

A Guide to Reading the OT Prophets

The OT Prophetic writings are not always easy to read, so they require a slightly different approach.

Here's a few suggestions and things to bear in mind as your read:



✚ Initial approach

Pray for understanding, and be purposeful with your reading. A casual approach or reading too quickly is likely to yield few worthwhile results.

✚ Remember Two General Principles from 2 Timothy 3:16, 17

All Scripture is:

- (a) God-inspired.
- (b) Profitable for us – even if we don't at first understand how. This includes the OT prophets.

✚ Three readings

Ideally, read through each prophetic writing at least three times.

1st reading: Straight through. Start by noting the date and addressee in the first few verses, if given. Read the book straight through, try to get the general message being conveyed. Don't get too slowed down by phrases you don't understand. Get the overall sense and main messages (see below).

2nd reading: One section/chapter at a time. A slower more thorough reading, one chapter or section at a time. Stay in that section until you believe you understand the general theme of that chapter or section. Don't be overly slowed down by individual difficult words or phrases during this second reading.

3rd reading: More thorough. Attempt to understand every word and phrase, stopping to research any you don't know. Depending on the length of the book, this will probably take a great deal of time and effort.

Obviously, this is not a quick process, but it is worth the trouble.

✚ Poetry and Imagery

Many of the prophets' words were written in Hebrew poetic style – not rhyming in sound but rhyming in thought and idea. There are many images and literary effects used, but the chief aim was to evoke a response by appealing both to one's logic and to one's emotions.

✚ **Bear in mind the purpose of prophecy**

Prophetic passages in the Bible were not really given to just satisfy a person's curiosity, which is of limited value. They were mostly (a) reminders and (b) messages requiring a response.

(a) The prophets spoke to deliver reminders about the greatness of God, and His laws and ways; these were often accompanied by examples from Israel's (and others') past.

(b) Messages concerning the future spoke of consequences for disobedience, impending tumultuous events, and the promise of glorious times yet come. Their purpose was to spur people into action; i.e. change their ways to avoid negative consequences, prepare themselves and their families for troublesome times, and remain faithful to God because this has great value.

Some of these principles have not changed, even today.

✚ **Repetition**

Some of the lengthier prophetic works (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), written over a long time period, repeat the same or similar messages time and again, but using slightly different language and images. This was to cover every possible angle and leave people without excuse. The value for us today is that, by reading these messages again and again but in varying words, we become familiar with the ways of God – His attitudes, what pleases and displeases Him, etc. These are things we should want to know today as we relate to Him.

Resist the temptation to think, "Oh, not this message again!", and instead take the approach of, "This message must be important." and "What can I learn about God through this?"

✚ **Who is speaking? Who is being addressed?**

Determine who is speaking – is it God, is it the prophet, or is it someone else? Establish who is being addressed. Some of these messages were for Israel's and Judah's people, some for Israel's and Judah's rulers, some were for the people of surrounding nations, and some for specific individuals for one reason or another. Ask yourself, "Who is the YOU?". Note that the person speaking changes more frequently than the editorial notes in our Bibles usually suggest.

✚ **Historical setting**

Within the first few verses, most of the prophets' writings record the dating and whom the prophecy concerns. This is important for context. Become familiar with the overall history of this time, and /or refer to a Bible timeline chart, such as "From Josiah to the Captivity", etc. Consider how God is dealing with Israel at that particular point in time.



✚ **3 Main Clusters of OT Prophetic writing**

The OT Prophecy writings are split into three main chronological groups:

- . those around the time of Israel's exile.
- . those around the time of Judah's exile.
- . those post-Exile.

✚ **Not always about the Future**

About half the passages in the prophetic writings are *not* predictions of future events. Many are messages to people of the time, urging them to change their ways. Some passages are descriptions of historical events that the prophet himself witnessed or was caught up in.

✚ **Still Future?**

Not all predictions of future events are still future today. Some have come to pass already. This does not mean they can't still find a future fulfillment in some way, however.



✚ **Future or Past tense?**

Some passages referring to future events speak of them as if they have already come to pass. This is a literary device, putting the reader into that future time, giving them an appreciation of how the predicted event will be received at the time. Comparison with other passages speaking of the same events will usually highlight this device.

✚ **Main Message?**

Most prophecy books contain more than a single message. This is especially true of the longer books. Sometimes Bible handbooks present overly simplistic summaries of the prophets. At first, these look helpful and might be easy to memorize; the intention of the author was probably good, but the reality is different. The major and longer books of prophecy are collections of writings from the prophets' ministries, containing different messages for different people at different times for different purposes. Whilst the longer books were written within an overall setting and context, the book's sections may not generally be lumped under one simplistic theme. This even applies for most of the shorter books.

✚ **Shorter sections than indicated by most Bible editions**

Tense and person change more frequently than chapter breaks indicate, so some individual messages are quite short, whilst others extend past the chapter break. As a general rule, if you're reading a chapter and the latter verses don't seem to flow on from the early verses, it could be two or more separate prophecy messages. If the passage changes subject, tense, the person who is speaking (i.e. is it God, or is it the prophet? Note use of "you" and "I", etc.), then it could be a new message.

✚ **Order? Structure?**

The prophets' writings can seem like a jumbled mess. Some of the books are actually collections of shorter prophecies, so look at a few overviews of OT Prophecy books, as found online or in Bible handbooks. The outlines presented in different handbooks often differ from each other in detail (!), so compare them, and look for the common features between them.

This can help to give you a workable framework, so that whatever verse or chapter you're reading has some sort of context and may be seen to be less random.

✚ Which “Israel”?

Be aware that the term “Israel” has several meanings in the OT Prophecy writings, and context will usually help you determine which one is being meant. Variants include:

- (1) An alternative name for Abraham’s grandson, Jacob.
- (2) All descendants of Jacob.
- (3) The formal kingdom of Israel.
- (4) The northern kingdom of Israel, as opposed to the southern kingdom of Judah.
- (5) The people of Israelitish stock, including those living in the southern kingdom of Judah.
- (6) A reunited Israel in the future.
- (7) the area of land occupied by Israel.



✚ Earth? Land?

The words "the earth" should most often be read as "the land", meaning the land of Israel or Judah. There are plenty of exceptions, but a prophecy mentioning something about the “earth” (in our English versions) usually has a more limited and localised context than meaning the whole planet.

✚ Map & Timeline charts

Access a multitude of Bible maps, Bible timelines and Bible dictionaries available to establish the finer details. Many of these are available online and can help you distinguish the difference between Syria and Assyria, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin, Bethel and Bethshan, etc. Having these simple tools with you as you read will greatly enhance your understanding of the messages of the OT Prophecy books, because the prophecies are full of locations and people’s names.

✚ Memorise the common place names

Commit to memory the approximate locations of these most frequently mentioned names: Jerusalem, Samaria, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Philistia, Tyre/Sidon, Lebanon, Syria, Damascus, Assyria, Nineveh, Egypt, Babylon and Persia.