Acts 3:20-23 John 7:40-42
Born in Bethlehem	Micah 5:2 (NAB 5:1)	Matthew 2:1 Luke 2:4-6
Born of a virgin	Isaiah 7:14	Matthew 1:20-23 Luke 1:26-31
From King David's line, reign on his throne	Isaiah 9:7 (NAB 9:6)	Luke 1:32-33 Romans 1:3
Eternal throne	Daniel 2:44	Luke 1:33 Hebrews 1:8-12
Called Emmanuel	Isaiah 7:14	Matthew 1:23
Called out of Egypt	Hosea 11:1	Matthew 2:13-15
Way prepared by messenger	Isaiah 40:3-5; Malachi 3:1	Luke 3:3-6
Preceded by Elijah	Malachi 4:5-6 (NAB 3:23-24)	Matthew 11:13-14 Luke 1:17
Rejected by own people	Isaiah 53:1-3	Matthew 26:3-4 John 1:10-11, 7:5, 12:37-38
A sacrifice for sin	Isaiah 53:5-12	John 1:29 Acts 10:43, 13:38-39 Romans 5:6-8 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 Ephesians 1:7
Bring light to Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles	Isaiah 9:1-2 (NAB 8:23-9:1)	Matthew 4:13-16
How beautiful the feet of him who brings good news	Isaiah 52:7	Romans 10:15
Speak in parables	Isaiah 6:9-10	Matthew 13:10-15
Heal the brokenhearted	Isaiah 61:1-2	Luke 4:18-19
Carry our diseases	Isaiah 53:4	Matthew 8:17

*continued*



## MESSIANIC PROPHECIES FROM THE PROPHETS AND THEIR FULFILLMENT

Table continued

PROPHECY ABOUT THE MESSIAH	PROPHET	FULFILLED IN JESUS
God's Servant	Isaiah 42:1	Matthew 12:18
Called king, enter Jerusalem triumphantly on a donkey	Zechariah 9:9	Matthew 21:8-11 Mark 11:7-11 Luke 19:35-37 John 12:12-15
Betrayed for thirty pieces of silver	Zechariah 11:12-13	Matthew 26:14-16
Like a lamb to the slaughter	Isaiah 53:7	Acts 8:32
Tried and condemned	Isaiah 53:8	Matthew 27:1-2 Luke 23:1, 23 Acts 4:26-28
Silent before accusers	Isaiah 53:7	Matthew 27:12-14 Mark 15:3-5 1 Peter 2:22-23
Spat upon, struck	Isaiah 50:6	Matthew 26:67-68 Matthew 27:30 Mark 14:65, 15:19 John 19:1-3
Numbered with transgressors	Isaiah 53:12	Matthew 27:38 Mark 15:27-28 Luke 22:37, 23:32-33
Hands and feet pierced	Zechariah 12:10	John 20:25-27
Side pierced	Zechariah 12:10	John 19:34
Buried in a rich man's grave	Isaiah 53:9	Matthew 27:57-60
By his stripes we are healed	Isaiah 53:5	1 Peter 2:24
Every knee shall bow	Isaiah 45:23	Romans 14:11

Note: This prayer, Pope Francis' "Prayer of Renewal,"<sup>†</sup> will be prayed at the close of every session of this study.

*Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways, I have shunned your love,  
yet here I am once more to renew my covenant with you. I need you.*

*Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace.*

<sup>†</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* 3.

## SESSION ONE TALK NOTES

## Introduction to the Prophets

## I. Introduction

- A. Definition: A prophet “afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted” (attributed to Abraham Heschel)
- B. Scope of this study
- C. The “so what?” – relevance to us
  - 1. The prophets’ teachings are perennial, for everyone
  - 2. The prophets are real people who share our struggles
  - 3. The prophetic mission is our mission
  - 4. The prophets reveal the Father’s heart and point to Christ
    - a. Hugh of St. Victor quote from CCC 134

## II. The “Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why” of the Prophets

- A. What is a prophet?
  - 1. What the prophets *do* reveals what a prophet *is*
  - 2. “Prophet” from Greek *prophētēs*, equivalent to Hebrew word *nabi* (to speak forth or to be called out)
  - 3. A prophet: one who is called out by the LORD to speak forth the Word of the LORD under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit
- B. Who were the Old Testament prophets?
  - 1. Non-writing prophets (Genesis through 2 Kings) – Examples:
    - a. Abraham, an intercessor (Genesis 20:7)
    - b. Aaron, spokesperson for Moses (Exodus 7:1)
    - c. Nathan, a conscience for the king (2 Samuel 12)
    - d. Elijah and Elisha use predictive prophecy, signs, miracles to confront sin, call to repentance
  - 2. Sixteen “writing prophets”
    - a. “Major” versus “minor” based on size of text
    - b. Major prophets (Christian tradition): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
    - c. Minor prophets: Hosea through Malachi
      - i. Intended to be read together
      - ii. “The Book of the Twelve” (example: Sirach 49:10)
    - d. Eight covered in this study: Hosea, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, and Malachi

- C. When did the prophets speak, and to whom?
  - 1. Three important time periods: Divided Kingdom, Exile, Return
  - 2. Placement of prophets on *Bible Timeline* Chart indicates audience
  - 3. See details in introduction to this study
  - 4. Audiences: Northern and Southern Kingdoms, other nations
- D. Where did the prophets come from?
  - 1. Most prophesied in Judea, Jerusalem; others came from Galilee
  - 2. All walks of life
- E. What did the prophets say? (three central themes)
  - 1. Call to repentance: healing a ruptured relationship
  - 2. Judgment (consequences) for covenant infidelity
  - 3. Hope, restoration, consolation
- F. How did they relay this message?
  - 1. Not “just the facts”
    - a. Use of images, metaphors, poetry, song
    - b. Aim to win hearts, not just heads
    - c. Prophets are living parables, embodying their messages
  - 2. Hosea (next session) as an example

### III. Conclusion: Pope Francis' Prayer of Renewal<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For the text of this prayer, which is prayed at the close of each session, see page 12.



## Prophets of the Divided Kingdom (930–722 BC)

### INTRODUCTION TO SESSIONS TWO TO SIX

The original kingdom of Israel was made up of twelve tribes ruled by a single king. This king was a descendant of King David, whose throne God had promised to establish forever in Jerusalem.

In 930 BC, the ten northern tribes revolted against the rule of David's grandson and split off from the two southern tribes, creating two separate kingdoms—Israel in the north and Judah in the south. (See the map on page 7.) Israel is often called “Ephraim” after the name of the largest northern tribe.

The first king of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam I, sets up two shrines with images of golden calves (one in Dan, in the northernmost part of the kingdom, and the other in Bethel, in the southernmost part). He also sets up a false priesthood and calendar of feasts to dissuade people from worshipping the one true God in the Temple in Jerusalem. Although Israel is first to turn away from God, Judah will soon turn its back on God's covenant as well. It is during the Divided Kingdom that God begins sending prophets to call his people back to himself.

Some prophets are sent to Israel (the Northern Kingdom). On your *Bible Timeline Chart*, locate the prophets in the period of the Divided Kingdom. These appear directly beneath the black “Northern Kingdom” bar. God sends Elijah and Elisha (two of the “former prophets”) early in the period of the Divided Kingdom. When the situation becomes grave and exile is imminent, God sends the writing prophets **Amos** and **Hosea**.

God also sends prophets to other nations during this time. In the band above the center of the Chart, you will find **Jonah** (who is sent to Assyria) and **Obadiah** (who prophesies against Edom).

God calls other prophets to warn Judah (the Southern Kingdom), particularly around the time of the collapse of Israel in the north, that if they do not change their ways and turn back to the LORD, they will find themselves in a similar situation. The message to Judah is that it should not assume God's presence in the Temple will assure the people of divine protection. They must obey the covenant.

Find these prophets on the Chart where the first blue arrow shows Israel going into exile (above the purple “Southern Kingdom” bar). Notable among them are Isaiah and Micah. More prophets are sent to Judah closer to the time of that kingdom's defeat by Babylon. (Look for Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk on the Chart, just before Judah's downfall and the three deportations to Babylon, which are marked by three blue arrows).

The first four prophets we will study—Hosea, Jonah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah—are from the period of the Divided Kingdom.