

Entering Prophetic Literature: *a place to start*

Entering prophetic literature can be intimidating; sometimes so much so that we avoid reading them altogether. But our goal at *Around the Word* is to equip God's people with the tools necessary to read the prophets with confidence. One simple and key concept to be aware of in our approach, is to recognize that many of the concepts spoken by the prophets are directly connected to earlier portions of redemptive history. Foundational to understanding the movement of a prophetic book is to be aware of the writings of Moses, sometimes known as the "fountainhead" of the prophets. He was the prophet who gave God's people the stipulations of the covenant, along with all the blessings that followed obedience and curses that followed rebellion.

All the prophets who followed Moses, as mediators between God and His people, served as enforcers of those stipulations. They warned the people, that because of God's character, He must bring the full curses of the covenant if they continue to reject God's law. It would be "the day of the Lord", and it would be gloomy. They also promised the people, that because of God's character, He would joyfully pour out the blessings of the covenant if they turn from their ways to live under God's authority. And they proclaimed an even greater future promise, that because of God's character, He will ensure that all who are truly His will be gathered to Him, for He made an everlasting, unconditional covenant with Abraham to make a great nation of His descendants. Yes, that too would be "the day of the Lord", and it would be glorious.

Most of the prophets follow this pattern (11 of 16). They write because of specific circumstances - the continual sins of God's people. As spokesmen for God, often using graphic pictorial language, they warn the people and hold out a promise. However, a few prophets break the mold. *Habakkuk* flows in the other direction. Speaking more from the perspective of the people, he sees all the pain and destruction coming and begins to question the character of God and covenant. *Obadiah* and *Nahum* speak to foreign nations concerning their sins against God's people (and other lands), as a warning for them to turn from their ways lest judgment soon fall on them. *Jonah* also speaks to a foreign nation, but his book seems to primarily serve as a picture of the heart of God's proud and merciless people (Jonah is the prototype of the people of Israel). And finally, *Daniel*, in the first half of his book, aims to show God's faithfulness to His promise spoken through Jeremiah, of preserving - and even prospering - His people in the foreign land of Babylon, the land of exile.

There is much more to cover, but for now, take a few moments to quickly skim through the following key passages that serve as a backdrop to the prophets. They highlight God's character, the relationship between God and His people prior to the giving of the law (Mosaic Covenant), the blessings and curses of the covenant, and what the people of the covenant are like. As you read the prophets, you will see that they continue to point back to the concepts represented in these passages.

WHAT THE GOD OF THE COVENANT IS LIKE

Exodus 34:6-7 – ⁶ The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

THE RELATIONSHIP ESTABLISHED PRIOR TO THE MOSAIC COVENANT

Genesis 17:3-8 (Abrahamic Covenant) – ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your

name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God

Exodus 19:1–8; 20:1-4ff (Just prior to Mosaic Covenant) – ¹...after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt...and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” ⁷ So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. ⁸ All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord...^{20:1} And God spoke all these words, saying, ² “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ “You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ “You shall not...You shall not...[Ten Commandments]

THE BLESSINGS AND CURSES OF THE COVENANT (abbreviated)¹

Leviticus 26 – ¹ “You shall not make idols for yourselves or erect an image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the Lord your God. ² You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord. ³ “If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, ⁴ then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase...you shall eat your bread to the full...dwell in your land securely. ⁶ I will give peace in the land...none shall make you afraid...I will remove harmful beasts from the land...the sword shall not go through your land. ⁷ You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you...I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you...I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you...I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people... ¹⁴“But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, ¹⁵ if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, ¹⁶ then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache...you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. ¹⁷ I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you...you shall flee when none pursues you. ¹⁸ And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again...I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze...your land shall not yield its increase... “Then if you walk contrary to me and will not listen to me, I will continue striking you...I will let loose the wild beasts against you, which shall bereave you of your children and destroy your livestock... “And if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me, ²⁴ then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will strike you...I will bring a sword upon you...I will send pestilence among you...you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy...you shall eat and not be satisfied...if in spite of this you will not listen to me, but walk contrary to me, ²⁸ then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and I myself will discipline you...You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters...I will destroy your high places...cast your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols...my soul will abhor you...I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate...I will not smell your pleasing

¹ See also Deuteronomy 28 for a parallel passage

aromas...I myself will devastate the land...I will scatter you among the nations... your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste...I will send faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight...you shall have no power to stand before your enemies...you shall perish among the nations...you who are left shall rot away in your enemies' lands

Deuteronomy 30:1-10 – ¹ “And **when all these things come upon you**, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, **and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you,** ² **and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice** in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, ³ then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you...he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you...will bring you into the land...make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers...the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live...will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you...you shall again obey the voice of the Lord...will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, ¹⁰ **when you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments** and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, **when you turn to the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul.

MOSES' FINAL PROPHET-LIKE CHARGE TO REMAIN IN THE COVENANT

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 – ¹⁵ “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, ²⁰ loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

UNFORTUNATELY, WHAT THE PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT ARE LIKE

Deuteronomy 31:16-18 (ESV) – ¹⁶ And the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them. ¹⁷ Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, ‘Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?’ ¹⁸ And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods.