

AIDS
to
THE PROPHETS

***“Take, my brethren, the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord
for an example of suffering affliction and of patience.”
(James 5:10)***

AIDS TO THE PROPHETS

“We have also a more sure Word of prophecy, whereunto ye do well that ye take heed as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” (2 Peter 1:19 - 21).

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1. Introduction

The Bible says,

“Take, my brethren, the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord for an example....” (Jas. 5:10).

The prophets were rejected (Acts 7:51-52). If we identify ourselves with God’s Word and with righteousness we can expect similar treatment (2 Tim 3:12; Matt 5:11-12). We can therefore gain much inspiration and encouragement from studying their personal lives, not just their prophecies.

My aim in these notes is to collect as many references as possible from the Old Testament prophetic books which give an insight into the lives of these unusual men of God whose faith cost them so much (Heb 11:32b-38).

I also very much hope that there will be those who will draw great strength and inspiration from seeing how the Lord revealed Himself to the prophets, and how the Word of the Lord came to them. I hope their faith will rise up, greatly quickened by the Holy Ghost, unto a living expectancy that God can speak to them likewise.

“The Lord God will do nothing but he revealeth his secret to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7).

“In the last days ... I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18).

Do you believe it? More significantly, do you expect it? Let not the lives of these men be mere past historical landmarks, Let not our faith in God be like the Pharisees who built beautiful memorials to the prophets when dead but who could not recognise One standing in their midst (Matt 23:29-36).

Let us read their lives in the same Spirit as the apostle John: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” (Rev.1:10a). When we read the Word under the anointing of the Spirit it quickens us and is quickened within us. Seek much therefore the Spirit of wisdom and revelation (Eph 1:17). “The words that I speak unto you they are Spirit and they are Life” (Jn 6:63).

Many seem to find difficulty in “getting into” the prophets and I hope that these notes will smooth the path into these books, which are equal in length to the whole New Testament. I trust that the reading of these prophecies will be made much easier after being inspired by the lives those men who were the mouth-pieces of God’s Spirit and Word (Heb 1:1; 1 P 1:10-12; 2 P 1:20-21).

“We have also a more sure word of prophecy, whereunto ye do well that ye take heed as unto a light that shineth in a dark place” (2 P 1:19).

2. Some Hints to Aid Study of the Prophets

Three points are suggested to benefit from the lives of these men:

- 1) Set their ministry in its historical context
- 2) Note all biographical details given
- 3) Observe in what different ways the Lord reveals His Word to them.

Historical Context

A great help to understanding the prophets and their ministry is to read the historical events of their day. The opening verses will usually give details of the reigning kings at the time. Cross-reference these as appropriate. Writing the names of contemporary prophets alongside the names of kings in the margin of the Bible is often a help.

The order of the prophetic books in our Bible bears little resemblance to the date order in which these men ministered. A helpful chronological order would be:

- a) Prophets before the exile
 - i) to foreign nations: Jonah & Nahum (to Nineveh, capital of Assyria); Obadiah (to Edom)
 - ii) to Israel before the Assyrian exile: Amos, Hosea, Micah
 - iii) to Judah before the Babylonian exile: Joel, Micah, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah & Jeremiah (who prophesied both before the exile and for some time later)
- b) Prophets during the Babylonian exile: Ezekiel, Daniel
- c) Prophets after the return from Babylon: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Biographical Details

Having established the historical setting in which these men ministered, some biographical details to look for (where given) to build up a mental picture of them are:

- how and why they were called;
- circumstances under which they ministered;
- how their Word was received;
- their treatment;
- effects on social and family lives;
- prayer and intercessory ministry;
- inner struggles and temptations;
- unusual actions they were sometimes called upon to undertake.

The ways the Lord reveals His Word

Notice the different ways in which the Lord reveals His Word to them (remembering with anticipation that He is the same living God able to do the same today) and the effects of these revelations on them - the deep inner burden.

3. General Background to the Prophets

Unlike the priests and Levites, whose office was hereditary, the prophets were individually called of God.

The word 'prophet' in Hebrew means, "to boil up and gush out like a fountain" or "to be a spokesman of". (See Ex 4:14b-16 and 7:1). They were God's mouthpieces. Originally they were called 'seers', which describes one of the ways God spoke to them (1 Sam 9:9; Num 12:6).

God has always had His holy prophets (Luke 1:70). He does nothing without first revealing it to them (Amos 3:7). They were men who knew the mind of God for their day and brought it to the people. Without it they fared ill (Pro 29:18; 1 Sam 3:1).

There were many prophets in addition to the 'writing' prophets (i.e. those whose names head one of the Old Testament prophetic books) e.g. Enoch (Jude 14), Abraham (Gen 20:7; Ps 105:15), Moses (Dt 18:15), Samuel (1 Sam 3:20), David (Acts 2:30), and certain of the temple choir (1 Chr 25: 1-7).

The 'writing' prophets began their ministry comparatively late in Old Testament history. It was not until the reign of Uzziah of Judah (2 Chr 26, called Azariah in 2 K 15) that they first appeared with Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah and Jonah all prophesying roughly about the same period. (Joel is also thought to have prophesied at this time, or even earlier, though nothing is known of this man apart from his father's name (Joel 1:1).

The historical setting explains much of the ministry of the prophets. In the reign of David, God brought Israel to the nearest point she had ever reached of His divine purpose for her. Here was a man who sought to establish the rule (or kingdom) of God on earth. All nations were to see that the nation whose God is Jehovah would be exalted. The surrounding nations were conquered and paid tribute to David. The Ark was established as the centre of the nation's life. All that was awaited was the greater David, the Messiah Himself, to come and establish His rule forever to the ends of the earth.

During the reign of Solomon, David's son, Israel enjoyed in peace all that David had earned in war. During that time (c. 1000 BC) Israel was probably the most powerful nation on earth. The Egyptian empire had declined earlier. The empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome were yet to come.

With Solomon's backsliding, however, the decline began. At his death the nation was split into the 10 Northern tribes, Israel, (often called Ephraim in the prophets), and the 2 Southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, with Jerusalem as their capital.

About 150 years after this division the 'writing' prophets began to appear. Israel had now lost her ascendancy among the surrounding nations. Syria to the north caused such trouble, The prophet Elisha had just died. A far more threatening enemy was beginning to rear its head, however, the dread armies of Assyria, an empire in the north of modern day Iraq, with Nineveh as its capital,

The savage cruelty of this rapacious nation was fearsome indeed. For roughly 300 years (from about 900 - 600 BC) they dominated the Middle East, threatening Palestine from the reign of

Uzziah till the days of Hezekiah when the angel of the Lord slew 185,000 of the besieging Assyrian hosts in one night (2 K 19:35). Thereafter their power waned as Babylon to the south began to rise, eventually subduing the whole Middle East and leading the remnant of Judah into captivity.

For 50 years before Israel was taken into captivity by Assyria (2 K 17), and 180 years before Judah's Babylonian exile, the prophets brought the burden of the Word of the Lord.

Their initial purpose was to inspire repentance and a turning from the idolatry the people had fallen into. They threatened they would be scattered among the surrounding nations if they did not, as long forewarned by Moses (Dt 28).

Having failed to avert the impending disaster, they turned their attention to the promise of a future restoration to their own land. The promised Messiah would still come and establish His universal rule from Jerusalem. Israel would be reunited and converted. The Gentile nations would be punished for their treatment of God's chosen people, and would yet come and acknowledge Israel as the head of the nations, worshipping Jehovah.

Before Messiah's universal rule, however, He would first come and be rejected. Nevertheless, through Him would all nations be blessed.

4. Prophets to Gentile Nations (Jonah, Nahum & Obadiah)

Almost all the prophets spoke of the future of the Gentile nations surrounding Israel at some point in their ministries. These nations figured large in the prophetic vision. This is because of Israel's place in world history. She was to become the chief nation, the visible revelation of the kingdom of God on earth, ruled over by her Messiah, the Son of David, who would hold universal dominion. Through her would the Gentile kingdoms be blessed.

Until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev 11:15), however, they are still in the control of the evil one (Matt. 4:8-9). They often, therefore, reveal his characteristics. So through them Satan reveals his hatred for Israel, the apple of God's eye.

So it is in the vision of Obadiah. Edom, a nation south of the Dead Sea, was filled with a proud spirit, self-confident in its wisdom (vv 1-9) (cp the spirit of the king of Tyrus, a type of satan, Ezk 28:1-6). This spirit had led them to join with those spoiling Judah and Jerusalem (vv 10-14). In this Edom was typical of the Gentile kingdoms as a whole, and they too will all be dealt with in the day of the Lord, when the kingdom will be the Lord's (i.e. the Lord will establish His visible kingdom (or rule) over all the earth) (vv 15—21).

Other nations mentioned in the prophets are Egypt, Ethiopia, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, Syria, Ammon, Moab, Babylon and Assyria.

The two remaining prophets to Gentile nations, Nahum and Jonah, both prophesy to Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire. This world empire lasted about 300 years, beginning to rise about the time of the division of the Hebrew nation after Solomon's reign. It gradually absorbed and eventually destroyed the 10 northern tribes (Israel) as well as seriously threatening Judah. The rising power of Babylon resulted in Assyria's downfall, led by Nebuchadnezzar's father.

The book of Jonah is self-explanatory. Note how, despite his shortcomings, Jonah is still a sign and foreshadowing of Christ. Since the Spirit of Christ was in the prophets they all in some way reflect Christ (Matt 12:39-41; 16: 1-4).

The prophecy of Nahum, given more than a century after Jonah's, spoke of certain doom. Nineveh's earlier repentance under Jonah's message had been forgotten. (Of Nahum himself nothing is known beyond the opening verse).

5. The impending Doom of the Northern Kingdom (Amos, Hosea & Micah)

For the historical background, read 2 Kings 14:23 - 18:3.

The long 41-year reign of Jeroboam II was the zenith of Israel's power. He was a successful but evil king. Within ten years of his death, however, Menahem had to pay the rising Assyrian power 1000 talents of silver to allow him to keep his throne (2 K 15:19). A dozen or so years later the whole of northern Israel was carried into captivity by the same armies (2 K 15:29), and 41 years after Jeroboam's death Israel had ceased to exist (2 K 17:1-6). (For an inspired commentary on the reason for Israel's captivity, see 2 K 17:7-23).

Her downfall had not been because of the Lord's indifference.

Elijah and Elisha had both sought earlier to return Israel to the Lord. Perhaps Jonah also. (Apart from his prophecy to Nineveh, we know Jonah also spoke of Jeroboam's reign (2 K 15:25)).

Then came Amos during Jeroboam's reign and Hosea at the same time and later. Micah too prophesied of the coming destruction of Israel in the short period after Jeroboam's death and before her final eclipse. He also warned Judah of a similar fate if she did not amend her ways.) (Micah 1:1). It was during these later years that the lengthy ministry of Isaiah to the southern kingdom began.

- **Amos 1:1** Notice how the Word came to Amos: "The word of Amos ... which he saw" i.e. by vision.

He was a humble shepherd from Tekoa in the Judean hills south of Jerusalem (cp 7:14—15). Note how He was called. He had no extensive formal preparation, though doubtless his character had been formed beforehand.
- **7:1—9** Insights into how the Lord speaks in visions. He had three visions. Note his intercessory ministry. Twice respite is granted. Israel still does not repent, so judgement is irrevocable.
- **7: 10—17** An insight into his reception. He had left Judah to prophesy in the northern king's court at Bethel, one of the worst centres of Israel's idolatry. As often happens, his prophecy was misinterpreted. He was reported as saying Jeroboam would die. But he actually said the *house* of Jeroboam would die by the sword (7:9b). (And so it was. Zachariah, son of Jeroboam, was slain by Shallum, 2 K 15:10). Note the prophet's fearlessness, even though it could have cost him his life.
- **Hosea 1:1—11** A remarkable illustration of the extent to which a prophet was identified with the Word he bore and the Lord he served. Israel's whole attitude to Jehovah was that of an unfaithful woman. She sought association with many lovers abandoning her true Husband (cp Jas 4:4). Hosea abounds with terms such as whoredoms, adulteries, lovers, and harlot. The whole land was full of the spirit of whoredom (4:12; 5:4).

In order for His servant to feel within himself the depths of God's own heartache over His adulterous wife, God desired him to marry an unchaste woman (1:2).

This was not the preaching of a hireling but of a man thoroughly wed to his message and to his God. Other prophets' home lives were also profoundly affected by their message. Jeremiah was forbidden to marry as a sign of Judah's coming destruction in which husband and wife would be separated. Compare how Ezekiel was forbidden to mourn when he lost his wife as a sign that the coming destruction would be such that the inhabitants of the land would have no opportunity for normal mourning and funeral arrangements.

Even the children Gomer, his wife, bore were constant reminders of Hosea's message (1:4-5, 6-7, 8-9). Likewise Isaiah's children were named after the burden of his message.

- **3:1—5** As already seen (1:10-11) Hosea had not only to speak of forthcoming judgement but also of a future restoration. To better equip him to express the depths of God's feelings in taking back unfaithful Israel, he too was called upon to take back his adulterous wife (who had since run away and sunk to a mere slave) and to show love to her once again. She was, however, to be deprived of full marital privileges for a while, just like Israel before her full restoration.

Now deeply did Hosea identify with his Master! Truly only after experiencing such things in his own life could he feel the deep, tender yearnings of the Lord's heart over His adulterous wife (6:4a; 11:8—9).

- **Micah 1:8** See how deeply the announcement of coming judgement (1:2—7) affects the prophet himself. He felt the sorrow of God towards the very people He reprovved.
- **3:8** The inner anointing equipping a true prophet to declare the Word.
- **Jer 26:16-19** Tells how Hezekiah responded to Micah's prophecy (see Mi 3:12).

6. Judah's immediate future assured: but forewarned of disaster (Isaiah)

For the historical background of the period see 2 Kings 15:32 — 16:20; 18:1 - 20:21.

Isaiah was contemporary with Micah and a little later than Hosea and Amos. His ministry probably lasted about 50 years, According to Jewish tradition he was sawn asunder by Hezekiah's wicked son, Manasseh (cp Heb 11:37).

Early in Hezekiah's reign, he saw the eclipse of the northern kingdom by Assyria. Despite the dire threat that Judah too would be carried away by the same foe, Isaiah prophesied that although captivity would indeed come because of Judah's sin, yet this would not be by Assyria, but by the as yet insignificant Babylon. Furthermore the latter would in turn be overthrown by the Medo-Persians, and the captive Jews allowed to return (Isa 39:5—7; 43:17—22).

In addition to prophecies concerning his own land and judgements on the surrounding nations of his day, Isaiah spoke much of the coming Messiah. It is he who gives the fullest preview of Him, and he is justly called the Messianic prophet (e.g. 7:14; 9:2 [cp Matt 4:14-16]; 9:6-7; 40: 3-5; 42: 1-4 [cp Matt 12:15-21]; 42:6b [cp Lk 2:32a]; 52:13—53:12; 61:1—2 [cp Lk 4:17—21]). Further prophecies point to the glorious future of a restored Israel, the blessing of the Gentiles, and the new heavens and the new earth.

- **Isa 1:1; 2:1** The subject and period of his prophecies.
- **6:1—13** A vision of Christ (Jn 12:41). Isaiah promptly heeds God's call. His mission is difficult; his message will not bring repentance but merely further harden the nation in their insensitivity to God's voice (6:9—10). This will last until the land is emptied of her inhabitants (6:11—12).

In all this destruction, however, as when an oak is felled the stump remains, even so will there remain a godly remnant who will yet see God's covenant promise to Israel fulfilled (6:11). (RSV is clearer: "And though a tenth (= of the population) remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is the stump"). It is to this remnant that Isaiah's prophecies of Israel's future glory are addressed (Isa 40—66).

- **7:1—25** For the historical setting see 2 K 16:1—18; 2 Chr 28: 1—26. Ahaz is assured that the threatened Israeli-Syrian invasion would fail. Within 65 years Ephraim (Israel) would be broken and taken into captivity (7:8).

Ahaz was not a good king, however. He did not trust the Lord (7:9b—13). Though given a sign of God's promise (7:14—16), his heart trusted in the military might of Assyria, whose aid he courted (2 K 16:5—9). The Lord therefore warned that this same nation would bring desolation to Judah (7: 17—25).

- **8:1—22** A later continuation of the previous theme. Isaiah's wife would bear a son named in accordance with his prophecy (Maher-shalal-hash-baz = 'they (the Assyrians) hasten to the spoil (of Syria and Israel), they speed to the prey'). The recording of the prophecy was to vindicate its truth after the event (8:1—4). Because of Judah's adulterous trust in the Assyrians instead of in the Lord, the Fountain of Living

waters, however, they would almost overwhelm her, too (8:5—8). But hostile plans would be brought to nought (8:9—10).

Identification with the Word meant separation from the popular way of seeking worldly alliances (8:11—13). To those who trust Him He is a sanctuary, to the rest a stumbling block (8:14-15). Isaiah and the disciples who heard him would trust in God and His Word, not seeking out mediums for guidance (8:16—20). Those who did so know great distress (8:21—22).

So it was that at the height of impending hostile invasions, Isaiah and those who hearkened to his Word stood alone in their proclamation of faith in God alone. Even his children's names were signs of the Word he preached (8:18; cp 8:1: 7:3: Shear-Jeshub = 'A remnant shall return', a standing memorial to a future restoration, despite the threatened dispersion).

Likewise he later denounced even the godly Hezekiah for his flirtations with Babylon, another potential ally against Assyria. The Lord would therefore use the former to take the impenitent Judah into captivity (36: 1—8). Well was he named Isaiah: 'Salvation and deliverance is of the Lord', for such was his continual message.

- **13: 1** The term 'burden' is common in the prophets (14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1,11,13; 22:1; 23:1; 30:6,27; Jer 23:33— 38; Ezk 12:10; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1). The Hebrew word means a burden, load or thing lifted up.

It is highly significant. It firstly indicates the inner burden within the prophet himself. The weight of God's Word lay heavy upon him and could not lightly be put on one side (cp Jer 20:9). It was something continually carried within until fully discharged. It also points to the effect of the prophecy on those upon whom the weight of it would fall. It could be the terrible burden of God's wrath (Isa 30:27) or the depths of the love which God longed for His people to feel the fulness of (Mal1:1).

Isaiah 13—22, 24, 34, 47 concern coming judgement on foreign lands. Here the meaning is the burden of His wrath.

- **15:1,5a, 16:9,11** Even when predicting judgement, the Word was not mere cold facts to Isaiah. He saw in vision invading armies plundering Moab (15:1 - 16:14). The scene was so vivid before his eyes that his heart cried out in anguish, and he wept with the sorrow of the invaded land. Even so did his Master, whose Spirit he bore, weep over the very people He judged (Lk 19:41—44). Likewise the Christian (Phil 3:18).
- **20:1—5** Assyrian power in the Middle East was supreme. Even Judah under Ahaz and Hezekiah was tributary to them, though not as yet actually invaded. This came later after Hezekiah grew in strength and rebelled (2 K 18:7), Some were of the opinion that Judah should ally herself with Egypt and Ethiopia to the south in order to throw off the Assyrian yoke.

Upon this scene Isaiah was sent as a remarkable testimony to God's Word. Even his clothing, sackcloth, had been a witness to his message of coming judgement on Judah. Notice how a prophet's whole life is inextricably bound up with his message (cp 2 K 1:8; Matt 3:4; Rev 11:3). Now he was to go naked (probably meaning stripped to his loin-

cloth) and barefoot for three years as a continual living reminder of his prophecy. Egypt and Ethiopia, upon whom the carnal set their hopes instead of on the Lord, would likewise go naked and barefoot into captivity. What identification! What readiness to be a public talking point!

- **21:1-9** A vision concerning the fall of Babylon (v 9). It is grievous. The invading Median and Elamite (Persian) armies are seen (vv 1—2). Belshazzar's feast is in full swing (cp Dan 5) (v 5). Suddenly the alarm is given (v 5b). The watchman describes the charging horses, camels and asses (vv 6—9). Then the city falls (v 9b). Note again how, as with Moab, so with Babylon, Isaiah feels the full depths of the horror of this attack within him (vv 3-4).
- **22: 4** Another insight. The burden of having to proclaim impending judgement to Judah was heavy indeed upon the prophet. He sought to be alone to avoid the superficial comfort of those who understood not his deep anguish.
- **36:1 - 39:8** Historical: the climax of Isaiah's ministry. All through his life Judah had lived under the Assyrian threat. In the 6th year of Hezekiah Israel had been overrun (2 K 18: 9—12). Eight years later Jerusalem was besieged and amazingly delivered. Despite Assyria's power, the Lord had continually said He would deliver (10:24-27; 30:27-31; 31:1-9). It was Babylon who would take Judah into captivity (39:1-8).

7. Habakkuk

Nothing is known of this prophet nor of when he lived. From the contents, however, it is plainly a warning to Judah of the impending Babylonian invasion.

The format of the book is unusual. It is in the form of a dialogue between Habakkuk and the Lord. It is possible for us, too, to come to a place where we speak to the Lord and receive His reply by direct revelation.

- **1:1—4** *Habakkuk's prayer* - How long till God punishes Judah for her wickedness?
- **1:5-11** *God's reply* - He will raise up the Chaldeans (Babylonians); they will possess the land thus executing judgement.
- **1: 12 — 2:1** *Habakkuk:* But how can God correct through a nation that is more wicked than the one corrected (1: 12—13)? They will show no mercy and attribute their success to their own resources, not giving the Lord the glory (1: 14-17). He will await the Lord's answer (2:1).
- **2:2—20** *The reply:* The Chaldeans will themselves be punished in due course for their pride. None shall save them. The Lord is fully in control. The time will come, even though not immediately, when the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord (2: 14—20).
- **3:1—19** *Habakkuk's final reply* - a psalm of patient confidence in God. His glorious past revelations of Himself at Sinai and at other times in Israel's history are the guarantee of His future deliverance from Babylon (3:3—15).

In the light of this, he will wait quietly and confidently for the day of coming trouble and distress when the Babylonians invade, rejoicing and trusting in God his strength (3:16-19).

8. Judah's last Opportunity (Jeremiah. Lamentations & Zephaniah)

For a historical background read 2 Kings 22—25 and 2 Chronicles 34—36.

Jeremiah prophesied from the 13th year of Josiah (Jer 25:3) to the end of the kingdom of Judah (40 years), and for a part of the 70 year exile among those Jews who fled to Egypt.

The main burden of his message can be found in his call and commission (Jer 1). Even as the almond tree awoke early from its winter sleep, flowering in January, so would God hasten to perform His Word of judgement on Judah, and Jerusalem for their wickedness, using the northern armies of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.

For 40 long years he delivered this burden, warning of impending invasion even though called a traitor and though contrary to his own wish for Judah.

In addition to warning of coming destruction, however, he also built up (Jer 1:9—10). Though Babylon would destroy, she too would be destroyed (Jer 50—51), as would the other Gentile nations (Jer 46-49). Judah and Israel would be restored and their promised King, Jesus, the Root and Offspring of David, would rule over them (Jer 23:1—8), God would make a new covenant with His restored and converted people (Jer 30—33).

Zephaniah ministered with Jeremiah during Josiah's reign (Zeph. 1:1), likewise prophesying impending judgement on Judah, as well as her final restoration and the present and future judgement of the Gentile nations.

In Jeremiah's later years Ezekiel and Daniel began their ministries, both in exile in Babylon. Daniel was taken away in the carrying away of some Jewish captives in the 3rd year of Jehoiakim, 19 years before the final captivity (Dan 1:1—2). Ezekiel was taken away with Jehoiachin's son, Jehoiachin, 8 years later (Ezk 1:1—3).

The first 18 years of his ministry under Josiah, Judah's last good king, were comparatively trouble-free. Open persecution followed, however, during the two 11 year reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah.

After the final Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah was carried away to Egypt by a small band of Jews, where he continued to prophesy against their adamant idol worship.

Despite the continual note of judgement in his prophecy, Jeremiah deeply loved his people. This is constantly evidenced by the revelations of his deep feelings in his writings. Lamentations, written after the final terrible siege of Jerusalem, is a good example of this. It is not prophetic at all but a revelation of the sorrow of the Lord towards the very people He is chastening, a sorrow wrought in the heart of Jeremiah by the Spirit.

- **Jeremiah 1:1—19** His call, commission and warning of fierce opposition.
- **3:6,11-12; 4:19; 5:11-14; 6:10-11, 27-30** Jeremiah's second message in Josiah's reign (3: 6-6: 30) gives many personal details about his ministry and his inner feelings. It is revealed to him alone by the Lord before being delivered and gives insight into how God speaks to His servants.

- **7:1-2, 16-17, 27-8** Another revelation to Jeremiah in the secret place (7:1 - 10: 25) to be delivered standing at the temple gate. Insights into the apostate people's hearts and their lack of response to the Word.
- **8:14 – 9:3** A typical prophetic scene. Jeremiah, identifying himself with the godly remnant, bewails the coming judgement and pleads with the Lord. In his grief he both identifies with soon-to-be-judged Judah, and with the Lord's sorrow over His people's state.
- **9:9 - 20** A similar situation: The Lord reasons with Jeremiah over the deserved coming judgements (v9 cp 5:9,29). Jeremiah bewails the consequent destruction (v 10). The Lord shows how this is rightly deserved and terrible suffering is to come (vv 11—17).

Jeremiah is so identified with the nation he loves, as well as with the yearnings of the Holy Ghost over the very people the Lord's holiness must punish, that in the midst of these words he cries out as though one of the suffering people (v 18) as he hears their cry of anguish (v 19). It is the Spirit of Christ in him (1 P 1:10—12) yearning over the very people He must judge (cp Matt 23:37).

- **10:6—10** In the midst of a denunciation of idolatry (10:1—5) Jeremiah worships God.
- **10: 19—25** Identification with the godly remnant in their prayer over the impending judgement.
- **11:6—8** His ministry took him to all the cities of Judah.
- **11:9 — 12:6** Even though he brought the Word of the Lord, the people conspired to kill Jeremiah (11.9). The Lord revealed to him that the people of Anathoth, his own hometown, sought this (11:18—23). Jeremiah asks why the wicked prosper (12: 1—4). The Lord warns him he must be strong. He had trusted in his home and family and these had betrayed him. Still greater opposition was to come (12:5—6).
- **13:1—11** A frequent prophetic happening: a significant action (cp 51:59-64).
- **13:15-17** Jeremiah's love for his people; his feelings for the very people he had to denounce.
- **14:1 — 15:21** The Word concerning a drought that had befallen Judah. It was one of the curses prophesied by Moses for rebellion against God (Dt 28:23-24). The drought is severe (14:2—6). Jeremiah pleads for his people (14:7—9). The Lord refuses to hear and tells Jeremiah not to pray for them. This is judgement for sin (14:10—12). Jeremiah urges that false prophets have misled them (14:13), but the Lord insists (14:14-16). He is desired to weep ceaselessly with the Lord for the judgement meted out (14:17—18).

This is common with the prophets. They enter into the very depths of the heart of God, Who, whilst punishing because of His holiness, yet in His heart yearns over the very ones

He punishes, At the same time they identify with the people in interceding for them in their sin. Thus they manifest the Spirit of Christ, the Mediator between man and God.

Again Jeremiah cries for covenant mercy (14: 19—22), but the Lord stresses that death, the sword, famine and captivity will come (15:1—9). Jeremiah laments the hatred aroused by his words (15:10). He is told he shall be protected (15:11) but judgement will still come (15:12—14).

Jeremiah again laments the persecution, rebuke and ostracism caused by his words (15:15-17). He even accuses God of failing him (15:18). He calls Jeremiah to reconsecration and renews His pledge to deliver him (15:19—22; cp 1:18-19).

Thus we see the intimate details of the prophet's inner struggles as he delivers the Word of the God he loves, yet having to denounce the people he loves, and being rejected socially because of it.

- **16:1-9** The effects of his calling on his public life. So intimately were the prophets identified with the Word they proclaimed that their whole social life was conditioned by it (16:1-4, 5-7, 8—9).
- **17: 12—18** Though encouraged by the vision of God's sovereignty (17:12), yet the burden of bearing God's Word is heavy. Jeremiah prays for strength (17: 13-18),

A typical feature of the prophets is that to reject them is to reject God (17:13). A prophet is God to the people; they are God's mouthpieces; to refuse their Word is to refuse God's Word (Ex 7:1; Jn 10:34-55, 13:20). In them was the Spirit of Christ. So they were rejected even as the Word Himself was rejected.

- **17:19—20** An example of how and where Jeremiah ministered.
- **18:1 —20:18** Another action designed to arouse public interest and highlight the Word. Jeremiah told to go to the potter's house (18:1—4). The explanation (18:5—17). The people's response (18:18). Jeremiah's prayer (18:19—23). (Note his secret intercession for the people) (18:20). He is then told to summon the elders to the Valley of Hinnom outside the city walls (19:1—2), and to deliver God's Word (19:3-9), afterwards breaking an earthen bottle and explaining why (19: 10—13).

He then departed and prophesied again to all those in the temple court of the coming evil (19:14—15). The chief officer of the temple, however, took exception to his Word and imprisoned him overnight (20:1—3). But intimidation could not daunt his spirit. Jeremiah still declared the truth (20:4-6).

Though fearless in the discharge of his office, Jeremiah still felt deeply the opposition of the people. Passhur, who imprisoned him, was a priest of the same order and family as himself. His own family had already sought to slay him (11:18—21); his own familiar friends watched for any slip he might make (20:10). The inner conflict was intense. He had sought to be silent to avoid reproach, but could not. The Word burned within him (20:7—9). Thoughts of confidence in God's protection (20:11—13) battled alongside despair (20:14-18),

- **21:1-4; 22:1-2** He spoke fearlessly even to the king who could have had him executed.
- **23:9** The effect of the burden of the Word. Opposition came not only from family, friends and fellow-priests. Many false prophets also contradicted him (23:10—40).
- **24:1—10** An insight into how the Lord reveals His Word: by vision, which He subsequently explains. (Can the same not happen today?) (Acts 2:17; 2 Cor. 12:1).
- **26: 1—24** Delivered at the beginning of the evil Jehoiakim's reign. Unlike Josiah his father, he violently opposed the Word.

Jeremiah is told to stand at the temple gate during one of the Mosaic feasts. The entire nation would thus hear as they came to Jerusalem to worship (26:1—6). The suggestion that the temple would be destroyed greatly offended the false prophets and the priests who believed them. Only the princes' intervention saved Jeremiah from death. And this was no idle threat as seen in the treatment afforded Urijah for prophesying similarly (26:7-24). There was still a godly remnant that believed the Lord. Ahikam was he who assisted Josiah in his reforms before Jehoiakim's reign (2 K 22: 12—14).

- **27:1 - 28:17** Another unusual public action. Jeremiah is commanded to send yokes to the ambassadors of several surrounding nations. Doubtless these had come to discuss with Zedekiah, Judah's last king, a treaty against the threat of the Babylonian armies. The yokes were symbolic of God's command that their safety lay not in resisting but in submitting. For a season He had given all nations to Nebuchadnezzar (27:1—11). As a sign Jeremiah himself was to carry a yoke on his own neck (27:2).

Zedekiah was likewise warned (27:12-15). So were the priests and all those who still believed the lying prophets' reports of safety (27:16-22). This required great faith, as it was sure to provoke both his own countrymen and the foreign kings at a time when their hopes were based on a confederacy. Sure enough, Hananiah, a priest, publicly challenged Jeremiah and prophesied falsely that within two years the Babylonian yoke would be broken, and the spoils of the previous Babylonian siege at the beginning of Zedekiah's reign (2 Chr 36:9-10) returned (28:1-4). How intense must have been their opposition to be so specific. Thus even the priests opposed Jeremiah. He re-emphasised God's Word and departed (28:5-11), returning later with the Lord's denunciation of the false prophet (28: 12-17).

- **29:1—32** Further opposition from false prophets. Jeremiah wrote to the Jews carried to Babylon at Zedekiah's accession, telling them to prepare for a long stay in exile and not to believe the false prophets who spoke of a soon return (29:1—19), two of whom were specifically warned (29:20-23). A further prophecy was directed against one Shemaiah who wrote from Babylon to the high priest in Jerusalem trying to persuade him to silence Jeremiah (29:24-28). He, too, was denounced (29:29—32).
- **32:1 —33:3** The predicted doom of Jerusalem is imminent. It is the 10th year of Zedekiah's reign. In the 9th, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to the city, and by the 11th the city had fallen (2 K 25:1—10).

In the midst of this God calls upon His faithful servant to undertake another highly significant act. He is to purchase a field owned by his cousin Hanameel and to finalise the legal details in full public view (32:1-15). But why, when the whole city was about to fall as predicted? Jeremiah sought the Lord (32:16-25). Then came the reply. Yes, judgement would come (32: 26—36). But there would be a restoration. Fields would again be bought and sold (32:37—44).

Now, at the lowest ebb of the nation's fortunes, came a word of hope. Jeremiah was to call on the Lord and He would reveal His mighty future plans (33:1—3). The promise of a future national restoration was then detailed (33:4-26). (For fuller details: 30:1 —31:40). To Jeremiah, the lover of his people, this revelation by dream (31:26) was indeed sweet after forty years of preaching warning and judgement.

- **34:1-32** Two fearless messages during the final siege (34:1—7, 8—22). Jeremiah was imprisoned for the first (32:2—5).
- **35: 1—19** Another public action.
- **36: 1—32** An indication of the attitude of Jehoiakim to the Word. Jeremiah had to hide during his reign to avoid a death he had already narrowly escaped earlier (26: 1—24).
- **37:1- 44:30; 52:1-34** A largely historical section from the beginning of Zedekiah's reign to the fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent history of Jeremiah among the feeble Jewish remnant left in the land.
- **45:1—5** A word to Baruch, Jeremiah's faithful companion (36:1,4, 32; 32:12—14; 43:36). Accompanying him from at least early in Jehoiakim's reign, he was doubtless a great source of comfort to the lonely prophet when so few heeded his words.

9, The Glory departs - but a future restoration (Ezekiel)

Six years before the fall of Jerusalem, God commissioned Ezekiel, a priest. He was one of those taken captive at the end of Jehoiakim's reign (2 K 24:6-17). Like Jeremiah in Jerusalem, Ezekiel in Babylonia proclaimed Judah's impending doom for her rebelliousness (2:1 - 24:27). There would be no escape. Once the final collapse came, however, also like Jeremiah, judgement was pronounced upon the surrounding Gentile nations for their pride against the Lord and His people (25:1 — 32:32). Judah and Israel would be restored to their land and the Messiah would come and rule over a converted nation (34:1- 48:35).

Ezekiel continued to prophesy for at least 22 years (1:2-3 cp 29:17). He probably knew Daniel (14:14,16; 28:3) whose piety and wisdom were renowned, and who was carried captive 8 years before Ezekiel. The former dwelt in the royal palace as a chief minister, the latter among the captives at Telabib (3:15) in his own house (3:24; 8:1) with his wife, until her death (24:18).

- **Ezk 1:1 — 3:27** The prophet's call and commission.

The hand of the Lord fell upon him (1:1—3). He had a vision of the Glory of the Lord (1:4—28). (This vision can be better understood if read in conjunction with similar visions: Dan 7:9—10; Rev 4:1—8). This vision is basic to Ezekiel's whole ministry. He had this same vision several times (3:22—23; 8:1—4; 43:1—3). He saw God on His throne surrounded by the living creatures or cherubim (cp 10:20). Such a vision produced a marked and long-lasting effect on the prophet and his future ministry. As in similar cases, it left him without strength (1:28b — 2:2; cp Dan10: 15—19, Rev 1:17).

He is then commissioned and warned of his reception (2:3—7). He is to inwardly digest God's words until his bowels are filled with the burden of that Word (2:8 — 3:3). He is then sent forth duly prepared (3:4-14).

For a week he sat, stunned by what the Lord had shown him (3:15). Then He spoke again: the awful responsibility of uttering all God's Words was laid upon him (3:16—21). He was led out to be given a further vision of God's Glory (3:22—23), and then told to stay in his house. God would make him dumb until He wanted him to speak (3: 24—27).

His was to be no easy life!

- **4:1—17** By a symbolic action Ezekiel was called to draw the people's attention to the Word. Note Ezekiel's inner hesitancy: he had never touched anything the Law said was unclean. Though given a partial respite, the basic issue had to stand, for his actions symbolised the Jews' coming dispersal among the defiled Gentiles (4:14-15).
- **5:1—4** Another public action designed to draw attention to God's threat to bring famine, pestilence and the sword upon Jerusalem (5:5-17). How wholly must a man be identified with his Lord to be willing to make himself such an object of the public gaze!
- **8:1 — 11:25** Chapters 8 — 11 form one vision.

Ezekiel was at home with the elders of Judah in Babylon. Suddenly he was transported in spirit to Jerusalem, shown many things, then returned to his home where he spoke to the

elders of what he had seen (8:1—4; 11:24-25). Can not this happen even today (Acts 8:39)? It seems to have been a common occurrence with a prophet (2 K 2:16).

As is usual with the prophets, Ezekiel entered into the vision and was escorted around the temple in Jerusalem to see the abominations committed there by those still in Palestine (8:5-18). Even so today the Lord is able to unveil to His children the secret sins of those outwardly professing godliness. Then Ezekiel witnessed the sending forth of the destroying angels to deal with the guilty (9:1-6). He pleads for mercy, but in vain (9:8-11). The fires of God's judgements are to be scattered over the city (10:1—7).

More significantly, he saw the Glory of the Lord, the cloudy pillar that filled the Holy of Holies, leave there and move to the threshold of the temple (9:3), then move from the threshold (10:18-19), finally to leave the city, moving to the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem (11:22-23). Ichabod was about to be written over the nation: The Glory is departed.

There was no other way for a wicked people (11:1—12). Even Ezekiel's intercession was of no avail, although he was promised that a remnant would one day return and be converted (11:13—21).

- **12: 1—16** A consistent feature of the prophets that they themselves are signs to the people. Not just their words but their very lives displayed God's Word for their day (12:6b, 11a; 24:24; Isa 8:18). So here, Ezekiel's action (12:1-7) was to provoke questions from the people as to its meaning (12:8-9). He was then to explain (12:10-16).
- **12: 17—20** A similar situation: Ezekiel's behaviour represented that which was soon to come upon Jerusalem.
- **12:21—28** Indications of how Ezekiel's words were received. He, too, had to battle with the false hopes given by false prophets and prophetesses (13:1—23).
- **14:1—8** In hypocrisy the religious leaders come to the prophet. But he knew their innermost thoughts. With boldness he reproves them. So today: Acts 5:1-11.
- **20:1—4** Again the elders come to inquire of the Lord through His prophet. How strange! They were frequent visitors (8:1; 14:1) yet would not obey the Word (33:31). How strange that though the true man is opposed and ridiculed yet it is to him they come in time of need. Similarly Zedekiah sought out Jeremiah as his kingdom was about to fall (Jer 21:1—2; 37:1—3) though this same king had had him imprisoned for his prophecies.

But a prophet cannot easily be deceived. The Word of the Lord comes to a prophet and the Word is a discerner of the thoughts and purposes of the heart (Heb 4: 12). Jesus knew what was in man (Jn 2:24—25).

Notice how v 4 overthrows the false modern understanding of Matt 7:1. He was to tell the elders that judgement was sure because of continual rebelliousness,

- **20:45—49** Ezekiel often prophesied in parables (e.g. 17:1—2). Here he spoke of the soon destruction of the southern parts of Judah of which Jerusalem was the

capital (vv 45—48). From his complaint (v 49) we see how this form of prophecy made him a source of jest and criticism. The prophets were firm in their singleness of purpose, but this did not make them insensitive to comments and incapable of hurt. Their ministry gave them a higher sensitivity than normal.

- **21:1—7, 8—17** An insight into the depth of the inner burden of the Word. A prophet was no mere polished orator. The Word weighed heavy until he could unburden it (21:2, cp 20:46). He felt the inner depths of the Holy Spirit's own travail so greatly that he could not but sigh with anguish of spirit, even in public (21: 6—7a). Such outward manifestations were not mere theatrical gimmickry but revelations of the depth of the inner burden. So also 21:12, 14a (cp 6:11). This was not merely an announcement of coming judgement. It was a heart crying out for the horror of what was to come, and for feeling the wrath of a holy God against sin. Oh for such preaching today!
- **24: 1—14** Another public action designed as a parable. Jerusalem was about to fall. Nebuchadnezzar had just begun his final 2-year siege.
- **24: 15-27** Another insight into how every aspect of a prophet's life was to be consecrated. The Lord would take Ezekiel's wife, yet he was to make no sign of mourning (24:15—17; v17, "bread of men" = bread brought by mourners in sympathy for the bereaved; mourners normally went barefoot and removed their head covering). In order for the significance of his action to be made plain, he first told the people, and after her decease explained it (24:18—24). He himself was a sign of what would come to pass (24:24, 27b; cp Isa 20:3). Until news reached the Jewish captives in Babylon of the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel would be unable to speak further (24:25—27), i.e. for three years. Compare 24:1 with 33:21—22 when the tidings came.
- **33: 30—33** An indication of Ezekiel's reception.
- **37: 1—14** The vision of the valley of dry bones. Again the Spirit transports the prophet.
- **37: - 15-27** A parabolic action to attract public attention,
- **40: 1—4, 43:1—6** Chapters 40—48 form one continuous vision. Transported by the Spirit to Israel, Ezekiel is given a vision of a restored temple and a restored nation. He is escorted by a man with the appearance of brass and given the relevant details (40:1—4).

He had seen the Glory when first commissioned (1:4-28 & 3:22—23), and when previously translated to Jerusalem (8:1-4) as It departed from the city prior to its destruction. His eyes are now rewarded with a vision of the future return of the Glory to the restored nation (43:1—6). Israel had not been cast off.

- **47: 1—12** An indication of what can happen in a vision.

10. The coming Kingdom of God & the future overthrow of the Gentile kingdoms (Daniel)

Contemporary with Ezekiel, Daniel dwelt in the Babylonian court from 19 years before the fall of Jerusalem till after the Jews were allowed to return with Joshua and Zerubbabel (1:1—2, 21; Ezra 1:1—11).

He lived through the 45-year reign of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 1 - 4) and the full length of the Babylonian empire. He saw its fall at the hand of the Persian armies on the night of Belshazzar's impious feast (Dan 5), and became prime minister of the victorious monarch, Darius the Mede (Dan 6), who ruled until Cyrus the Persian came to the throne and issued his famous decree.

The whole theme of the book, both in the historical section (1—6) and the prophetic (7—12) is that "the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will" (Dan 4:32). In the historical section, every monarch with whom Daniel has dealings is made to confess this. In the visions also this is shown to be so. The whole future of the Gentile kingdoms is unfolded until their final abolition and the establishment of God's Kingdom, a kingdom that shall never be destroyed.

The historical section gives abundant insight into Daniel's exemplary life. From the second section (as well as parts of the first) much insight may be gained into how the Lord speaks in visions and in dreams.

Like Joseph, "the dreamer" (Gen. 37:1—11; 40:41—46; cp his Egyptian name, Zaphnath-paaneah, which = "revealer of secrets"), Daniel was given understanding in all visions and dreams from an early age.

Based on 1:17, Daniel was probably only about 15 to 17 years old. So, let the faith and expectancy of even the faithful teenager be quickened.

God often reveals His secrets in dreams (Gen 28:12; 31:10—11; Num 12:6; Dt 13:1—5; Matt 1:20; 2:12—13, 19, 22), and in visions (Gen 15:1; 46:2; 1 Sam. 3:15; Job 33:15; 2 Chr 26:5; Matt 17:9; Lk 1:22; 24:23; Acts 9:10-12; 10:3; 10:17—19; 16:9—10; 18:9; 2 Cor. 12:1). He has promised to do the same today (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28). As we consider, therefore, let there be an expectant faith that this same living God can speak to us in a similar way. This is not a theological treatise, but the living Word of a living Father.

- **Dan 2:1—30** Our God is supernatural. He reveals even the hidden thoughts of man, for He knows what is in him (Amos 4:13; Jn 2: 24—25). After prayer the secret was revealed in a night vision.
- **4: 1—2 7** Unlike the previous instance, Daniel did not need to seek revelation. The interpretation was given him immediately, but left him stunned.
- **7:1-2, 15-16, 19a, 28** The vision of the 4 beasts (representing the 4 Gentile world empires which would rule before Christ sets up His kingdom on earth). These visions were given during the night whilst asleep. Like Zechariah, Daniel entered into the vision.

He understood the interpretation because he was able to inquire of the angel who stood by him.

- **8: 1—2, 13-19, 27** The vision of the ram and the he-goat (representing 2 of the 4 world empires, Medo-Persia and Greece). In vision Daniel was transported to the Persian royal palace at Shushan. (Men are often translated in visions e.g. Ezk 8:1—3; 40:1—2; 2 Cor 12:1—4; Rev 4:1—2). Again there are several angelic beings in the vision, and one, the angel Gabriel, is instructed to explain its meaning. As in 7:28, visions can leave a deep effect (8:27).
- **9: 1—27** A different setting altogether. Daniel is in prayer. He had discovered the prophecy of Jeremiah that the captivity would last for 70 years. These were now almost accomplished (9:1—2). He therefore prayed to God confessing the nation's sin and the justice of their punishment (9:3-15). He asks for forgiveness and national restoration (9:16—19),

While praying, the angel Gabriel appears. (Can this not happen today also? cp Acts 10:1—8. What expectancy this should arouse!) Daniel has a vision whilst awake (9:20-23). In it Gabriel instructs him that though the Jews will soon return as predicted, there were yet 70 weeks (not literal weeks) determined before Daniel's prayer for the full restoration of the Jews could be answered (9:24-27),

- **10: 1—21; 12: 5-13** The last three chapters of Daniel form one single vision given 2 years after the Jews had been allowed to return from Babylon.

Daniel was given a revelation (10:1) in the form of a vision (10:7a). Should we not expect this today in our own meetings, as in the early church (1 Cor 14:6, 26, 30; 2 Cor 12:1)?

The method was different again. He was not asleep this time nor in prayer, but walking with some other men along the river Hiddekel (Tigris) when he saw a supernatural vision (10:1-8). Again it had no small effect on him (10:8—10). He had been in prayer for three weeks concerning what would happen to his nation in the latter days. (In earlier visions he had been shown how there would rise a wicked king who would do much hurt to the Jews and their worship at the end of the 4th Gentile world empire). The answer was now to be given, though the (spirit) prince of Persia had sought to delay it (cp Eph 6:12) (10:11—14).

Again Daniel needs strength to bear the effects on his mortal frame of these supernatural events (10:15-19) before the angel could explain (10:20—21).

From 11:1 to 12:3 details are given to Daniel of what is yet to come upon his people. It would culminate in "a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation, and at that time thy people shall be delivered" (12: 1). Certain details are still withheld, however, despite his enquiries (12:5-13).

From these visions, then, how real the spiritual world is seen to be when God's people are able to commune with angels as they unveil His purposes. Similar situations are found in Zechariah (1—6) and Ezekiel (passim).

11. After the Return from Babylon (Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi)

The rising Babylonian empire had destroyed the power of Assyria and Egypt, the two powers of her day, and taken Judah into captivity. Nebuchadnezzar, her greatest king, extended her rule over most of the then known world (as prophesied: see Jer 27:1—11).

During the reign of his grandson, Belshazzar, Darius the Mede dammed the Euphrates and entered Babylon with his armies along the dry river bed in the midst of his impious feast (Dan 5:30-31; as prophesied Isa 21:1-9). Thus ended the Babylonian empire. The Medo-Persian empire had established itself.

Very soon after Cyrus the Persian came to the throne. He issued an edict allowing the exiled Jews to return to their homeland, exactly 70 years after their first deportation (cp Jer 25:11; 29:10; Dan 9:1-2). About 150 years beforehand Isaiah had foretold the Jews' return (even though not yet exiled), even naming Cyrus by name (Isa 44:28 - 45:4).

Henceforth, though dwelling in their own land, the Jewish nation was subject to Persia, and only independent for about 100 years during the succeeding Greek empire. In 63 BC Palestine was conquered by the Romans and continued thus at the days of Christ.

Of the historical books, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther relate to this post-exile period, with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesying during the same time.

The first to return after Cyrus's decree were 42,360 Jews with Zerubbabel as governor and Joshua as high priest. Ezra 1 – 6 describes their return and the commencement, delay and final completion of the rebuilding of the temple.

It was this delay (lasting about 15/16 years) after only the altar and temple foundations had been built, which occasioned the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah, who should be read in conjunction with Ezra 1—6.

Both began to minister in the second year of King Darius, the year in which construction recommenced.

Haggai's recorded ministry lasted only 3 months. He called for the work to recommence (1:1-15), and promised blessing once previous disobedience was repented of (2:10—19). They were not to be discouraged by the difference between the present temple and Solomon's earlier one. The glory of the latter would be greater than the former (2: 1—9). Similarly, despite the insignificance of the present tiny Jewish state, God would still overthrow the governments of all nations and establish Israel as the chief nation (2:20-23).

The ministry of Zechariah was likewise designed to encourage a small disheartened people that God had not forgotten His covenant with Israel.

Despite their present lowly position, Israel would yet rise to supremacy among the nations and a restored and rebuilt Jerusalem would yet become the religious centre of the whole earth. The Gentile nations, at present so predominant, would then bring their wealth to her, and go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts. Jehovah would be King over all the earth (8:20—23; 14: 9,16).

As a result of their ministries, within 4 years the temple was rebuilt (Ezra 5:1; 6:14).

Zechariah contains certain features common to the ministries of the prophets:

- **Zech 1:7-8a** The expression “the Word of the Lord came” is often found in the prophets. Here we see one of the ways in which this happened: in a night vision. An angel was sent to rouse him from his sleep (4:1).

Zech. 1:7 — 6:15 is a series of visions to encourage the returned Jews, all probably seen in the same night.
- **1: 12—17** Not all prophecy is uttered at short notice as the Lord gives the anointing. Here Zechariah is told in vision what to speak (1:14a, 17a). He would be unable to deliver it until later. Likewise in our day the Lord is able to reveal many things, and to give His Word in the secret place to His own.
- **1:18-21** His are not simply visions viewed, as it were, from a distance. Zechariah actually enters into the scene, conversing with an angelic “guide”. He not only sees the vision; he is able to inquire as to its meaning.
- **7:1-4** A common event in the life of a prophet - when a perplexity arose, a delegation is sent to enquire of the Lord, to seek a supernatural revelation of His mind on the matter. In this instance the problem was whether to continue an annual fast instituted to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem. The reply was given to the prophet (7:4 - 8:23).

About 80 years after Cyrus’s decree and 60 years after the temple was rebuilt, Ezra, a very godly scribe, led back a further 1,754 males. Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, and Zechariah were probably all dead now. Ezra 7—10 describes the return and what he found. Despite past judgement on Judah for sins, they were again turning from the Word.

Thirteen years or so later, Nehemiah, the Persian king’s Jewish cup-bearer, was allowed to return to Jerusalem as governor for 12 years (Neh 5:14). He organised the rebuilding of the city walls, and co-operated with Ezra in enforcing religious reforms. Nehemiah 1-12 describes this period.

Despite such godly leaders as Ezra and Nehemiah, however, there were many seeking to cast off the restraints of Scripture. During a period when Nehemiah had to return to the Persian court much evil was done, even by those in high office (Neh 13).

It is in the light of Ezra 7—10 and Nehemiah 1—13 that Malachi, who prophesied at this time, should be read. Though no historical or biographical details are given, this book should present no difficulties. The burden of his Word is the love of God for a people who, though outwardly religious, yet inwardly were insincere.

After him there came no prophet for 400 years till John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, the great Prophet Himself, as foreseen by Malachi.