

Understanding Scripture Class

Session 7: The Prophets and Revelation

Recap:

Biblical hermeneutics is the craft of interpreting Scripture.

1. *Grasping the Text in Their Town (What Does it Say?)*
2. *Measuring the Width of the River to Cross (What Does it Mean?)*
3. *Crossing the Principizing Bridge (Where is Jesus?)*
4. *Grasping the Text in Our Town (How Can I Apply It?)*

Interpreting the Old Testament Prophets:

I. Background

The Prophets are a collection of Old Testament literature written to the people of Israel and Judah during a 300 year period (760-460BC) when both kingdoms were either in decline, being destroyed, in exile, or rebuilding upon return from exile.

Their message is a call to repent or else face judgment. They also speak of a hope of future restoration and a coming Messiah

But less than 2% of prophetic literature predicts the Messiah and the end of the age.

The prophets were primarily concerned with “their town”. They spoke to their contemporaries in terms that they would understand, to get them to repent and hope.

The collection called “the Prophets” consists of every book of the latter part of the Old Testament from Isaiah to Malachi.

II. Historical Timeline

a. It’s helpful to know when and to whom each particular prophet spoke.

1. Pre-Exile Period (760-600 BC) –
 - Isaiah-> Judah
 - Hosea->Israel
 - Amos-> Israel
 - Jonah-> Israel
 - Micah-> Judah
 - Nahum -> Judah

2. Exile Period (600-540 BC) –
 - Jeremiah-Exiles in Jerusalem
 - Lamentations-Exiles in Jerusalem
 - Obadiah-Exiles in Jerusalem, Edom
 - Ezekiel-Exiles in Babylon
 - Daniel-Exiles in Babylon

3. Post-Exile Period (540-460 BC) –
 - Haggai
 - Zechariah
 - Malachi

- b. Refer to the Bible's historical books to gain a better understanding as to the timeline of each prophet and the historical context in which they were speaking.
 - 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles cover the pre-exile period, destruction of each kingdom and the exile period.
 - Ezra and Nehemiah cover the post-exile restoration period
- c. Often prophets refer to the king currently reigning as they write.

- i. "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple." (Isaiah 6:1)

See 2 Chronicles 26 to learn about the kingdom under Uzziah.

- ii. "On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal, and the hand of the LORD was upon him there." (Ezekiel 1:2-3)

See 2 Kings 24:8-17 and 25:27-30 to learn about Jehoiachin and the exiles.

- iii. "In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, "The LORD was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts." (Zechariah 1:1-3)

See Ezra 5 & 6 to learn more about Judah under Darius.

III. Primary Message of the Prophets

The message of each of the prophets can be summarized as one or more of the following points:

- a. You have broken the covenant; you had better repent.
“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? (Malachi 2:10)
- b. No repentance? Then Judgment!
“For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes but their lies have led them astray, those after which their father walked. So I will send a fire upon Judah and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem. (Amos 2:4-5)
- c. There is hope beyond the judgment for a glorious future restoration.
“In that day, declares the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted; and the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore. (Micah 4:6-7)

Most of the prophets cover all three of these themes at various points in their writings.

Practice: Pick out the themes of sin, judgment and hope in Jeremiah 16

“And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, ‘Why has the LORD pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin which we have committed against the LORD our God? Then you shall say to them: ‘Because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the LORD, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshiped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law, and because you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn, evil will, refusing to listen to me. “Therefore, I will hurl you out of this land and into a land that neither you nor your father have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.”

“Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt’, but ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.’ For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers.” (Jeremiah 16:10-15)

IV. Looking for and Appreciating the Gospel in Prophetic Literature

The primary themes found in the Prophets help us appreciate and believe the Gospel.

- a. God is presented as absolutely holy, patient, good and gracious.
- b. Israel, Judah and all of mankind are thoroughly sinful and deserve judgment.
- c. A just God must mete out judgment on sinners and does.
- d. Despite impending judgment a gracious God saves a remnant and establishes a better kingdom.

Until we appreciate the seriousness of our sin in light of his holiness, we cannot fully appreciate His saving grace and work through Jesus Christ.

The Apocalypse/Revelation:

I. Background-

Revelation is the last book of the New Testament and the last book of the Bible. Written by the Apostle John, it is believed to be the last book of the Bible written (~90AD)

It was written to seven churches in Asia Minor who had experienced much persecution and were about to undergo more.

It begins with the words “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.” (Rev 1:1)

It presents Jesus as the reigning “Lamb”, defending his bride (the church) and meting out judgment on everyone who stands in the way. It ends with a restoration of paradise on a New Earth.

It is considered an apocalyptic/prophetic genre, which is one of the most difficult genres to understand.

II. Apocalyptic Genre

- a. Symbol laden and characterized by vivid imagery.

“And in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace,

and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.” (Rev 1:13-16)

i. The symbols are sometimes defined in the immediate text.
“As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” (Rev 1:20)

ii. More often the symbols relate to other writings in Scripture, where a clearer meaning for them can sometimes be derived.
“Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12)

iii. Sometimes the symbols have parallel imagery in other prophetic apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament.
“I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, and his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.” (Daniel 10:5-6)

b. How Apocalyptic literature differs from standard prophetic literature:

i. Apocalyptic imagery is not to be taken literally. It can't be drawn. Prophetic symbols tend to be metaphorical and relate more to real things in the world, like “the potter and clay” imagery from Isaiah 45:9 and 64:8

ii. Apocalyptic literature tends to be used to forth-tell the future more than standard prophetic literature. Most references predicting the end of the age in Scripture occur in the books where the Apocalyptic genre is most used:

- Revelation
- Daniel
- Ezekiel
- Zechariah

- iii. Apocalyptic Literature speaks more effectively to those undergoing intense tribulation. It comforts the troubled. Prophetic Literature speaks more effectively to those at ease. It troubles the comfortable.

III. Principles for Reading Revelation

- a. Be humble and teachable. It isn't easy to understand.
- b. Remember the original audience. It meant something to them. Revelation has been comforting persecuted Christians since it was first written.
- c. Don't read it chronologically or linearly. Christ returns multiple times in the story of Revelation. The book retells the story of Christ's triumphant reign over and over.
- d. Take Revelation seriously, but not literally. The descriptions are symbolic.
- e. Take notice when John defines a symbol. Don't interpret it as something other than he says that it is.
- f. Use Scripture to interpret the symbols, not the newspaper. Don't try to match the imagery to current events.
- g. Remember the main thing. It's about Jesus and his everlasting kingdom.
- h. Fear the Lamb, not the Dragon, Beast, False Prophet or the Harlot. It's Jesus who is meting out all of the judgments in the book. The others are mere bit players.

IV. Note on Application

Finding application "in our town" from prophetic and apocalyptic literature seems to be challenging. But it shouldn't be.

Application of Scripture should not be narrowed to just one or more of the following categories:

- a. How can I improve my personal/spiritual disciplines
- b. How can I stop sinning.
- c. How can I serve others.

The primary application of all Scripture is to increase our worship/adoration/love of the God revealed on every page (especially the Prophets and Revelation). If we do this (love God more via Scripture), we will get all the other applications right, too.