

A Study Guide to the Entire Bible

Part II

The Poetry and the Prophets

Introduction to Part II, the Poetry and the Prophets

Part II consists of the Old Testament books of poetry and the Old Testament books of the prophets. There are five books of poetry and 17 books of prophecy.

Although there is some beautiful poetry in the books of the Law and the books of History (e.g. Ruth 1:16-17), poetry is not their basic characteristic; and there are prophecies in the books of poetry (e.g. Psalm 22), but prophecy is not their basic characteristic. In the same way there are prophecies in the books of History (e.g. I Kings 13:1-3); but prophecy is not their basic characteristic.

These two groups of books are so called because poetry is the basic nature of the five books we call the books of poetry, and prophecy is the basic nature of the 17 books we call the books of prophecy.

Introduction to the Five Books of Poetry

The next five books are usually categorized as the Books of Poetry; some, however refer to them as the Books of Wisdom. Although they contain strong elements of history, philosophy and, of course, theology, their style is poetic. There is also poetic language in the books of the prophets--some of it at least as beautiful as any in the books we classify as the books of poetry. In fact, approximately 75% of the Old Testament is Hebrew poetry; even Genesis is rich in poetic content.

Nevertheless, the following five books are the ones called the Books of Poetry.

The Nature of Hebrew Poetry

Ancient Asian poetry was not written in the way that is typical of most of the poetry of Western Civilization, i.e. with meter and rhyme. Rather, it was written as lyrical narrative, expressed in poetic language, and very rich in metaphor.

Parallelism. The distinguishing characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, which is the expression of the same idea in two or more different ways. In some

cases, as in Proverbs, much of it was written in what today we call couplets--two lines, with the second line paraphrasing the first, expanding on it, or expressing its opposite. For example, Proverbs 11:1, "A false Balance is an abomination to the Lord; but a just weight is his delight"; and, Proverbs 19:5, "A false witness shall not be unpunished; and he that speaketh lies shall not escape."

Some of the poetic language in Job is very beautiful, no matter what the standard.

Acrostics in Hebrew Poetry. Hebrew poetry is also rich in acrostics. In one form the first letter of each line, combined and read from top to bottom, forms a word, especially a word significant to the poem. Another form has the first letter of each line combine to be the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in order.

A classic example of acrostics is Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible, with 176 verses; and it is an amazing acrostic. It consists of 22 groups of eight verses each, with each group titled by one of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetical order, from Aleph to Tau. In each group of eight verses, the first Hebrew letter of the first word in each verse is the letter with which the chapter is titled. For example, the heading of the first group of 8 verses is "Aleph," the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; and the first letter in the first word of each of the 8 verses in that section is aleph. The heading for the second group of 8 verses is "Beth," the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet; and the first letter of the first word in each of those 8 verses is beth. This pattern is carried all the way through, with the last section headed "Tau," and the first letter in the first word of each of those last 8 verses is tau. This is what makes Psalm 119 an amazing acrostic¹.

This will appeal to some, but not to others; so, for their sake, we will leave the matter here and press on. Those who find acrostics interesting can pursue it on their own; there are readily available sources on acrostics in Hebrew poetry.

When Were the Books of Poetry Written?

In general, the Books of Poetry, with the exception of Job, are largely the work of David and Solomon. Most of Psalms, plus Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, may be thought of as belonging to the Golden Age of Israel (the era of the United Kingdom--from Saul and David, through the "good years" of Solomon.

Ecclesiastes, however, was probably written at the end of the latter ("bad") years of Solomon's life; and some of the Psalms were obviously written during, or after, the Babylonian Captivity (for they refer to it).

The Book of Job may have been written as early as the time of Moses, and some authorities consider it to be one of the very first books of the Bible to be written.

¹ There are other acrostics in the Old Testament, including Psalms 25 and 34, and Lamentations.

Introduction to the 17 Books of Prophecy

The 17 books following the five Books of Prophecy are the writings of the Old Testament prophets. The first five books of the prophets are commonly referred to as the “Major” prophets, and the other 12 books of prophecy are commonly referred to as the “Minor” prophets. This is not because the Major Prophets are more important than the others, or were in closer communion with God; rather, it is simply because the writings that they left, which we call their books, are much larger. For example: there are 66 chapters in the Book of Isaiah alone; and all of the twelve Minor Prophets, combined, contain only 67 chapters, averaging only about 5 1/2 chapters for each book. The book of one of the Minor Prophets, Obadiah, contains only one chapter of 21 verses. In the Bible, the books of the Major Prophets come first, beginning with the largest of all, Isaiah.

Some of the Greatest of God’s Prophets Left No Writings

Some of the greatest of God's prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, left no writings at all. Nathan, one of the boldest of the prophets, the one who perfectly set King David up, and then famously said to him, “Thou art the man,” bringing about David’s repentance, left no written prophecies that have survived as such. We know about him only from II Samuel, I Kings, I Chronicles, II Chronicles, and the superscription of Psalm 51. Nathan, Iddo, and other prophets did leave written records, but their contents are apparently included in the books of II Samuel, I Kings, and I and II Chronicles².

What Is a Prophet, and What is Prophecy?

If we stopped 100 people at random and asked, “What is a prophet?” 99 would probably say something to the effect that a prophet is someone with supernatural power to predict the future. They would be wrong or--at best--only partially correct.

The nouns “prophet” and “prophecy,” and the related verb “prophesy,” are terms about which there is considerable confusion among people who have never given the matter much thought. And, regrettably, the same is true of some theologians and students of the Bible--those who **have** given the matter a great deal of thought; for some of the most skeptical and humanistic theologians, and their followers, reject entirely the concept of inspired messages from God.

But the biblical answer is simple: a prophet was one whose ministry was to speak, and/or write, messages from God (“Thus saith the Lord...”), inspired and

² See in this regard I Chron 29:29; II Chron 9:29.

empowered by the Holy Spirit. An inspired prophecy **may**, or **may not**, include information about the future.

It is helpful to remember that prophetic utterances were always "**forth-telling**" (speaking forth words that God has inspired), but were not necessarily "**fore-telling**" (predicting the future). An example of this is Nathan, telling King David, "Thou art the man."

Some, Who Were Not Prophets, Also Prophesied

Others, who were not prophets, were occasionally anointed to speak such messages for God. On one occasion the wicked, and emotionally ill, King Saul prophesied³; and you will recall that even Balaam's donkey once spoke God's message, in order to correct his master⁴. But these were the exceptions, and not the rule.

The Credentials of an Old Testament Prophet

For an Old Testament prophet, however, such prophetic speaking was his calling, his ministry, and his identity; it was what he was, and what he did.

Thus, someone identified in the Bible as a prophet was one chosen, set apart, and empowered for the purpose of speaking messages for God. Some of them were women, such as Hulda the prophetess, whom King Josiah consulted concerning the re-discovered Scriptures; this one is particularly interesting to me because Jeremiah, one of the Major Prophets was also in Jerusalem at the time and, apparently, available⁵. Another prophetess, the elderly Anna, who was led of the Spirit to come to the Temple to see and confirm the newborn Messiah, was probably the Old Testament's last prophetess⁶.

In the Old Testament period, prophets (and prophetesses) were a separate class; there were even "schools of the prophets," communities set apart for training young prophets. Such a person, man or woman, called of God to this ministry, was one of uncommon commitment to, and an uncommonly close relationship with, the Lord. As Matthew Henry, put it, "A prophet is one that has a great intimacy with Heaven and a great interest there; and, consequently, a commanding authority upon [the] Earth⁷."

The 16 authors of the 17 prophetic books were prophets, called and sanctified by God to live and speak for him⁸. But there were others, such as Moses and David,

³ I Samuel 19:24.

⁴ Numbers 22:28-30.

⁵ II Kings 22:11-20; II Chron 34:19-27.

⁶ Luke 2:36-38.

⁷ Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Isaiah, p 1.

⁸ Yes--the 17 books have only 16 human authors, for Jeremiah wrote two of them.

who are not identified as prophets but whose writings and speaking were often prophetic. In fact, a great many of the significant prophecies of the coming Messiah were written by David in the Psalms; such psalms are often called “messianic psalms”⁹. In addition, there were still others, such as Samuel, Nathan, Gad, Elijah, and Elisha, who were prophets--even very great prophets--but who authored no surviving books of the Bible, although the writings of some are included in other books of the Bible. And, apparently, neither Elijah nor Elisha, two of God’s greatest prophets, left any writings at all.

Prophets Spoke God’s Messages Only When Directed to Do So

It is also important to remember that prophets could neither prophesy nor discern things supernaturally whenever they chose; they could do so only when the Holy Spirit granted the anointing (empowerment) and so directed them, to meet the need of the moment. The prophet’s close relationship with the Lord was abiding; but the anointing to speak for Him was momentary.

John the Baptist was the prophetic bridge between the Old and New Testaments, for he spoke prophetically, identifying Jesus as the Messiah, “the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sin of the world.” John can be thought of as the last of the Old Testament prophets, or as the first of the New Testament prophets, and with equal validity, for he was both. And Jesus said of him that there had been no greater prophet¹⁰.

The Prophets: When and Why

a. When? The writers of the Old Testament books of prophecy lived and ministered only during the time of the human kings of Israel and Judah, the captivity, the return from captivity and the Restoration in the Promised land, a period of approximately 500 years (roughly 1,000 BC to 500 BC).

The beginning of this period of the Old Testament prophets began when the time of the Theocracy, with God Himself as King of the Israelites, ended. The period of the Theocracy, with God as King, ended when the people demanded human kings like the pagan nations around them. And, as the theocracy ended, the prophet Samuel assured the people that they would regret what they were demanding.

God gave the Israelites their first human king, Saul. Saul was succeeded by David; and he was succeeded by Solomon. The unified Kingdom of Israel was divided after Solomon's death, when 10 northern tribes seceded and became a separate kingdom. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) was born in pagan idolatry,

⁹ Perhaps the greatest example of these messianic psalms is Psalm 22.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:11.

and embraced it during its entire existence. Its wickedness finally brought about its destruction, and the carrying away into captivity in Assyria. The Southern Kingdom (Judah) soon fell into idolatry also, following the bad example of the Northern Kingdom. With the exception of periodic revivals of righteousness under righteous kings, the Southern Kingdom also embraced pagan idolatry until this sin brought about the final destruction of Judah also, followed by the Babylonian captivity and, eventually, the Restoration.

Thirteen of these 16 prophets lived and ministered during the years when Israel had kings. They ministered during the years of the unified kingdom, the division into two kingdoms (Israel and Judah), the decline and destruction of the two kingdoms, and the captivity. The other three (Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) lived and ministered during the captivity, the return from captivity to the Promised Land, the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem, and the restoration of the reunited nation of Israel, at the close of the Old Testament period.

b. Why? During the 500-year history of the Kings of Israel and Judah, all of the kings of Israel were wicked, as were most of the kings of Judah; pagan idolatry was embraced, and the true God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was, for much of the time, largely forgotten and greatly offended. The Aaronic priests, who before had been God's representatives and exemplars, were an hereditary class; they inherited their positions, whether righteous or corrupt; and many were corrupt, blessing the sin of the people and joining them in it.

The prophets, however, did not inherit their positions; they were individually selected, called out, and empowered by God. They very rarely fell away and betrayed their calling; as a group they remained steadfastly faithful, spoke for God, were empowered by Him, and provided an ongoing, conspicuous, living standard of righteousness. And so, it appears, God found it necessary to send prophets, in order to keep the truth of God alive before His people, and the guidance of God available to the people who had ears to hear it--priests and all.

The Occasionally Bizarre Behavior of the Prophets

At times God required bizarre behavior of the Old Testament prophets, in order to act out, or otherwise illustrate, the message the prophet was given to deliver to the people. We shall see this as we read the prophets¹¹.

The Writing Style of the Prophets: A Note of Caution

When reading the books of the prophets, it is essential to keep in mind this significant fact about their style: one part may have been applicable to that day in which it was written (e.g. Is 3:1-8); another part may be for a future time, but

¹¹ For an extreme example of this, see Is 20:1-6.

already fulfilled (e.g. Is 7:14); another part may be a prophecy which is not yet fulfilled (e.g. Is 2:1-5); and still another which is applicable to all times (e.g. Is 1:18). Sometimes these changes will occur within a single chapter, without warning or explanation. In fact, in Chapter 40 of Isaiah, such changes occur within the first five verses (we shall see this in the study guide to Isaiah). For lack of a better term I will call these “mixed prophecies.”

But don't be discouraged; the context, plus common sense, will usually tell you how, and when, a passage applies.

There is Poetry in the Prophets

Some of the writings of the prophets are also poetry, as beautiful as that in any of the group of books that we call the Books of Poetry. In fact, Isaiah 5:1 reads as if it belongs in Song of Solomon. Another example of poetic expression in the prophets is in Isaiah 55:1-2 and 12. Some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible was written by a major prophet, Jeremiah. In the middle chapter of the saddest book of the Bible (Lamentations), written by the saddest man in the Bible (Jeremiah) there is some of the most bright and hopeful poetry in the Bible (Lamentations 3:21-26).

Yet, the primary characteristic of the 17 books of prophecy is just that: prophecy.

New Testament Prophets

If you are not now sufficiently confused, the New Testament also records a number of prophets, and provides for such prophetic ministry as a gift to the Church¹². For examples, one Anna, an aged Old Testament prophetess, prophesied over the infant Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:36-38); there was a Christian prophet named Agabus, who prophesied to Paul, warning him not to return to Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-11); and the evangelist, Philip, one of the seven original deacons, had four daughters, “which did prophesy” (Acts 21:8-10). The old apostle, John the beloved, certainly wrote a great deal of prophecy in the Book of Revelation; but he is not thought of as a prophet, nor is he identified as such in the Bible.

But for Now...

But, for now, this is beside the point; we will deal with this aspect of the Bible's prophets when we get to the relevant books of the New Testament. For now, remember that when we speak of "the prophets" in terms of the books of the Bible, we are speaking only of the 17 prophetic books of the Old Testament, and of the 16 men who were their human authors.

¹² Ephesians 4:11, et al.

The Prophets Complete the Old Testament

The 17 Books of the Prophets complete the Old Testament. As observed by Matthew Henry, the great 17th Century commentator, it is proper to end the Old Testament with the Books of the Prophets for, because of their many predictions of the coming Messiah, "...they were the nexus--the connecting bond between the law and the gospel, and are therefore rightly placed between them¹³."

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¹³ Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol IV, Isaiah to Malachi, Preface.

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And now we begin the study of the Books of Poetry and the Books of the Prophets.

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