

*Teaching from*  
*The Prophets*

Extra Notes for Cyprus Training Session

June 2018

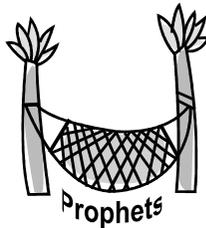
# The Prophets – Bible Teachers’ Workshop

The Prophets speak of Christ (Luke 24v44), point to the gospel of Salvation through faith in him (2Tim.3v15), and equip the godly Bible teacher for the task of building up God’s people (2Tim.3v16f) – yet they are generally misunderstood and/or avoided. How are we to rightly understand and faithfully communicate their message to God’s people today?

The Prophetic books span 300+ years: from midway through the Divided Kingdom era, into the Exile, and beyond. Like a hammock suspended between two trees, the Prophets can best be understood in relation to two great events, one which occurred hundreds of years before the earliest of them, the other which was to come hundreds of years after the latest:

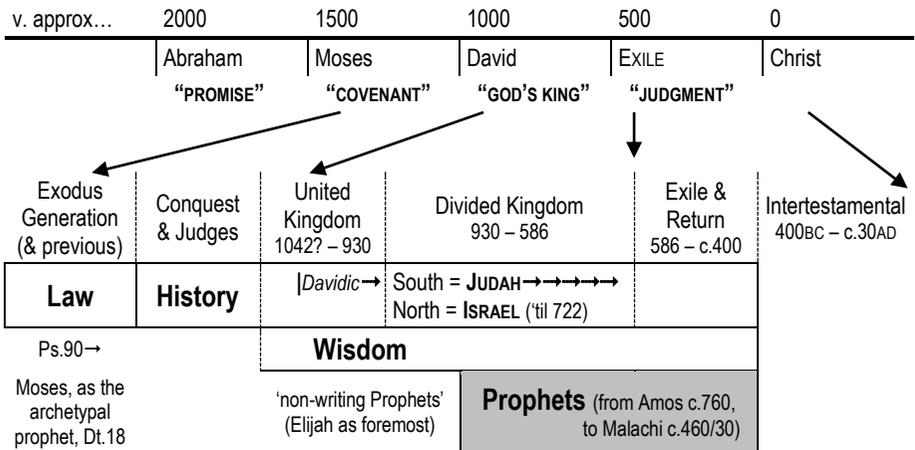
## The Giving of the Law

In the past lies God’s covenant with the nation, to be remembered and obeyed. Loyalty to God determines the imminent future of the people whether for good or ill; persistent covenant breaking will inevitably lead to exile.



## The Day of the LORD

In the future lies a glorious vision of hope. From the very beginning (the Golden Calf!) it is clear that the nation cannot keep the terms of God’s covenant with them. If the people are to be rescued from a greater slavery than the Egyptian captivity, namely slavery to sin, something more is needed; and God will bring it about.



The final words of the last prophet (Malachi 4v4-6) neatly summarise this ‘twin perspective’:

- “Remember the law of my servant Moses...” – looking back to the covenant with Moses
- “...that great and dreadful day of the LORD... turn the hearts ... else I will come and strike the land with a curse.” – looking forward to God’s decisive intervention of renewal & judgment.

## The Prophets in Context

The Prophetic books comprise around ¼ of the OT, just under a fifth of all Scripture:

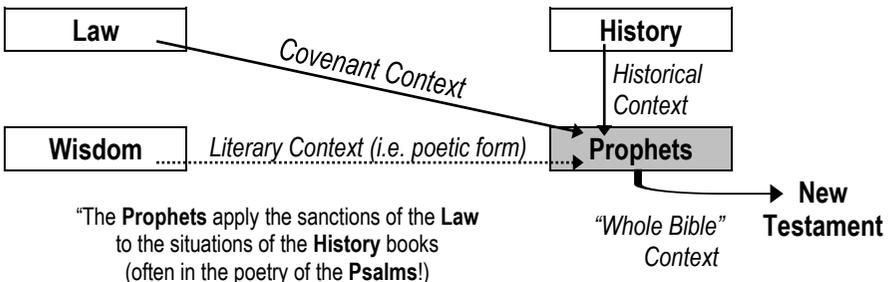
OLD TESTAMENT* (75%)		NEW TESTAMENT (25%)	
<b>Law</b> (=‘Torah’, instruction), <i>Genesis – Deuteronomy</i>	5852v = 19%	<b>History</b> <i>Joshua – Esther</i>	7018v = 23%
<b>Wisdom</b> <i>Job – Song-of-Songs</i>	4785v = 15%	<b>Prophets</b> ‘Major’ <i>Isaiah – Daniel</i> (80%) ‘Minor’ <i>Hosea – Malachi</i> (20%)	<b>Gospels/Acts</b> , <i>Matthew – Acts</i>
			4786v = 15%
			<b>Letters</b> <i>Romans</i> – <i>Revelation</i>
			3172v = 10%

\*HEBREW BIBLE has 3 divisions: **Torah**, **Prophets** (Isa, Jer, Eze + ‘Minor prophets’ + Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) and **Writings** (*Wisdom* + Ruth, Lamentations, Daniel, Chronicles, Ezra, Neh, Esther)

In terms of ‘bulk’, the prophets can be divided into four roughly equal amounts:

**Isaiah** (1292v), **Jeremiah** (1364v), **Ezekiel** (1273v), **Daniel + Minor Prophets** (357+1052v)

The Prophetic Books need to be understood in their various contexts:



A further ‘context’ (outside the scope of this Workshop) is the *thematic context* of “Prophets and Prophecy” in general. This includes the nature of prophecy, the Prophetic ‘office’ and call, true and false prophets, the schools of the prophets (supplementing dysfunctional Levites?), the mode of prophetic inspiration, and the question of NT prophecy. Exodus 7v1 and Deuteronomy 13+18 are good places to start (also see “Prophecy, Prophets” in the IVP New Bible Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. – article by J. A. Motyer & J. P. Baker).

# The Giving of the Law – The Covenant Context

Arguably the key to understanding the Prophets is to grasp their relationship to the Law (i.e. Genesis to Deuteronomy, a.k.a. 'the Pentateuch', or 'Torah' = instruction). The prophets were neither radical social reformers nor innovative religious thinkers – their basic message was not original: their points and doctrines are already found in the Pentateuch. In essence they were doing what we as teachers are called to do: pointing people 'back to the Bible' – The Prophets were Preachers!

## **Covenant Framework**

As well as previous 'redemptive-historical' covenants with Noah and Abraham (Gen.9+17), the use of covenants ('treaties') was widespread in the Ancient Near Eastern world (cf. Gen.14v13, 21v27, 26v28 etc.). The COVENANT made at Sinai and restated in Deuteronomy is modelled upon the sort of treaty made by a powerful overlord ('suzerain') with a weaker, dependent state ('vassal'=servant). Such treaties gave benefits / protection, and demanded **loyalty**. They contained the following elements...

- Preamble (introducing the parties)
- Prologue (history of the relationship)
- Stipulations (general / detailed – 'examples' rather than exhaustive; evidencing loyalty)
- Witnesses (who would enforce the covenant; often a list of gods)
- Sanctions (punishments for disloyalty = 'curses', benefits for loyalty = 'blessings')
- Document clause (recording the agreement & specifying where it is to be kept, and thus referred to)

All these elements are present in Exodus 20ff / Deuteronomy, though for obvious reasons there is no 'god list'! The witnesses given are the LORD himself, and 'the Heavens and the Earth'. The Sinai covenant contains over 600 detailed stipulations to be observed.

## **Covenant Sanctions**

The Covenant Sanctions are found in Leviticus 26, and in Deuteronomy 28-32. They can be grouped and categorised in various different ways (cf. Fee/Stuart, "How to Read...", p168):

- **BLESSING** (Lev.26v1-13, Deut.28v1-14; cf. Deut.4v32-40): life, health, agricultural abundance, prosperity, safety/victory, respect/renown.
- **CURSE** (Lev.26v14-39, Deut.28v15-68; cf. Deut.4v25-28.): death, disease, drought, dearth, danger, destruction, defeat, deportation, destitution, and disgrace (10 'D's').

The sanctions apply *corporately* (for individuals, notice the tension in the Wisdom literature e.g. between Ps.1 and Job). Prophets sometimes bless/denounce specific groups within Israel (e.g. Eze.22v24ff: prophets, princes, priests, people; thus v30: 'without exception').

## “Covenant Enforcement Mediators”

2 Kings 17v13ff summarises the general calling of the prophets (& the response they got!)

The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets." <sup>14</sup> But they would not listen...<sup>15</sup> They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless ...they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do.

The Prophets were raised up by God to speak on his behalf, announcing his intention to enforce his covenant (i.e. the sanctions). Delays in enforcement were attributable to the LORD's patience, but now he intended to act. In general, the prophets don't 'cite' specific laws, but draw attention to various breaches of loyalty. The judgments or blessings that they predict are not newly invented, but rather refer to the sanctions in the covenant documents.

Explicit 'covenant language' sometimes occurs in the prophets (e.g. Jeremiah 11, 22v9; Daniel 9v4, 10-13; Hosea 8v1). More often the covenant framework can be discerned in the curses threatened/explained (Mal.2v2f, Amos 4v6ff, Haggai 1v6) or the blessings promised (Amos 9v11-15, Mal 3v10-12). There may be other things that signal this background, e.g. Mal.1v14: "I am a *great king*"; Amos 3v2: special relationship; or the 'love/hate vocabulary' of Mal.1v2-5 which was the standard ANE language of diplomacy (see 1Kings 5v1+12 for a Biblical example); today we speak of 'special relationships', 'treaty obligations', 'historic allies' etc.

The Basic Form of many oracles is

- ① identification of Israel's sin / God's love
- ② announcement of curse / blessing

Various 'sub-forms' can be identified, in particular, the **Lawsuit**, consisting of a summons, charge, evidence, and verdict (with God as plaintiff, prosecution, judge... & prison warden!), e.g. Isaiah 3v13-26, Hosea 4, Micah 6. Also e.g. **Woe** oracles (Habakkuk 2v6-8), **Promise**/salvation oracles (Amos 9v11-15), **War** oracles (Nahum 2v1-10, Habakkuk 3v3-15) etc.

## Knowing the Background – the Historical Context

Many people come to the prophets solely to find predictions of Christ, the New Covenant Age, or (in particular!) what lies ahead of *us*. But often the Prophets were predicting the imminent future of the people to whom they spoke, i.e. **their future is our past**. Unlike the Psalms (which tend to be broadly general), prophetic oracles are often tied closely to their particular historical context, and can only be fully understood with respect to that context.

The details of historical context may be

- supplied by the historical books – Kings, Chronicles, Ezra & Nehemiah (& Daniel 1-6),
  - described or deducible within the Prophetic book (or contemporary prophetic books).
- Sources outside the Bible often shed some light, e.g. on the wider international scene, but Scripture itself is the *primary* source for historical context. Nevertheless, Scripture cannot be understood independently of its linguistic and cultural context. For example, to understand Nahum 3 we must know something about the fall of Thebes. Similarly Daniel 11 will be unintelligible if we are unaware of the history of the rival Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties which followed Alexandra the Great.

In general the prophets can be categorised according to *when* and *to whom* they prophesied (though Joel in particular is difficult to locate):

Era \ Audience	Judah (SOUTH)	Israel (NORTH)	Foreign Nation
8 <sup>th</sup> Century BC	Isaiah, Micah,	Amos (from Judah), Hosea	Jonah (NINEVEH of Assyria)
7 <sup>th</sup> Century, and up to 586 BC	Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, ?Joel?		Nahum (NINEVEH of Assyria)
Exile	Ezekiel, Daniel		Obadiah (EDOM)
Post-Exile	Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi		

For further detail see the table on the back cover.<sup>1</sup>

## The Day of the Lord – The Covenant ‘Road-Map’

The original covenant did not just promise blessings and curses, based on the nation’s loyalty or otherwise, in any given ‘local’ situation. It also prophesied the general decline and ultimate judgment of the nation, followed by renewal (Lev.26v40–45, Deut.4v29-31, 30v1-6).<sup>2</sup> The pattern is:

**Blessing—Curse—Renewed Blessing**

<sup>1</sup> The dates in the table are largely gleaned from K. A. Kitchen’s book, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* – lengths of reigns cannot be simply ‘read off’ from the OT accounts due to the complications of ① different calendars in use ② different methods of ‘counting years’ (starting at ‘0’ or ‘1’), and ③ co-regencies (overlapping reigns). Kitchen’s book also gives details of external sources relating to this particular period (for earlier periods, read it with caution).

<sup>2</sup> It is vital to see the Sinai covenant within this larger redemptive framework. Otherwise, considered in isolation, it arguably becomes a covenant of works, with obedience required, and corresponding sanctions – though there is also the embedded concept of forgiveness via the sacrificial system.

This time of renewal was more than just national restoration – it was tied up with God’s purposes for the whole world (recall Gen.12v3, all nations blessed). Thus the Prophets *do* look beyond their particular/immediate future to a cosmic/ultimate future. Working within this roadmap (e.g. Ezek.16v59ff) they look forward to “latter days” and a “day of the LORD”. The various descriptions in the different prophets together form a composite picture of this ultimate future, containing the following elements:

- Cosmic Turmoil (Hag.2v21f); God’s decisive intervention (Mal.3+4), rescuing his people from great tribulation, in which their enemies threaten to overrun them (e.g. Joel 3, Ezekiel 38-39, Zech 12) but in fact Israel defeats her enemies (Obadiah v18),
- ...yet also, a judgment on those amongst ‘God’s people’ who have not remained faithful to him (Mal.4),
- ...and yet *also*, a transformation of God’s people, such that they have his law written on their ‘circumcised’ hearts (Jer.31, Eze.31, cf.Deut.30v6) and thus return to him and offer acceptable worship (Mal.3)
- A unity amongst God’s People (no longer Judah vs. Israel!, Hosea 1v11)
- A new covenant (Jeremiah 31) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2)
- God’s universal rule over all the nations, and their universal worship (Mic.4; Dan.7).
- Peace, Prosperity & Renown! (Hos.2v18,22; Joel 3v18, Zeph )
- God delivering+ruling through his Anointed, a King in David’s line (Eze.34, Jer.33, Mic.5)
- Resurrection, death conquered, and a great banquet feast – with the wicked, the enemies of God, excluded and punished (Dan.12, Isa.25)
- New Heavens and a New Earth – all creation restored to harmony (Isaiah 65)

A number of the elements in this promised future seem hard to fit together (without the hindsight of the NT!). In particular, there is an ambiguous attitude towards ‘the nations’, who are seen by turns as both part of the problem, but also part of the glorious future...

- “Moab will be trampled under him as straw is trampled down in the manure” (Isaiah 25v10)
- “I will restore the fortunes of Moab in the latter days, declares the LORD” (Jer.48v47, ESV)

For further examples compare Zeph.2v4-15 with 3v9, Zech.8v22f with 12v3 etc and Isaiah 24v21 with 56v6f; 19v23-35. The tension is modelled historically in God’s dealings with Nineveh recorded firstly in Jonah (mercy) and then in Nahum (judgment)!

## Which is Which?

Many of the pre-exilic predictions of judgment and blessing were fulfilled in the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem and the return of the exiles. Indeed, before the Exile, the curses predominate, since the nation was on a downward path, and desperately needed to repent. Post-Exile there was more emphasis on coming blessing (the ‘great curse’ had already fallen). Also, before the exile, prophecies of a return included all the elements of the great cosmic future – a new captivity (in Babylon, not Egypt) would culminate in a new exodus, a new covenant, a renewed nation ruled by a new King, and ultimately a new

creation. However, though the people did return from exile, it did not turn out to be the glorious homecoming hoped for; the restoration was fragile and limited, and the greatest promises still remained unfulfilled.

Thus one of the challenges in interpreting the Prophets is distinguishing between

- predictions of imminent judgment (with their specific historical fulfillments, sometimes recorded in the historical books)
- predictions of the historical exile and homecoming
- predictions of the ultimate future, with its crisis moment, judgment, & glorious blessings

This is further complicated by the fact that descriptions of the imminent and ultimate future may be intermingled, with prophecies of the near future set against the backdrop of the ultimate, eschatological events (cf. Joel 2 – the locust plague and the Day of the LORD, also Zephaniah). In addition, ‘cosmic language’ is sometimes used for local judgment and restoration (e.g. ‘resurrection language’ in Ezekiel 37 referring primarily to national restoration). Thus, to better understand the prophets, we need not only to know their historical background, but also to appreciate their literary genre...

## The Prophets as Poets & Preachers – the Literary Context

Whilst the Prophetic books differ from the Psalms in their historical particularity, in terms of ‘form’ there are often similarities:

- **Poetry:** much of the prophetic books is ‘poetry’ (e.g. the vast majority of Isa.40-66) – replete with *parallelism* (= ‘thought rhymes’) and *imagery* (= ‘thought pictures’) – see the ‘Psalms Workshop’ Notes. This includes the ‘bizarre / grotesque’ imagery of Apocalyptic writing (Daniel 7ff, Zechariah). Even the prose can have a ‘poetic flavour’ – e.g. Malachi is laid out entirely as prose (in NIV etc.), but a number of verses show clear parallelism:

"Yet I have loved Jacob,  
 but Esau I have hated,  
 and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland  
 and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."  
 Edom may say,  
 "Though we have been crushed,  
 we will rebuild the ruins."  
 But this is what the LORD Almighty says:  
 "They may build,  
 but I will demolish.  
 They will be called the Wicked Land,  
 a people always under the wrath of the LORD.

"A son honours his father,  
 and a servant his master.  
 If I am a father,  
 where is the honour due to me?  
 If I am a master,  
 where is the respect due to me?"  
 True instruction was in his mouth  
 and nothing false was found on his lips.  
 He walked with me in peace & uprightness,  
 and turned many from sin.

(1v2-4, 1v6; 2v6)

There is also imagery:

But who can endure the day of his coming?  
 Who can stand when he appears?  
 For he will be like a refiner's fire  
 or a launderer's soap.  
 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver;  
 he will purify the Levites  
 and refine them like gold and silver.

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.

(3v2-3; 4v1-2)

However, the prophets are not only poets, but preachers...

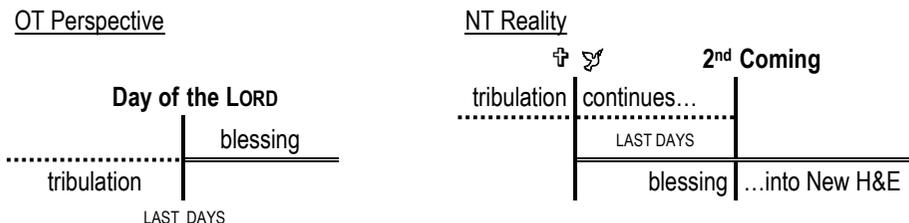
- **Oracles.** To effectively read the Prophets we must recognise their general composition, not as continuous narrative, but as an anthology/collection of spoken oracles (equivalent to the gospel 'pericope' (short passage) and the epistle 'paragraph').
  - Sometimes the oracles are hard to delineate (though sometimes not: e.g. Haggai)
  - Sometimes they are clearly 'organised', but not always – cf. Jeremiah!
 This composition explains why it is much harder to read large portions of the Prophets in one sitting than e.g. a gospel or historical book – it is more like reading a number of different psalms one after another. E.g. the only 'narrative' in Malachi is 3v16!
- **Direct Address.** A specific feature of oracles (and a distinctive of the Prophets vis-à-vis other Scripture), is God speaking in the first person – "Thus says Yahweh". (NB: the epistles are first person, but more generally a *written*, rather than *spoken* style).
- **Vision / drama** sometimes 'supports' the prophetic message (e.g. Jer.1v11 / Eze.4f). In these cases the focus remains upon the spoken word; what is seen or done is merely a visual aid (to introduce a topic or arrest attention). God's message through the prophet lies in the explanation that accompanies the vision etc. (Jer.1v12, Eze.5v5ff).

## New Testament Fulfilment in Christ – "Whole Bible" Context

(i.e. Redemptive Historical or Hermeneutical or Christological context...)

The New Testament takes OT prophecies of a coming age of blessing and applies them to the gospel age (e.g. Joel 2 in Acts 2, Amos 9 in Acts 15, Jeremiah 31 in Hebrews 8). God's decisive intervention has occurred, the Lord has come to his temple, God's judgment on sin has fallen, the enemies of God's people have been routed by Messiah, the resurrection of the righteous has taken place, the Holy Spirit has been poured out, and the Davidic King reigns over the whole world... all in the person and work of Jesus! In this sense the first Easter was "the day of the Lord". As a result the nations (i.e. the Gentiles) are becoming part of God's people.

Nevertheless, we still await a decisive intervention, namely Christ's return, "the day of the Lord" (2Thes.2v2), and now we live in a time of (uncomfortable!) overlap between the present evil age and the Kingdom of God – yet the day is coming when everything that is now true of Christ will also be fully true for his people. The following diagram shows the difference between the Prophetic perspective and the actual fulfilment.



Because the OT prophecies do not clearly distinguish between the first and second comings of Christ, they often present a composite picture – with some elements corresponding to the gospel age, and some yet to be fulfilled in the age to come. In this regard it is interesting to compare Isaiah 61 with Luke 4v18-19:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn...”

Christ quotes Isaiah 61v1-2 with reference to his own ministry, yet he stops his citation at “the year of the LORD'S favour”, *before* “...and the day of vengeance”. The year of the Lord's favour had dawned in his ministry, and we continue to enjoy it – whilst still awaiting the final day of vengeance. We live in the ‘day of Salvation’ (2Cor.6v2).

Thus the prophets speak of Christ (Luke 24v44) not only in their predictions of a Davidic King (e.g. Eze.34v23f, Jer.33v15) or of a Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53), but in their portrayal of a coming age of blessing, which Christ has inaugurated, and which he will ultimately consummate. In this sense they speak of Christ, and what he has done, is doing, and will do (though without necessarily perceiving those distinctions, cf. 1Pet 1v10-12).

One particularly difficult portion to untangle is Zechariah 9-13 which narrates two ‘stories’ –

- the story of the nation – rescued & victorious in battle, besieged yet God turns the tide, enabling them to triumph over their enemies.
  - the story of the individual – the humble King, the rejected Shepherd, the pierced one.
- Whilst the latter is clearly fulfilled in the Passion of Christ (as the NT citations confirm), the former thread largely awaits his second coming, and the final vindication of his people – and yet in Zechariah both are interwoven. Such a passage represents the Prophetic books at their most exegetically demanding!

## Teaching from the Prophets

Teaching from the prophets presents a number of opportunities and challenges. Of the former, there is the awesome immediacy of God's direct address, 'Thus says the LORD'. In addition "the prophets do not really differentiate between social and religious sins any more than the Sinai covenant does" (Goldsworthy, "Gospel & Kingdom" p77), so there is healthy balance in the twin requirement for orthodoxy *and* orthopraxy, right belief *and* right behaviour (cf. Eph.2v8-10; James 1v27, 2v18).

The great challenge in teaching from the Prophets is bridging the gap between their day and ours, both historically and hermeneutically. On the historical front, we must 'do our homework' using the resources available – Bible Dictionaries, commentaries etc. These helpfully supplement our own research as we seek to identify the historical setting, basic outline and specific issues of whichever of the prophets we may be teaching from.

On the interpretative front, we need to grapple with both the continuity and the discontinuity between the Testaments. The Prophets work within the framework of the Old Covenant, whereas we live under the new covenant ...and yet that new covenant is described as God's (old covenant!) law written on hearts. God's love for his people is axiomatic across Scripture. And God's basic call for loyalty remains unchanged, even if the forms that loyalty takes differ from the 600+ stipulations of the Sinai Covenant – the demands of Christ are no less radical and all-encompassing than those made in the Law and pressed home by the Prophets.

God still threatens wrath and judgment on law-breakers, & the idea of sanctions has its NT counterpart: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." (Gal.6v7; see also Blessings/Curses in Matt.5v3-11 and 23v13-32; Luke 6v20-26; cf. Mark 10v29-30).

As we encounter the blessings and curses in the prophets we need to hold in balance:

- the specific and physical sanctions of the Old covenant which fell on the nation of Israel, through her unfolding history, culminating in the exile to Babylon.
- the wrath and curse borne by Christ on behalf of his people, and the New Covenant blessings thereby obtained for us.
- God's fatherly dealings with us, rebuking our waywardness and blessing our obedience.
- the ultimate curse awaiting the impenitent, and the glorious blessings for God's people in the Coming Age, portrayed so graphically in the prophets.

## **Postscript**

Amidst the interpretative challenge of the Prophets we must be sure to unfold the great basic truths which are also prominent – for example... Isaiah 40: The Greatness of God; Ezekiel.18: individual responsibility; Daniel: God's Sovereignty; Obadiah: Judgment on the enemies of God's people; Jonah: God's compassion; Habakkuk: wrestling with the problem of Evil; Haggai 1: the call to put God first, etc. May God bless us in this great task!

# The Writing Prophets in their historical context

