

Prophetic Literature

Though the historical books mention a good number of active prophets in the course of Israel's history, the most famous of them being Elijah and Elisha of the 9th century BCE, the writing prophets made their appearance with Amos and Hosea only in the 8th century BCE.

Practically all the prophetic books have a very complicated "birth story", as additions and revisions were frequently made, but for our purposes, we will accept the books as they are found in our Bibles.

Let us remind ourselves of the time that these books acquired the form they have now:

Around 750: *Amos; Hosea; Micah; First Isaiah*
630-600: *Zephaniah; Jeremiah; Nahum; Habakkuk*
Exilic: *Ezekiel; Second Isaiah*
Post-Exilic: *Third Isaiah; Haggai; Joel; Zechariah; Malachi; Obadiah*
350-200: *Jonah*
200-175: *Daniel*

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Book of the Twelve belong to the *Nebi'im*, while in Christian Bibles, the book of Jeremiah is followed by the Book of Lamentations (belonging to the *Writings* in the TeNaK) and Baruch (which is a deuterocanonical book, and therefore not found in the TeNaK). Neither book belongs to the Major Prophets.

The very last prophetic book was the second-century BCE *Book of Daniel*, which the TeNaK had to place among the *Writings* as the Canon of Prophetic Books was already closed when the book was written. Christian Bibles, however, place this book between Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets.

In our Bibles, four books are listed as **Major Prophets** (not because of their quality, but purely because of their length!). They are: **Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel**.

Note that the one book of Isaiah was in fact written by three different prophets in three very different periods, and are now called First Isaiah (chapters 1-39), Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66).

The books found in the Scroll of the Twelve are listed as **Minor Prophets** (written in italics above).

The twelve **Minor Prophets**:

Hosea, was a prophet of Israel, the northern kingdom.

Joel, named after its author, the prophet Joel, a man of Judah.

Amos, named after the prophet Amos who, though born near Bethlehem, preached in the northern city of Bethel.

Obadiah, named after the prophet Obadiah, a native of Judah but otherwise obscure.

Jonah, named after its fictional hero, himself named after a Galilean prophet briefly mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25.

Micah, named after the Judean prophet Micah.

Nahum, named after the Galilean prophet Nahum.

Habakkuk, named after the prophet Habakkuk of whom nothing is known.

Zephaniah, named after its author the prophet Zephaniah, who may well have been the great grandson of King Hezekiah.

Haggai, named after the prophet Haggai.

Zechariah, named after the prophet Zechariah, contemporary and near neighbour of Haggai.

Malachi, a name meaning "my messenger" but about whom nothing is known.

We have included the Books of Lamentations and Baruch in this section since we are following the order in which they are found in the Bible; most Bibles put these two books after Jeremiah, even though they are NOT part of the Major Prophets.

Isaiah

Isaiah is often considered the greatest of the Old Testament prophets because of the sheer range and vision of his prophecy.

An inspiring quote

“but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary. . . .” (Isaiah 40:31).

The Book of Isaiah

This book falls into three distinctive parts (or books), coming from different periods of history, *First Isaiah 1-39* (pre-exilic), *Second Isaiah 40-55* (exilic) and *Third Isaiah 56-66* (post exilic).

The first section, First Isaiah (chapters 1-39) contains a large number of messages describing the judgement that will fall on the people of Judah unless they change their ways. These prophecies were so important that they were used and re-used, expanded and edited by subsequent generations. This judgement is shot through with some beautiful passages of hope and promised salvation. This first section also contains some narrative sections, especially chapters 36-39 which are an exact copy of 1 Kings 18:13-20:19.

The second section, Second Isaiah (40-55) is based almost entirely on the comfort that will come to God's people. It is the most coherent and consistent assembly of material. It feels as though it is set after the judgement, promised in the first section, has happened and pledges a new future for God's people. Human effort is seen here both in its limits and its possibilities. To be sure, even strong young people eventually grow tired but God gives power to the powerless enabling them to renew their strength and take off like eagles. In Old Testament thought, the eagle was an unclean animal (Leviticus 11:13) and could not be eaten; this text is the only positive eagle reference in the prophetic books. Still, "unclean" does not mean that the eagle is not pronounced "very good" along with the rest of creation (Genesis 1:31) – indeed, good enough that both God and Moses can compare God to the eagle (Exodus 19:4; Deuteronomy 32:11-12). Just as God bore Israel on eagles' wings at the first exodus (Exodus 19:4), now, in the second exodus – the return from exile – God's people are given power to mount up themselves with wings like eagles.

The third section, Third Isaiah (56-66) appears to be set at a different time and there is less coherence in this section, probably after God's people have returned and started to rebuild the country. This section details the infidelities and corruption of Israel both before and even after the Babylonian Exile. It contains a mix of warnings about how they should behave alongside comfort and hope for the future.

Who wrote these books?

Isaiah, son of Amoz (not the Amos from the Minor Prophets) was a prophet in the 8th Century BCE. The traditional view is that Isaiah wrote the whole book and that 40-55 and 56-66 were prophecies by Isaiah into the far future but this view is no more tenable (and many modern scholars, however, think that the book began with

Isaiah's prophecies but were added to over time). Indeed 8:16 ("Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples") implies that Isaiah's original prophecies are to be kept by his disciples until a future moment. This suggests that Isaiah's disciples preserved the prophecies and then opened them again as the exile came to an end and added to them when they actually returned from exile.

What kind of books are they?

These books are nearly all prophecy of different kinds and are mostly poetic. The exceptions are a few chapters, like 36-39 which are prose, history and a few chapters (24-27) often called the Isaiah apocalypse, prophesying doom for Judah.

The themes of the books

The theme of justice and judgement — next to, and not behind, mercy and compassion — are probably the biggest themes in Isaiah.

During the Church year, we hear readings from

The Book of Isaiah is the Old Testament book most frequently used in the liturgy. The cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:3) occurs in every Mass. Isaiah dominates Advent, providing the great majority of readings at Mass, nourishing the expectation of Christians for the coming Messiah. In the early part of this season, Isaiah is read semi-continuously, the Gospel selections being accommodated to these readings. Further on, Isaiah provides the readings for all four Masses of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The third part of Isaiah is reserved for the season of the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord, with its celebration of the nations assembling to pay homage to the Saviour.

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, readings from Isaiah are again prominent, now concentrating on the mission of the Servant of the Lord who is at the centre of the Paschal Mystery. Isaiah is presented twice in the Paschal Vigil, on this occasion to illustrate the love and forgiveness preached by the prophets. In the rest of the year, Isaiah is frequently read on Sunday, Solemnities and in July on the weekdays of weeks 14 and 15 (Year II).

The very popular hymn, "Here I am Lord" by Daniel Schutte was inspired by Isaiah 6:8. (You can listen to it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AG35D8Regh0)

How is the book structured?

| | |
|--------|---|
| 1 - 39 | the first part of the Book of Isaiah |
| 1-5 | prophecies before the Syro-Ephraimite War |
| 6-12 | the book of Immanuel |
| 13-23 | proclamations against foreign nations |
| 24-27 | apocalypse |
| 28-35 | poems on Israel and Judah |
| 36-39 | historical appendix |
| 40-55 | the Book of the Consolation of Israel |
| 56-66 | the third part of the Book of Isaiah |

God speaks to us

as he spoke to Isaiah, telling him that he is the Lord Sabaoth, who must be held in veneration (Isaiah 8:13).

Jeremiah

Jeremiah's book opens with his call as a prophet in the 13th year of King Josiah about 627 BCE. He holds the record for prophetic activity, some 45 years in all.

A favourite quote

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart” (Jeremiah 1:5).

The Book of Jeremiah

The Book of Jeremiah recounts the life preaching and ministry of the prophet Jeremiah. The early chapters of the book show in colourful poetic imagery Israel's adulterous infidelity and the many opportunities for conversion which had been blindly neglected in the past (chapters 2-10). The people practise their religion but their hearts are not in it. They think that because they respect the ritual, God will protect them; they have made the practice of religion a matter of security which relieves them of the obligation to love. Jeremiah tells them that God demands not outward circumcision of the flesh but an inward circumcision of the heart.

It goes on to give details of the curse which such neglect has called down upon them (chapters 11-20). The inevitable conclusion follows, in a selective illustrative history of the last days of the monarchy in Jerusalem (chapters 21-25). Only then can hope of a new heart begin to be expressed by promises and by examples of the results of loyalty and disloyalty (chapters 26-35). Chapter 31 is the climax of Jeremiah's message. He preaches hope beyond misfortune: God spoke to Jeremiah and told him that he would make a new covenant – not like the one made with their ancestors. Through the mouth of Jeremiah, God tells his people that the covenant was not permanently broken. He invites them to enter into a new covenant. With the new covenant, the Lord said that he would put his law within them and write it on their hearts. He says he will be their God and they will be his people (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

More examples are given in the story of Jeremiah in and after the siege (chapters 36-45) before the concluding chapters demonstrate the overwhelming cosmic power of the Lord in the eventual punishment of Israel's tormentors (chapters 46-51).

Who wrote this book?

Jewish and Christian tradition both view Jeremiah as the author of this book. There can be no doubt that Jeremiah is the source of much of the contents of the book, but the way the book jumps around suggests that it has been edited over a long period of time collecting together different parts of Jeremiah's message. As a result, many regard Jeremiah as the author of the words in the prophecies, but not necessarily as the editor of the final book. One possibility of who that was is Baruch.

What kind of book is it?

This is a book of prophecy. The three big prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) are all similar in that they contain a majority of prophecies, but with elements of narrative history woven around the prophecy.

The theme of the book

Much of Jeremiah's prophetic preaching is based on the theme of the covenant between God and Israel (God would protect the people in return for their exclusive worship of him): Jeremiah insists that the covenant is conditional, and can be broken by Israel's apostasy (worship of gods other than Yahweh).

Liturgical notes

In the liturgy, Jeremiah is the model of the suffering prophet, and as such he is seen as a type of Jesus Christ in his suffering. Indeed, Jesus' disciples attest that some thought Jesus was a returned Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14). His endurance also makes him a model for the Christian during Lent. At Mass, the book is read on several Sundays and semi-continuously in July and August on weekdays 16-18 (Year II).

How is the book structured?

- 1-25 the earliest and most important part of Jeremiah's message
- 26-29 some biographical accounts and Jeremiah's encounter with other prophets
- 30-33 God's promise of a new covenant
- 34-45 Jeremiah's conversation with Zedekiah and the fall of Jerusalem
- 46-51 Divine punishment to the nations surrounding Israel
- 52 conclusion: Baruch's Testimony

God speaks to us today

We listen to the word of God from Jeremiah (who more than any other prophet uses that phrase) in order to receive, believe, learn and submit to it. We listen to the word in order to understand it and know the contexts into which God speaks to us today through his word.

Lamentations

One of our most important sources of information about the terrible conditions in Jerusalem and Judah after the Babylonian attack comes from the Book of Lamentations.

An inspiring quote

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end” (Lamentations 3:22).

The Book of Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations is a collection of five poems lamenting the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians at the time of the exile. They are written in a mix of third person (he/she/it/they) and first person (I/we) and recognise that their current disaster was directly connected to their past disobedience to God. The poems plead with God to see their disaster and to act to save them.

The people had undergone terrible psychological and moral suffering. The exiles had their leisure hours - they were not kept by their masters at hard work continually. During these leisure hours they naturally "sat down" by the rivers of Babylon, as the most pleasant and attractive places. They brought their harps with them, with some idea, perhaps, of indulging in mournful strains. Grief, however, overpowered them – Zion came to their recollection – and they could do nothing but weep. We can hear an echo when we listen to the song “By the rivers of Babylon” which uses the words of Psalm 137: “there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion”. The song expresses the lamentations of the Jewish people in exile following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586BCE. (Listen to the Boney M rendition of it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ta42xU2UXLA)

Who wrote this book?

The Greek and English Bibles suggest that Jeremiah wrote this book. The problem with this is that Jeremiah went to Egypt during the exile, but these poems seem to have been written by people who stayed in Judah. On the other hand, the recognition of the link between the people’s behaviour and the exile would fit well with what Jeremiah said.

What kind of book is it?

Lamentations is a book of poetry. It contains five poems of lament which capture the devastation of what it felt like to lose their land.

The theme of the book

Lamentations has much to say about pain. God seems to be absent, and his promises seem to be forgotten (Lamentations 1:12; 2:1). However, just as pain is a global and ever-present experience, so too God’s mercy is ever-present for

those who trust him. We see that it is those who were called to lead God's people who are largely responsible for misleading them.

Liturgical notes

The liturgy of the Church before Vatican II prescribed the chanting of these laments during Holy Week at what is called "Tenebrae" or the "Darkness Service" before daybreak, a usage which survives in some places. These poems do not resolve grief or suffering, but they bring it into the presence of God. The Book of Lamentations now earns only one weekday reading at Mass, in June on Saturday in Week 12 (Year II) Cry aloud to the Lord, daughter of Zion (Lamentations 2:2, 10-14, 18-19).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|--------|---------------------------------|
| 1:1-22 | there is no one to comfort them |
| 2:1-22 | there is only anger and weeping |
| 3:1-66 | God has not forgiven them |
| 4:1-22 | utter devastation |
| 5:1-22 | plea for restoration |

Something for today

Lamentations does not represent silent suffering but angry, grieving lament. Reflect as you read on the importance of expressing deep emotion rather than bottling it up.

Baruch

The book of Baruch claims to be from the hand of the famous secretary of Jeremiah. It was treasured by the early Jewish community in Alexandria.

An inspiring quote

“Take courage, my children, call on God. He will deliver you from tyranny, from the clutches of your enemies” (Baruch 4:21).

The Book of Baruch

The Book of Baruch is a striking testimony to the spirituality of the Jews after the trauma of the Babylonian Exile. It expresses their soul-searching and their consciousness of guilt, but at the same time, their unfailing confidence in God’s protection and power to save.

The Book of Baruch is made up of different periods and (possibly) different authors. As it is now, it is a fine expression of penitence. It begins with an affirmation: our sins have broken our relationship with God (Baruch 1:1-14). Then comes a reflection on sin as being exile far from God; the only recourse we have is to the tenderness and faithfulness of God (Baruch 1:15-3:18). This first part is a letter to the people who were in exile with King Jehoiakin in Babylon. As a result of hearing the letter, the people wept, fasted, prayed and made a collection for the Temple to be sent back to Jerusalem. The gift for the Temple was sent with the request that the people prayed for King Nebuchadnezzar and his son Belshazzar so that the exiles might live in peace under them.

The second part of the book (Baruch 3:9-5:9) changes tone dramatically and consists of two poems (or hymns). The first poem is one of the most treasured parts of the book; it exhorts God’s people to learn wisdom (Baruch 3:9-4:4). The second one, the tone of which suggests Second Isaiah, gives consolation to Jerusalem and tells her that God grants her his light and his mercy. Reconciliation is achieved (Baruch 4:5-5:9).

Connected to the Book of Baruch is the letter of Jeremiah, sometimes included as chapter 6 of Baruch and sometimes as a stand-alone book.

Who wrote this book?

A brief introduction reports that Baruch, son of Neriah, Jeremiah’s secretary, wrote the book five years after the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonia in 586 BCE (Baruch 1:1-2). Although it is attributed to Baruch, its verbal differences from the rest of Jeremiah had made scholars doubt whether, in fact, he was the author (or the only author). The very different tone of the two parts of the book also raises questions about whether the same person wrote 1:1-3:8 and 3:9-5:9.

What kind of book is it?

This book is partially historical story, partially letter and partially poetry.

The theme of the book

The theme of Baruch is that the salvation of Israel is founded on wisdom: “Learn where prudence is, where strength, where understanding; that you may know also where are length of days, and life, where light of the eyes, and peace” (Baruch 3:14).

Liturgical notes

The Book of Baruch is read on the second Sunday in Advent (Year C) and on weekdays in September on Friday and Saturday of Week 26 (Year 1). The combination of consciousness of sin and confidence in forgiveness makes the book suitable for Christian prayer; but it is most familiar from the hymn to Wisdom (Baruch 3:9-4:4), which is read at the Easter Vigil.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 1:1-14 | introduction set in Babylon |
| 1:15-2:10 | a confession of sins |
| 2:11-3:8 | prayer for mercy |
| 3:9-4:4 | a poem in praise of wisdom |
| 4:5-5:9 | the reason why the people are in exile |
| 6:1-73 | letter of Jeremiah |

Something for today

Baruch is a book of hope which reveals the transformative power of trusting in God with sincere repentance.

Ezekiel

The most remarkable individual during Israel's period of exile was the prophet Ezekiel.

An inspiring quote

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

The Book of Ezekiel

The Book of Ezekiel contains the various visions and prophecies of the prophet Ezekiel written to the people of Judah after the first wave of exiles deported to Babylon (in 597 BCE). His message was couched in the same terms as Jeremiah's, who remained in Jerusalem: he censured the people of God (Ezekiel 3-24) and the nations (Ezekiel 25-32) for their wicked conduct. Ezekiel was active at possibly the darkest period of Judah's history. His purpose was not to depress the people still further but to assure the exiles in Babylon that they were not abandoned rejects.

Once the punishment of obdurate Jerusalem was complete, the Lord would clear his name and reputation soiled by his failure to protect his people. Then, indeed, "You will know that I am the Lord" - a formula occurring repeatedly throughout the book. When the people had lost all hope, his preaching became a message of hope: God would restore his people (Ezekiel 33-39). Ezekiel was so sure of this that he gave a description, in futuristic terms of the Jerusalem of the future, transformed by God (Ezekiel 40-48).

Who wrote this book?

The book is ascribed to Ezekiel, a priest and prophet. Although he may not have written the visions and prophecies down in the form we now have them, they are very likely to be traced back him.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a book of prophecy, which includes visions as well. Many of the prophets do have visions in their writing (e.g., Isaiah and Jeremiah also have visions), but what makes Ezekiel unusual is the balance of visions – his prophecies are mostly visions with a few verbal prophecies rather than the other way around.

The theme of the book

The theme of this book is compassion and forgiveness. Although Ezekiel is a pretty wrath-intensive book, it also has compassion and forgiveness in evidence.

During the Church year, we hear readings from

Three great readings from Ezekiel are prominently used: one about the Good Shepherd on the Feast of Christ the King (chapter 34); one about God's holy name at the Easter Vigil (chapter 36) and one about the Valley of the Dead Bones at the Vigil of Pentecost (chapter 37). At weekday Masses, the book has a semi-continuous reading in August in Weeks 19 and 20 (Year II).

The song "Dry bones" made popular by the Delta Rhythm Boys was inspired by Ezekiel, where he talks about the Lord making him walk through a valley of dried bones. The Lord told him to prophesy over the bones, saying "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord" (Ezekiel 37:3-6). (You can hear their rendition of the song on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVoPG9HtYF8)

How is the book structured?

| | |
|------------|---|
| 1:1-3:27 | introduction and call of Ezekiel |
| 4:1-24:27 | the doom that is coming on Judah and Jerusalem |
| 25:1-32:32 | the doom that is coming on other nations too |
| 33:1-39:29 | a range of prophecies about the people in exile |
| 40:1-48:35 | hope for the future. |

A message for today

The core message of Ezekiel for the worldwide Church today is its radical God-centeredness. The God who is presented in Ezekiel is utterly transcendent, perfectly holy, and not to be relegated to the side-lines of the corporate life of his people.

Daniel

In English translations of the Bible, Daniel is always found as the fourth of the Major Prophets, standing immediately after Ezekiel and before the twelve Minor Prophets. The book is filled with dreams and visions that reveal coming events.

An inspiring quote

“His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:14).

The Book of Daniel

The Book of Daniel was written during the struggle of the Jews to maintain their religion against the attempts of the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BCE) to stamp it out. It is an early example of a type of writing which became very popular in Judaism at this time, an apocalypse. Such a writing is intended to encourage those undergoing persecution by reassuring them of the unlimited power of God in heaven and on earth, and of divine protection on those who remain faithful. Persecution will not last for ever, and those who persevere will be richly rewarded with God’s love and favour.

The Book of Daniel is named after the book’s principal character. In the first part of the book, Daniel and his three friends are in service to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Fidelity to their Jewish faith lands them in the fiery furnace, from which they are miraculously delivered. Further adventures lead our hero to the lion’s den and deliverance causes all to glorify God. The second part of the book is devoted to Daniel’s vision of God’s future victory over those who exploit his people. The beginnings of a theology of life with God after death may be detected here.

Who wrote this book?

While the book is accredited to Daniel, the book’s hero, there are problems with this. Some of the details associated with the stories in chapters 1-6 are hard to tie up with evidence from the Babylonian and Persian periods. Also details in the visions in chapters 7-12 are uncannily accurate about events that took place in the second century BCE. So, although it appears to be set in the sixth century BCE, it seems to be more knowledgeable about the second century BCE.

One explanation for this is that the stories from chapters 1-6 originated in the sixth century BCE, but were talked about and retold over a period of 400 years until eventually being written down in the second century BCE, along with the visions in chapters 7-12. This would make Daniel a book with a long period of composition and used in different contexts as a reflection on how to remain faithful to God in hard times.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a historical story and apocalypse. The first six chapters are very much like other stories in the Old Testament (such as Ruth or Esther). These stories exist to reflect on live issues and offer advice (like how to treat foreigners – Ruth; why to celebrate Purim – Esther; and how to live faithfully in a foreign land – Daniel).

The second six chapters are of a very different kind. They consist of a range of visions which are reminiscent in some ways of the Book of Revelation. They contain weird beasts, violent battles between good and evil but beneath everything a certainty that God was in control. There are only two full apocalypses in the Bible (Daniel and Revelation) but outside of the Bible, this was a very common way of writing, the most common in fact between around the second century BCE and the sixth century CE. The word apocalypse means revelation and points to the fact that all these books seek to reveal God's role in the world even where he appears to be absent.

Liturgical notes

Readings from Daniel provide background to the final triumph of Christ. At Mass, the heavenly investiture of the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13-14) is therefore read on the Feasts of the Transfiguration and of Christ the King. Daniel is also read on weekdays in the final week (Year I), preparing for the annual emphasis at the end of the liturgical year on the final coming of Christ.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|------|----------------------------|
| 1-6 | Daniel at Court in Babylon |
| 7-12 | Daniel's visions |
| 13 | Susanna |
| 14 | Bel and the dragon |

Something for today

God is present in the world even where he appears to be absent.

Hosea

The prophet Hosea in the 8th century BCE protested violently against Israelite religious practices.

An inspiring quote

“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6).

The Book of Hosea

Hosea came from the north and preached at the same time as Amos. He discovered the tenderness of God through personal experience. He loved his wife, although she behaved badly towards him; through his love he succeeded in restoring to her the feelings she had had when she was young. This is how God loves us: not because we are good, but so that we can become good (Hosea 1-3).

The book begins with God’s command to Hosea to marry an unfaithful wife who he loved passionately and the first few chapters describe what happened when he did so. Chapter 4 onwards contains a range of messages from God via Hosea, first to the people of Israel (chapters 4-11) and then to the people of Israel and Judah (chapters 11-14), about the anger God felt because of their betrayal of him through injustice, corruption and their worship of other gods. Woven between these messages of doom are some messages of hope, pointing to what God’s people can look forward to beyond the times of trouble.

Who wrote this book?

The author is announced as Hosea in verses 1:1-2. He was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Hosea, in Hebrew, means salvation but Hosea is popularly termed “the prophet of doom”.

What kind of book is it?

This book is made up of prophecies from God to his people. Where the book is unusual – though not unique – are its symbolic prophecies. Hosea’s marriage to Gomer in Hosea 1-3 symbolizes the relationship between God and his people – her infidelity is seen as Israel’s infidelity; Hosea’s hurt and anger at this to be God’s hurt and anger.

The themes of the book

The themes of this book include:

(1) *the horror of faithlessness to God*. The importance of remaining steadfastly loyal to the Lord is not a regional concern; all God’s people in all parts of the world are constantly tempted to compromise or even abandon faithfulness to God.

(2) *God's deep compassion for his people.* Despite his people's utter faithlessness over many generations, God cannot forsake them once and for all. "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender" (Hosea 11:8). God speaks to his wayward people in terms of deep affection. He has bound himself to them, and while he must discipline them, even the pain of discipline will serve to restore them (Hosea 1:6–7; 2:14–23; 3:1–5; 11:8–11; 14:4–5).

(3) *Divine sovereignty and rule.* Almost one hundred times throughout Hosea, God speaks in the first person: "I . . ." It is the Lord who will judge his people; it is the Lord who will bring punishments on his people; and yet it is the Lord who will have mercy on his people. The affairs of his covenant people, and the affairs of the nations of the world, are in God's hand.

During the Church year, we hear readings from

Hosea's message of God's passionate love for his people and his call for renewed fidelity have lost none of their relevance for today. At Mass, Hosea is read on a semi-continuous basis in July on weekdays Monday-Friday of Week 14 (Year II).

Hosea was the inspiration for the hymn, "Come back to me with all your heart" (Hosea 14:1). (You can listen to it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=84Z5pBxtUuk)

How is the book structured?

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 1:1 | Introduction |
| 1:2-3:5 | Hosea's marriage as a metaphor for the covenant between God and his people |
| 4:1-11:11 | God's lawsuit against Israel, ending with a prophecy of hope |
| 11:12-14:19 | God's lawsuit against Israel and Judah ending with a prophecy of hope |

Something for today

Believers today can be confident that as they trust him wholeheartedly, they cannot finally be separated from the Lord's love for them, even amid suffering, persecution, sickness, and economic hardship. This is great encouragement for believers around the world today.

Joel

The book of Joel is a difficult book to classify. It seems to be as much a liturgy of penance as a collection of prophetic oracles.

An inspiring quote

“Yet, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (Joel 2:12-13).

The Book of Joel

The opening section of the book of Joel focuses on a plague of locusts that descends on the land and causes famine. Joel sees this as a call to repentance. The second half of the book sees God responding and promising to remove the locust plague.

We don't know when this 'ecological' prophet preached. The pollution everywhere seemed to him to be a sign of the coming of the day of the Lord, the day when God would lay bare people's sins. However, God would put his spirit into those who had been stripped in this way and those who call upon the Lord shall be delivered and saved (Joel 2:32).

The book ends with a speculation about what the final day of the Lord will be like (as opposed to this temporary one): that day, Joel says, will see God's justice fully enacted in the world. The nations who have opposed God will be punished and Israel will be blessed. Ultimately, all the nations will recognise Yahweh in that day (Joel 3:17).

Who wrote this book?

Joel, son of Pethuel, is said to be the author of the book; but we know nothing about him.

What kind of book is it?

The Book of Joel is the second of the 12 Minor Prophets. The striking feature of this book is that it is very like the Psalms of Lament. It begins with a problem, something to grieve for, states with confidence that God will act and ends in praise of the God who saves.

The theme of the book

The theme of judgement runs all the way through this book. The locust plague is seen as God's judgement on his people and Joel looks forward to a greater day of judgement in the future. It is hard not to feel uncomfortable as you read this.

Liturgical note

The Church follows Peter's speech at Pentecost in taking up the emphasis in Joel (3:1) on the coming of the Spirit at the last times, and on the threatening nature of the final judgement. So Joel provides the first reading for Ash Wednesday, and for the Vigil of Pentecost. At Mass, two passages from Joel are also read on Friday and Saturday in October on weekdays of Week 27 (Year I). Joel is telling the priests to put on sackcloth and lament; it is a day of darkness and gloom.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 1:1 | introduction |
| 1:2-2:17 | the locust plague |
| 2:18-27 | God hears the people's cry and responds |
| 2:18-3:21 | what will happen on the day of the Lord |

Something for today

The point is that it is in God's time — not ours — that justice will come.

Amos

The basic message of Amos stresses God's moral rule over the entire world and the divine demands for justice and concern for the outcast or oppressed. Amos has a surprising universalism in his outlook: God cares for every nation.

An inspiring quote

"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11).

The Book of Amos

Amos was a shepherd and a prophet from Tekoa, near Bethlehem on the edge of the Judean desert. He was one of the first, perhaps the first of the prophets whose work was written down, though the book as we have it now has been slightly elaborated.

On two occasions, Amos speaks of his call. He describes it (Amos 7:10-17) and he tries to make sense of it (Amos 3:3-8). A prophet is someone who is taken into the council of God and thereafter sees everything in the light of it, trying to decipher God's plan in his life and in the events of his time. His social teaching is based on the covenant; it is not an assurance which allows people to live in any way they like. It is a responsibility. "You alone, of all the families of the earth have I acknowledged" God declared "therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:1-2).

If God punishes people, it is to bring about their conversion. His warning that the punishment would be "a famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11) was a token of God's highest displeasure. At any time, and mostly in a time of trouble, a famine of the word of God was the heaviest judgment, for when they find themselves besieged by the enemy, they will find no prophet, no one to lighten their distress.

Who wrote this book?

As with many of the prophetic books, these are thought to be the words of Amos, though they may have been collected and written down by someone else.

What kind of book is it?

This is a book of prophecy. Amos is a collection of Amos' prophecies, which also contains a biographical account of conflict between Amos and Jeroboam, the king of Israel at the time, and a few fragments of psalms.

The themes of the book

The major themes in the book of Amos – judgment, injustice, lament, the sin of God's people, repentance – are not easy subjects. Reading them today we may well be tempted to downplay the force of the message and dilute the challenge; but, this

message lands on the Church today with as much force and necessity as it landed on the people of God 2,700 years ago.

Liturgical notes

The insistence of Amos on social justice and the care of the needy echoes powerfully in our day. In July, on the 15th Sunday (Year B), his mission is compared to that of Jesus' disciples. In September, on the 25th Sunday (Year C), his warning against fraud introduces the parable of the Crafty Steward; and, on the following Sunday, his warning against luxurious living introduces the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In June, on weekdays, this prophecy is read during Week 13 (Year II).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|----------|---|
| 1:1-2 | opening introduction |
| 2:3-2:16 | judgements against nations surrounding Israel |
| 3:1-6:14 | judgements against Israel |
| 7:1-9:10 | five visions of judgement including a confrontation between Amos and Jeroboam |
| 9:11-15 | hope for the future |

Something for today

The prophecy of Amos carries an important message for the Church today. In light of massive worldwide needs such as poverty, lack of clean water, malnutrition, and inadequate medical care, climate change, some believers must go out to those parts of the world where help is needed.

Obadiah

The small book of Obadiah, whose 21 verses make it the shortest book in the Old Testament, gives us another picture of the terrible conditions in Judah during the period of exile.

An inspiring quote

"The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head" (Obadiah 1:15).

The Book of Obadiah

This Book of Obadiah, the shortest of all the prophetic books, is named after the prophet Obadiah, a native of Judah. In it, judgement is uttered against the kingdom of Edom because of how it treated Judah and Jerusalem. It is set at the time of the exile and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE and criticises Edom for looting Jerusalem when the city was at its lowest ebb. The book holds up as a vision of a time when Judah's enemies will be defeated and Judah will be restored once more. It is an unusual prophecy in that it defends Judah entirely and is not interested in anything that Judah might have done wrong in the run up to the exile.

Obadiah is one of the angry books of the Bible, and, as with a number of the psalms, challenges us to think deeply about how we express our more negative emotions to God. Having said that, the message of Obadiah is that despite Israel's sin, God will judge those who afflict his people (Obadiah 1–15) and he will restore his people (Obadiah 16–18), who then will be an everlasting blessing to the whole world (Obadiah 19–21).

Who wrote this book?

The prophet Obadiah wrote this book; although there is little evidence about him either in this book or elsewhere. All we know is that he lived at the time of the exile – though probably had not been taken to Babylon as he was there to see the aftermath – and protested at what the Edomites had done.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a very short book of prophecy, revealing the anger and resentment felt by the people of Judah that the Edomites, their near neighbours were prepared to cash in on their time of devastation.

The themes of the book

The danger of pride. Throughout the Bible we are taught that God opposes pride and is drawn to humility. Pride was precisely Edom's problem: "Your pride of heart has led you astray, you whose home is in the holes in the rocks in your lofty dwelling, who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?' ...

though you soared like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, I would still fling you down again – it is the Lord who speaks” (Obadiah 3–4).

Divine retribution. “As you have done,” says the Lord, “it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head” (Obadiah 15).

The universal kingdom of God. The closing verses of Obadiah ring with the glorious promise of a spreading international kingdom under the people of God, “and the kingdom shall be the Lord’s” (Obadiah. 21).

Liturgical note

The Book of Obadiah is not used at Mass nor in the Liturgy of the Hours.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|----------|--|
| vv 1-4 | introduction |
| vv 5-9 | judgement on Edom is pronounced |
| vv 10-14 | how Edom sinned against Judah |
| vv 15-18 | the punishment that will happen on the day of the Lord |
| vv19-21 | a vision of the restoration of Israel |

Something for today

Our God is a God of unswerving justice who will do only what is right and just. This is a severe and sober caution for those who oppose the people of God, yet it also gives great hope to God’s people as they experience affliction of various kinds around the world. Whatever is done to them by those hostile to the gospel will one day be repaid by God himself.

Jonah

Jonah is found among the prophetic books; but it is totally unlike any other prophetic book. It is the story about a prophet; and, right from the beginning, we are warned to take this prophet with a grain of salt.

An inspiring quote

“In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me” (Jonah 2:2).

The Book of Jonah

This entertaining tale of the disobedient prophet and the responsive people of Nineveh is a satire on Israel’s self-righteousness. It is one of the best-loved stories of the Old Testament. God called Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) and call them to repentance. Jonah was, to say the least, reluctant and fled in the opposite direction (Jonah 1:3).

Jonah found a ship going to Tarshish; he paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the word of the Lord. But the Lord hurled a mighty wind upon the sea, and such a great storm came upon the sea that the ship was in danger of breaking up (Jonah 1:4). The men cast lots to find out just who might be responsible for this disaster – and the lot fell on Jonah; and the men realised that Jonah had fled from the Lord’s presence (Jonah 1:7, 10). The storm was growing worse and worse – so Jonah told them to throw him overboard into the sea (Jonah 1:11-12), whereupon the sea ceased its raging (Jonah 1:15). Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah up and he remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17).

Jonah prayed to God for help. The fish regurgitated Jonah (Jonah 2:10); and he continued on to Nineveh where he called the people to repentance. They repented and Jonah was upset with God. Outside the city, he sat down and waited for God to wreak vengeance on the city, which didn’t happen. Because of their repentance, God changed his mind (Jonah 3:10). Jonah was angry and remonstrated with God. God caused a plant to grow to shadow him from the sun and then killed it. Jonah was upset again. The book ends with a question from God to Jonah about whether he was right to be merciful or not.

Who wrote this book?

No one knows anything about the author of this book; but it must have been someone with a great sense of humour.

What kind of book is it?

This book is prophecy with a twist. Jonah was a terrible prophet – reluctant, grumpy and easily upset. In contrast, the people (all non-Israelites) with whom he engaged, behave impeccably.

The themes of the book

The compassion of God is the key theme of Jonah. It is the note on which the book ends, as the Lord asks a despondent Jonah, “Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11). God’s merciful compassion is not restricted to insiders. His mercy is for all who repent. Divine compassion is shown not to those who think they deserve such compassion but to those who receive it with repentance and humility—as the Ninevites did.

Other themes include God’s sovereign purposes and the universal need for grace. God does whatever it takes—from a storm at sea to a great fish to the miraculous response of repentance by the Ninevites—to bring his boundless compassion to the nations. The Ninevites needed grace for their wickedness. But Jonah, the insider, the prophet, also needed grace. He was shown grace in the belly of the fish, and yet his heart remained stubborn even at the end of the story. He is resentful, refusing to feel the same pity for Nineveh that he felt for a small plant (Jonah 4:5–10). In short, he is a sinner—a hard-hearted man who is in need of mercy, the same mercy that God extended to the Ninevites.

Liturgical Note

The message of Jonah who satirises the professionally religious, remains valuable (and uncomfortable) even in the Church today. Jonah is read in January on the 3rd Sunday (Year B) to prepare for John the Baptist’s message of repentance to the self-righteous. On weekdays, Jonah is read in October from Monday to Wednesday in Week 27 (Year 1).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|--------|--|
| 1:1-17 | Jonah’s call and flight |
| 2:1-10 | Jonah’s prayer from the belly of a fish |
| 3:1-10 | Jonah’s reluctant message of repentance |
| 4:1-11 | Jonah’s lesson about the goodness of God |

What is God conveying in this story?

The message of Jonah is an urgent call for the global church to extend to others the compassion they themselves have received. One way we can do this today is through tangible acts of love such as financial generosity, hospitality, sharing of resources and personal possessions, and advocacy on behalf of those in need politically or socially.

Micah

If Isaiah seemed to be totally concerned with the behaviour and life of Jerusalem the capital city, and with the presence of the holy God that dwelt in its midst, Micah seems nearly the opposite.

An inspiring quote

“What does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

The Book of Micah

The prophet Micah prophesied at a similar time to the prophets First Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. Much of his prophecy pronounces disaster for Samaria if they will not mend their ways, a disaster realised at the Sack of Samaria in 721BCE. He uses the imagery of the countryside, owls, jackals and especially sheep and shepherding, as well as the imagery of arable harvest, gleaning, vines and figs.

Whereas Hosea and Amos prophesied in the northern Kingdom of Israel, Micah and First Isaiah prophesied in the southern Kingdom of Judah, though their messages were addressed to both nations. Like the other three prophets, Micah condemned the attitude of the wealthy, particularly the way in which they oppressed the poor with their actions, for insincere worship and venal priests, for its corrupt judges and cheating traders.

God acknowledges repentance. A most memorable text is Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”.

Who wrote this book?

The prophet Micah probably spoke most of the words contained in this book although considerable parts of it reflect post-exilic times and must be credited to some who cherished the words of the prophet and added to them.

What kind of book is it?

This is a book of prophecy. An unusual feature of Micah is that its subject matter changes abruptly from judgement to hope and back again, which makes it hard to read in one go.

The theme of the book

The theme of the book is being God’s chosen people and – despite their sin – God will restore humanity from all the nations of the earth as anticipated in Micah 4:15. This restoration is beautifully expressed in the words of worship that close Micah’s prophecy: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he

delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot” (Mic. 7:18–19).

Liturgical notes

On the final Sunday of Advent in Year C, Micah’s promise of the Messiah prepares for Elizabeth’s greeting of Jesus in Mary’s womb. His prophecy is read at Mass also in July on some weekdays of Week 16 (Year II).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|----------|--|
| 1:1-2:11 | the looming disaster for both Israel and Judah |
| 2:12-13 | a short word of hope |
| 3:1-12 | messages of condemnation against corrupt leaders |
| 4:1-5:15 | mixed messages but with a strong strand of hope |
| 6:1-7:7 | God’s lawsuit against Israel |
| 7:8-20 | a liturgy of repentance |

God Speaks to us today

Micah’s major criticisms of the leaders were clear. Do you think, through Micah, that God is saying that today’s leaders are risking the same criticism?

Nahum

Zephaniah had lived before Josiah's reform and focused his zeal mostly against the evils of idolatry and faithlessness in Judah itself. Nahum provides a different view taken from within the time of reform and directed mostly against the evil in Assyria.

An inspiring quote

“The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him, even in a rushing flood” (Nahum 1:7-8a).

The Book of Nahum

The Book of Nahum is a vivid psalm on the wrath of the Lord (Nahum 1:1-8), and a short interchange about the unexpected delivery of Judah (1:9-2:1), precedes the main subject of the prophecy, pitiless exultation at the destruction of Nineveh. Nahum has visions of chariots fighting at the overthrow of Nineveh long before it happened and he sees the ruin of the Assyrian capital. It is a vengeful poem and it shows the violent hatred felt for Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which had sacked Samaria in 721 BCE. It was, in turn, sacked by the Babylonians in 612 BCE.

The book reflects the joy which greeted the news that Nineveh, the capital of hated Assyria, was destroyed. Nahum is a vengeful celebration of an enemy's defeat. It was written to the southern kingdom of Judah after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, prophesying the demise of the Assyrian empire. The promise of hope was designed to give Judah encouragement to persevere in the face of the tyranny and oppression that they were experiencing from the Assyrian empire. The prophecies appear to be addressed to Assyria but the real audience is Judah.

Who wrote this book?

This book is named after the Galilean prophet Nahum the Elkoshite, who wrote it.

What kind of book is it?

It is a book of Prophecy. Nahum takes the form of a series of prophecies depicting God's anger which, as the book unfolds, is clearly directed towards the Assyrians.

The theme of the book

Nahum's prophecy resounds with one key theme above all others: the horrifying experience of being judged by God when he is one's enemy. Listen to the way Nahum describes the punitive action of the Lord: “The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. . . . His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him (Nahum 1:5-6).

The prophet is searching for language that will communicate the awful terror awaiting those who reject God and abuse God's people. For those who “take refuge in him,” God “is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble” (Nahum 1:7).

Liturgical notes

Despite Nahum's daunting message of the violent destruction of those who use violence on the People of God, this prophecy is only read once at Mass in August, week 18 (Year II) telling the listeners "woe to the city soaked in blood, full of lies, stuffed with booty, whose plunderers know no end!" (Nahum 2:1, 3: 3:1-3, 6-7).

How is the book structured?

- 1:1 introduction
- 1:2-8 an acrostic poem laying out God's anger
- 1:9-15 a prophecy of the destruction of God's enemies and the restoration of God's people.
- 2:1-3:19 the future destruction of Assyria

Something for today

God is just and God is committed to justice and will not allow any arrogant, violent or evil nation to endure forever. However, while God defeats evil, He is also good and cares for the innocent. He will provide a refuge on the day of distress for anyone who humbles himself before God, believes in God's justice and trusts that in his time he will bring down oppressors in every time and place.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk lived shortly after Nahum and describes a time when Babylon was taking over the Near East from the fallen Assyrians. Habakkuk describes Babylon as the scourge of God causing terror everywhere.

An inspiring quote

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).

The Book of Habakkuk

The Book of Habakkuk consists of a conversation between Habakkuk and God about the injustice of the world. It falls crisply into three parts. First, a dialogue between the prophet and the Lord about unjust suffering (Habakkuk 1:1-2:4): the prophet twice complains at the triumph of the unjust oppressor and the Lord replies, saying that he was sending the Chaldeans or Babylonians to punish the wicked.

In the second part (Habakkuk 2:5-20), Habakkuk protested that this was using wickedness to punish wickedness; God responded again by promising that all the perpetrators of violence would eventually be punished.

The third part is an epic psalm celebrating the Lord’s control over the powers of nature and with an expectation that God would act again.

Who wrote this book?

The prophet Habakkuk is mentioned twice in the book (Habakkuk 1:1 and 3:1) so it makes sense to think that he wrote it. Some point out that the name Habakkuk means “embrace” or “wrestle” and this seems to be what he is doing in the book.

What kind of book is it?

It is a book of prophecy and, as such, it is unusual since it is largely made up of a conversation between Habakkuk and God, rather than messages from God to God’s people, about Habakkuk’s fears for the world around him.

The theme of the book

The major theme of Habakkuk is trying to grow from a faith of perplexity and doubt to the height of absolute trust in God. Habakkuk addresses his concerns over the fact that God will use the Babylonian empire to execute judgment on Judah for their sins. Habakkuk openly questions the wisdom of God.

Liturgical notes

The readings from Habakkuk at Mass in October (27th Sunday (Year C) and in August on Saturday in the 18th Week (Year 2) stress the need for endurance in faith. On both occasions the same reading is used from the beginning of the book about

how “the upright man will live by his faithfulness” (Habakkuk 2:4) – a phrase repeatedly quoted by St. Paul in Romans.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|----------|------------------------------------|
| 1:1 | introduction |
| 1:2-4 | Habakkuk’s first lament |
| 1:5-11 | God’s first reply |
| 1:12-2:1 | Habakkuk’s second lament |
| 2:2-20 | God’s second reply |
| 3:1-19 | Habakkuk’s prayer of praise to God |

Something for today

We are called to trust in the Lord – even though it is often difficult to see the hand of God when we are confused and surrounded by natural disasters, poor stewardship of the earth’s resources, political corruption, hunger, economic instability, and a thousand other frustrations and disappointments.

Zephaniah

About the time of Josiah's crowning, the book of Zephaniah records for us the voice of reaction against the idolatry practiced in Manasseh's years. Zephaniah was a fiery preacher whose wrath against pagan practices and hatred of Assyria were matched only by his devotion to Yahweh.

An inspiring quote

"The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

The Book of Zephaniah

The first verse of the book dates Zephaniah's ministry to the reign of Josiah. It opens with a description of the day of the Lord which is characterised as bringing destruction upon the world. It itemises the human beings as well as the animals, who will be swept away before the wrath of God. This prophecy seems to promise destruction for everyone – in Judah and in the nations around – and there is very little hope on offer at all to the recipients of its message.

This is one of the more bleak of the prophetic books. The first part of the book (Zephaniah 1:1-3:8) is a tragic recognition of the situation. The only potential glimmer of hope talks of the importance of seeking the Lord, though no deliverance is promised to those who do (Zephaniah 2:1-3). The same Hebrew word keeps recurring, though in English, it is translated by a longer phrase: draw near. . . . Zephaniah is dismayed; however hard he looks, in the midst of the people, there is no one who is righteous, save God: but he stands alone. Jerusalem does not draw near to her God (Zephaniah 3:2). And, the great day of the Lord's wrath is near.

Since powerful men, kings, prophets and priests have gone wrong, the prophet turns to those who are poor in heart, those who do not pride themselves in their own strength, but put their trust in God (Zephaniah 2:3). In this way Zephaniah is the pioneer of a theme – that of spiritual poverty – which will develop further in the New Testament. However the love of the Lord is strongest of all. God finally sees when he will be able to be in the midst of his people and the people come to a renewed relationship with God.

Who wrote this book?

The opening verse attributes the book to Zephaniah, who is said to be a distant descendant of Hezekiah: "The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah, son of Amon of Judah (Zephaniah 1:1).

What kind of book is it?

This book is the ninth of the 12 Minor Prophets. It is a prophecy almost entirely focused on the day of the Lord.

The theme of the book

The dominant theme of the book is the “day of the Lord,” which the prophet sees approaching as a consequence of the sins of Judah. A remnant will be saved (the “humble and lowly”) through purification by judgment.

Liturgical note

Zephaniah’s messianic promises are taken up for three readings in Advent. On the 3rd Sunday of Advent (Year C), and on weekdays during that week (in both Years 1 and 2), we read about how Messianic salvation is promised to all the poor in spirit. His message of lowliness is read on the 4th Sunday (Year A) as a preparation for the Gospel reading of the Beatitudes.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|---------|---|
| 1:1 | introduction |
| 1:2-18 | destruction is proclaimed |
| 2:1-3 | seek the Lord even though it does not guarantee salvation |
| 2:4-15 | messages of judgement against the nations |
| 3:1-13 | further messages of judgement |
| 3:14-20 | God will bring hope and restoration to the remnant |

Something for today

The message of Zephaniah to the global church of the 21st century is the certainty of the coming “day of the Lord” (Zephaniah 1:7). On that day, punishment will be executed on all God’s enemies from many nations (Zephaniah 2:11; 3:8) and salvation will be granted to all God’s people, also from many nations (Zephaniah 3:9–10).

Haggai

Haggai is one of the shortest books among the Old Testament prophets - only two chapters, containing four oracles, all dated between August and December 520BCE.

An inspiring quote

“What God is preparing for your future is greater than anything you could ever imagine” (Haggai 2:9).

The Book of Haggai

Haggai is the first of the post-Exilic prophets. It encourages those who have recently returned from exile in Babylon to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Haggai was upset that people were living in fine houses while God’s Temple remained in ruins and argued that the people’s lack of prosperity was attributable to the Temple being in ruins. Haggai declared that God would make the second Temple greater and more glorious than the first. It is similar in some parts of its message to its companion book Zechariah.

There are four short passages dated from August to December 520 BCE, shortly after the first group of exiles returned from Babylon. Haggai stresses that the rebuilding of the Temple is of primary importance, a pre-condition of the Lord’s blessing. Prosperity will only come when God’s house is at the heart of restoration programmes.

Who wrote this book?

Haggai was the author of this book. He was probably one of the first to return from Babylon. His grave and Nahum’s grave are venerated on the Mount of Olives to this day.

What kind of book is it?

This is a book of prophecy with a clear aim and, indeed, outcome. Haggai argued strongly for the rebuilding of the Temple and the book recounts that he was successful in this. As a result, the book is a mix of prophecies and narratives.

The themes of the book

The restoration of God’s house is a key theme. A decaying Temple signifies a decaying relationship with the Lord; it brings weakness rather than holiness to the people (Haggai 2:14). The prophecy is delivered by the hand of Haggai; but it is God’s word that is spoken. The phrase, “Lord of hosts” occurs 14 times in the 38 verses of this short book.

The Lord gives the divine word, controls the fortunes of his people and nations; the Lord directs nature and motivates his people to action. But the people must work. A restored house will bring glory to God and blessing to the people (Haggai 2:19) but physical and hard work is needed.

Liturgical notes

There are two readings at Mass in Week 25 (Year 1) one on Thursday (Haggai 1:1-8) and one on Friday (Haggai 1:15-2:9). The first one is about Haggai's promises of the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem; and, in the second one, the Lord promises that he will fill the Temple with glory and guarantees God's presence among his people.

How is the book structured?

| | |
|---------|---|
| 1:1-11 | prophetic call to rebuild the Temple |
| 1:12-15 | the people obey and begin to build it |
| 2:1-9 | God promised that the second Temple would be glorious |
| 2:10-19 | Haggai asks the priests to declare what is clean or unclean |
| 2:20-23 | Zerubbabel is identified as the chosen one |

The Lord declared:

The Lord declared, "I am with you" (Haggai 1:13, 2:4). In a fallen world, in which it is often difficult to feel God's presence amid trials of various kinds, the message of Haggai to the global church is the promise of the presence of God.

Zechariah

Zechariah preached in the same period as did Haggai; but the present book of Zechariah combines Zechariah's own words with a series of later oracles.

An inspiring quote

“Not by my strength but his” (Zechariah 4:6)

The Book of Zechariah

The 14 chapters which make up the book as we now have it bring together the preaching of two prophets. The first eight chapters of Zechariah takes up the preaching of Haggai, but he does so in a language of his own which is already that of the apocalypses.

The book is named after the prophet Zechariah, contemporary and near neighbour of Haggai. It was almost 70 years after the exile, the Israelites were experiencing hardships and wondered if prophetic promises of a New Jerusalem would ever be fulfilled. The first part (Zechariah 1-8) consists of eight visions which foretell the rebuilding of the Temple, the reestablishment of the authority of the High Priest (Joshua) and the re-emergence of the kingship (Branch).

Scholars say that the second part (Zechariah 9-14) were written by a prophet from the time of Alexander. The arrival of this young king, who overthrew the powerful Persians, raised people's hopes: it castigates ancient oppressors (Egypt; Assyria) and the newly arrived Greeks. Zechariah looks to a time when the yoke will be lifted. Early Christians saw many prophecies of the Messiah in these chapters.

Who wrote this book?

The first eight chapters come from Zechariah and the remainder from the days following the takeover of Palestine by Alexander the Great (336-323 BCE) and his Greek cohorts.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a book of prophecy.

The themes of the book

One of the themes of this book is worldwide salvation. “Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. . . . And he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9:9–10).

Another theme we see throughout Zechariah is the joy that comes with God's merciful redemption of his people. The feasts that will be celebrated at the time of Zion's coming restoration will be “seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts” (Zechariah 8:19).

Throughout Zechariah, we also see the metaphor of “shepherd” applied to those who lead God’s people—more often than in any other prophet (Zechariah 10:2; 11:4, 7, 9, 15, 16, 17; 13:7).

Liturgical note

The best-known use of Zechariah in the liturgy is the quotation on Palm Sunday, “Behold your king comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). This passage is also used on the 14th Sunday (Year A) to underline the Gospel passage about Jesus “gentle and humble in heart”. On the 12th Sunday (Year C) we have a foretaste of the mourning for the death of an only-begotten son (Zechariah 12:11-12). Zechariah is read three times on the Saturday of Week 25 and weekdays during Week 26 (Year I) to show the high degree of estimation in which Jerusalem and the Jews would hereafter be held, by foreign nations, when those among them, who were piously disposed to worship Jehovah the true God, would come to worship him at Jerusalem, as a place of peculiar sanctity.

How is the book structured?

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| 1:1-6 | the first part: a summons to conversion |
| 1:7-7:14 | the visions |
| 8:1-23 | the prospect of messianic salvation |
| 9:1-11:17 | the second part: the new Promised Land |
| 12:1-14:23 | the deliverance and restoration of Jerusalem |

Something for today

Zechariah’s prophecy presents a vision of a globally minded God on a mission to restore the world to the way it was originally created to be.

Malachi

The prophet Malachi is the last book in the canon of the Old Testament. It is not dated and the author is unknown.

An inspiring quote

“You will be my treasured possession . . .” (Malachi 3:17).

The Book of Malachi

When Malachi was preaching, the Temple had been rebuilt. Worship had begun again; but so had the bad pre-exilic habits. Rites were performed, but without great care and people were being unjust and unfaithful.

Malachi reacted vigorously, and his message had great influence. His book takes the form of six dialogues between God and his people, a prelude to the definitive dialogue to the gospel, “I was hungry . . . When, Lord, did we see you hungry? . . .” (Matthew 25:31-40). I love you, says God. And you say, “In what way do you love us?” This refrain, “And you say” occurs eight times, directed against a nation of arguers. It is repeated to lay bare the sin which is carefully tucked away: the sin of those who offer their left-overs to God (Malachi 1:6ff), of priests who do not preach the word of God (Malachi 2:1ff), of those who repudiate their wives (Malachi 2:10ff) and of those who cannot even distinguish between good and evil (Malachi (2:17ff).

The Book of Malachi was written at a time, after the return from exile, when many of the people had stopped obeying the law or listening to God at all. Malachi calls people to repentance and promises that God would send another messenger to the people of Israel in the future.

Who wrote this book?

The book is named after Malachi; but nothing is known of Malachi. Indeed, since the name means “my messenger” (Malachi 3:1), the author may be hiding in anonymity.

What kind of book is it?

This is another book of prophecy. Malachi is a prophecy of challenge and of hope, encouraging people back to full following of the law but also pointing to another messenger who would come and show them the way.

The themes of the book

The theme is of the messenger – Malachi is a messenger but he points to another one. Notice too, the theme of covenant to Malachi – and, in particular, what he expects people to do in order to follow the covenant fully.

Liturgical note

On the 31st Sunday of the year (Year A) Malachi's warning to the corrupt Temple priests prepares for Jesus' warning to the Pharisees. On the 33rd Sunday (Year C), his eschatological warning of purifying fire prepares for Jesus' eschatological threats against the Temple (Malachi 3:19-20). On the Feast of the Presentation (2nd February), the prophecy "I am sending my messenger to prepare a way before me" (Malachi 3:1) is applied to Jesus. That same passage is read on 23rd December, and Malachi is read once more in Week 27 (Year I).

How is the book structured?

| | |
|---------|--|
| 1:1-5 | the destruction of Edom |
| 1:6-2:9 | a corrupt priesthood |
| 2:9-17 | the importance of the covenant |
| 3:1-7 | the messenger that is coming |
| 3:8-18 | giving God everything that he deserves |
| 4:1-6 | the day of the Lord |

Something for today

Malachi focuses on being faithful. We should reflect on what being faithful means for us as Christians today.