Chapter Five

The Latter Prophets

Introduction to and Composition of the Latter Prophets

The historical books of the former prophets featured prophets as characters in their narratives—people who played key roles in the continuing development of the nation of Israel. In contrast, the books of the latter prophets bear the names of their prophet along with their oracles, or divinely inspired messages, and represent a shift away from the oral tradition toward the crafted, written word.

For this reason, the latter prophets are also known as the classical or literary prophets, and their books can more specifically be regarded as sharing these three characteristics: 1) structural features such as a subscription and editorial notes; 2) evidence of compiled materials, such as modified prophets’ words, that ultimately pay tribute to the significance of the prophet and which are sometimes linked chronologically and sometimes thematically; and 3) a record of a calling by God.

Scholar Jeremiah Bright describes this shift as “both a new thing in Israel and the continuation of an ancient tradition,” because, in addition to their focus on polished language, “they emphatically did not speak as paid personnel of the cult” even though some of them did come from the clergy and/or “delivered their message at the shrines” (Bright xxii).

What this means is that the latter prophets were more likely to come from the ranks of ordinary believers, such as Amos, who was a farmer, and whose words carried enough weight that later editors were compelled to formally record them. Theologian Martin Buber describes their writings as a deep “dialogical reciprocity between heaven and earth” (Buber 176).

Written during an approximately 400-year time span, starting in the eighth century BCE, the books are comprised of three major and 12 minor figures: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, considered major because of the length of their works; Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, considered minor because of their relative brevity (and sometimes referred to as the “twelve prophets”). It is this categorization that is reflected in the biblical canon.
Another significant way of categorizing these prophets is by chronology. Here is a reminder of that historical timeline with the latter prophets added:

- **Assyrian crisis, 721-612 BCE**: In the northern kingdom (Israel), **Amos** and **Hosea**. This marked a period of remarkable stability and growth for Israel which brought about a different set of social ills for the prophets to address. In the southern kingdom (Judah), **Isaiah** and **Micah**. Though the book of Isaiah itself is actually a “collection of collections” (Schökel 165) with multiple writers/editors, the eponymous Isaiah lived during this time and was contemporary to Micah.

- **Babylonian crisis, 612-539 BCE**: **Jeremiah**, **Habakkuk**, **Nahum**, **Zephaniah**. This marked a tumultuous timeframe that witnessed both the height of the Judean King Josiah’s nationalist ambitions as well as Jerusalem’s eventual destruction, and the beginning of Judea’s deportations amidst the Assyrian decline.

- **Exilic period and Post-Exilic, 539-330 BCE**: During the exile, **Ezekiel**. The time when Judeans were separated from Jerusalem and “Zion theology” emerged. **Malachi**, **Haggai**, **Zechariah**. Written during the early Persian period (see chapter Four) “which saw the rebuilding of the Temple and the consolidation of Israel’s cultic and legal traditions under the control of the priesthood” (Marks 208) and which is also known as the Second Temple period. **Joel**, **Jonah**, **Obadiah**. Likely written later in the Persian period with an emphasis on the sovereign nature of Israel’s God. Obadiah and Jonah are often placed here in the post-exilic period, but scholars have often remarked on the difficulty of dating these two books.

To understand how these texts reflect their historical contexts and relate to each other, this chronological approach to the literary prophets can be very useful, though we will also at times refer to the canonical orders presented in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament.

**Reading the Latter Prophets**

**Key Themes**

The books themselves continue to reflect a widespread 8th-century BCE, Near East practice of recognizing a belief in “one who is called” or “one who announces,” a deity-charged messenger.
Thus, they represent an important transition in the biblical canon between the historical and wisdom books. This is due in part to the latter prophets’ expansion of the Deuteronomistic principle to include in their interpretation of history all moral failings, not just idolatry or covenant breaks, as well their exploration of essential tenets of their faith, such as God’s sovereignty on Earth and the power of repentance. Indeed, according to the biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld, in these books “there is no doubt that the religious moral pathos pervading classical prophecy as well as the prophetic ideas about the end of idolatry, universal peace and world salvation, reflects the genuine spirit of classical prophecy” (Weinfeld 178).

This transition traces the development of the Israelite religion—from cultic practice of codified moral prescriptions toward rabbinic Judaism—through the prophetic shift toward the kind of “tasks of encouragement” and a “freer orientation toward an unspecified future resonant with eschatological overtones” also more conducive to the ups-and-downs of shifting political and national boundaries (Marks 210).

It is important to note that the literature of Israelite prophecy stands out as exemplary among all religious traditions, according to many scholars, even if it was not a genre entirely unique to them.

One of the key themes developed throughout the latter prophets is a focus on the kind of moral decay and social injustice that occurs when a religious practice becomes too centered on the practice itself rather than on the moral behavior of an individual person. A classic interpretation refers to this focus as “the primacy of morality... the idea or the doctrine that morality is not just an obligation equal in importance to the cultic or religious obligations, but that morality is perhaps superior to the cult. What God requires of Israel is morality and not cultic service,” as scholar Christine Hayes explains (“Literary Prophecy: Amos”). This expansion also explores the practical application of religious belief: Yahweh has been defined, the rituals set, and now the practitioners must live accordingly, at various times removed from physical access to a temple. What should that religious practice look like? Who has the authority to decide, especially in the absence of a temple and in the midst of diaspora? The latter prophets engaged these types of questions, seeking answers both for their current moment and, increasingly toward the end of their era, for some distant future. They also explored questions of obedience, punishment, and repentance as they sought to adjudicate what they perceived to be national sins. Such prophecies were delivered directly toward the offending nation, be that Israel or foreign.
Key Literary Styles

When biblical scholar Moishe Greenberg describes the book of Ezekiel as one of “doom” and “consolation,” a common feature of the latter prophets, we can better understand his conclusion by looking at the styles behind the content of each book. These latter prophets often had grim messages to deliver—whether related to the religious infidelity of the Lord’s followers or social justice violations and economic greed—that were then often balanced out, in a way, with messages of redemption and hope: “...Amos and the prophets who followed...found hope beyond the judgment or, better, hope through the judgment...” (Hubbard 88). Here are the most common literary styles represented in the latter prophets.

**Fig. 8. Literary Styles in the Prophetic Writings.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary Style</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oracles or speeches</td>
<td>Pronouncement messages from Yahweh delivered through forms of heightened poetry, and/or dramatic and exaggerated language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hymns or songs</td>
<td>Religious songs or poems, typically in praise of/to a god or God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laments</td>
<td>Passionate expressions of grief or sorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proverbs</td>
<td>Brief sayings that memorably express a familiar or useful bit of folk wisdom, usually of a practical or prudential nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rib/Riv</td>
<td>The Hebrew term for covenant lawsuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic visions</td>
<td>Dreams or visions that are meant to represent a key message through metaphor or allegory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative accounts</td>
<td>Traditional story arcs with recognizable characters and plot</td>
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Underlying these individual styles is a near constant attention to poetry. You will find these texts filled with metaphors, similes, and dramatic imagery rhythmically designed to promote audience attention and retention through emotional reckonings. As scholar Robert Alter claims, “it is analytically demonstrable that the impetus of their poetic medium reinforced and in some ways directed the scope and extremity of their vision” (Alter 623). In other words, these prophetic texts reflect the ancient truth that the depth of human experience needs the language of poetry to be understood.

We start with the earliest books, Amos and Hosea, not only to respect the chronological historical reflection but also to familiarize ourselves with major themes and literary styles before we move toward the major prophets.
Amos and Hosea

Amos

The book of Amos begins as do most books of the latter prophets, with a superscription that introduces us to the prophet with contextual details:

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

And he said:

The Lord roars from Zion,  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;  
the pastures of the shepherds wither,  
and the top of Carmel dries up.

(1:1-2)

From this we learn that the prophet Amos was a farmer/herder from the southern kingdom of Judah (perhaps a financially stable one given his literacy skills and perceived education) and, as you know from this section’s introduction, he lived during a time of remarkable political stability. Such stability enabled Israel’s economy to flourish, so much so that the country reached its wealthiest point in history. As a prophet, Amos was concerned with the ramifications of such wealth, namely income inequality between the urbanites who owned most of the land and the rural people who worked it. Indeed, some of the wealthy became so by employing treacherous lending practices toward poor rural farmers who tried desperately to hang on to family properties but who were often pushed out, either when in debt or in dire straits during times of drought. Thus, we see highlighted a major tenet of the latter prophets: concerns for social justice.

Amos was called to deliver his message directly to Israel, to the royal sanctuary in Bethel in the northern kingdom, and, while he was generally regarded as well-spoken, his messages of doom eventually got him driven out. In fact, it is these messages of doom that open the book of Amos, following the superscription, first against foreign nations and then against Israel itself, in chapters 1-6. The speeches or oracles against the nations are meant to imply the Lord’s universal sovereignty, another key theme of the latter
prophets, and also serve as examples of the kind of heightened language that builds the
dramatic tension of the prophecies. For example, note the repetition of phrasing “For
three transgressions of _____, and for four” throughout chapter 1 (e.g., 1:3, 1:6, 1:9). Reading
the words aloud might help you hear the beauty beneath the gloom and imagine how
isolated the prophets might have felt.

Consider this oracle directed toward Israel in chapter 5:

Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.
Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.

(5:11-13)

In it, Amos is simultaneously judging the contemporary moment and warning of future
repercussions, a tough combination to consider when your country is witnessing such
prosperity.

Another key tenet of Amos’s text that falls within the oracles of chapters 1-6 lies in its
extension of the Deuteronomistic principle: Israel will suffer divine punishment in the
form of hostile nation takeovers, namely the Assyrian threat, because it had faltered in its
ethical responsibility to affirm their chosen-by-God status. An example of such warning
comes in chapter 3:1-2, "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of
Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I
known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities,”
and in chapter 3:6, “Does disaster befall a city unless the Lord has done it?”

Although prophecy is sometimes associated with the foretelling of the future, much of the
scholarly study of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible has been focused on understanding
how the latter prophets reflect their own contemporary culture, era, and events.
Moreover, the reflections that benefit from hindsight in these texts may be editorial evidence of a shaping and smoothing of materials completed at a date later than the prophet. For the book of Amos, for instance, it was once thought that it was written during the middle years of King Jeroboam II (about 760 BCE), but more recent research has shown that the text was likely composed closer to the end of Jeroboam II’s reign, around 750-748 BCE.

We also see evidence of the latter prophets’ criticism of empty religious ritual when Amos speaks for God in chapter 5: “I hate, I despise your festivals...Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (v. 21; 23-24). As you read these oracular passages in Amos, be on the lookout, then, for further evidence of social justice and Deuteronomistic concerns. Indeed, you might recognize that powerful language from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” and “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” speeches, for which we can thank writer David Plotz for pointing out (Plotz 222).

In chapters 7-9 of Amos, we find another literary convention common to the latter prophets in the use of symbolic visions. Chapter 7 opens with the report, “This is what the Lord God showed me,” and that pattern continues through chapter 8. What did Amos see in those visions? Locusts, fire, unsafe buildings (the “plumb line” in verses 7:7-9), ripe fruit – all threats of ruin. He also reveals that he “saw the Lord standing beside the altar” in 9:1, a moment of theophany that echoes the Torah.

Interwoven with these visions are more oracles as well as a narrative interlude that describes Amos’s call to prophesy, yet another key feature of the latter prophets. This call is described during an encounter between Amos, the outsider prophet, and Amaziah, a royal priest in chapter 7:10-17; Amaziah sends Amos away from Bethel for his harsh messages and Amos reveals that, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’” (7:14-15). We might return to the supposed isolation of the prophet here, sent away from his presumably pleasant life to deliver messages of judgment on the Israelites. What made him listen to that voice and what in him was led to believe that the voice was actually God?

If the book of Amos opens with oracles of doom, it closes with oracles of restoration (or consolation), another feature of the latter prophets. Chapter 9 finds Amos offering reminders of both God’s sovereignty — “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the
Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir? (9:7), and his covenant promise with the house of David:

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit
them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them among their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God.

(9:14-15)

The beauty and the balance of his words, along with the unmistakably power of his message, are among the chief reasons that Amos has been so highly regarded as prophecy, scripture, and literature from its era to our own moment.

Hosea

Scholar Jack R. Lundborn claims in his 2016 online Oxford Research Encyclopedia entry, “Prophets in the Hebrew Bible,” that the “fullest expression of divine prophecy was when the life of the prophet itself became the symbol.” We see this phenomenon most spectacularly in the book of Hosea.

In it, the prophet Hosea serves as a stand-in for God, acting the part of an injured husband, and Gomer, his aggrieved wife, a stand-in for the fickle Israel. As scholar Gregory Mobley notes in his introduction to the book of Hosea in the fourth edition of The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV, the superscription reveals only the name of Hosea’s father and that the prophet himself was an Israelite, a unique status among the latter prophets. Thus, by chapter 1:2, Hosea’s own biography becomes subservient to the metaphor of Hosea as Israel. And this happens in no uncertain terms: “When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, ‘Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.’” This extended metaphor, or allegory, comprises chapters 1-3 as Hosea marries a prostitute named Gomer and continues in married life. The allegory is completed amidst the book as whole when, in at the end of chapter 2 and throughout chapter 3, we read a promise of restoration, “...And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi [Hosea and Gomer’s children], ‘You are my people;’ and he shall say,
'You are my God’” (2:23b). This cycle is reminiscent of the structural outline of the book of Amos as the prophet opens with the blunt directive against a sinning people and ends with a beacon of hope for the faithful.

Hosea was a contemporary to Amos, and his book continues with oracles warning Israel that its political and religious misdeeds would bring upon them divine retribution. We see a clear example of the type of legal language that indicates _riv_ or _rib_, that Hebrew word for covenant lawsuit that is also a literary style feature of the latter prophets, to begin chapter 4: “Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land” (4:1a). Using the legal language of “indictment,” This opening statement is followed by a series of charges that exemplify those political and religious misdeeds mentioned earlier. We see charges against Israel for being politically reckless and forming untoward alliances, “Ephraim [another name for Israel as it was its most important tribe] herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long; they multiply falsehood and violence; they make a treaty with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt” (12:1); and for being unfaithful in their religious practices, “People are kissing calves!” (13:2). As you read, look for additional language clues, such as the repetition of the word “guilt” and other instances of “indictment,” to help you follow the covenant lawsuit scene. Biblical scholar Luis Alonso Schökel calls such literary use of a lawsuit “ingenious” because “who would not be interested in a dispute, a challenge, a tournament?” (176).

You can also search chapters 9-11 for a series of four metaphors that present what Mobley describes as “before and after” illustrations of Israel’s prior fidelity against its current state. The four metaphors are: Israel as “grapes in the wilderness” (9:10); “a luxuriant vine” (10:10); “a trained heifer” (10:11); and “a child” who was loved (11:1). Focusing on such literary devices helps us think about the rhetorical relationship between prophet and audience; the prophet, after all, wants his words to be heeded and to be remembered. Much like Amos, Hosea concludes with a restorative plea for Israel to return to its God as well as a promise of restoration – “O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; your faithfulness comes from me” (14:8).

Overall, it is easy to conclude that the book of Hosea is more complex than its opening allegory suggests, as masterful an illustration as it is, as the prophet seeks to exemplify the bewilderment of a wronged God through his pronouncements to a likely equally bewildered audience.
The Twelve Prophets

Now that we have explored in some detail the first of the two minor prophets, it is a good time to remember that they belong to the greater anthology of twelve. That these books remained thematically and chronologically linked over the 500-year time span it took to document them constitutes an astonishing feat and serves as testament to the common men who answered their respective calls to prophecy. In fact, since “the earliest mention of the ‘twelve prophets’ occurs in the deuto-canonical Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, written early in the second century BCE,” approximately two centuries following the last prophetic era, this means that they have been included in the Hebrew canon from the very beginning (Marks 207).

Isaiah

Introduction and First Isaiah

For much of the Bible’s history, the book of Isaiah was thought to be written by one person, the prophet himself. However, according to scholars over the past few hundred years, who have plotted events described within the text against an historical framework, it seems much more likely that not only were there more than one authors, there were likely at least four stages of composition that span the entire era of the latter prophets. The image below (Fig. 6) offers a brief explanation of the composition timeline and is adapted from Marvin A. Sweeney’s introduction to Isaiah in the fourth edition of The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV.

From these compositional stages we can assess the primary structural components of the text and attribute each component authorship:

- **First Isaiah**, chs. 1-39, the works of Isaiah ben Amoz, the eponymous character writing during the Assyrian crisis; even this section was unlikely written solely by Isaiah himself, according to the textual scholars that have studied it most carefully.

- **Second Isaiah**, chs. 40-55, also known as Deutero-Isaiah, an anonymous prophet writing during the conclusion of the Babylonian exile.

- **Third Isaiah**, chs. 56-66, also known as Trito-Isaiah, multiple prophetic sources writing a collection of materials during the early Persian period that saw the restoration of Jerusalem.
Fig. 9. Stages of Composition for Isaiah.

Because this book encompasses work spanning each of the major eras of the latter prophets, and because of its significant length, Isaiah is the first of our major prophets. In it, we discover a complex literary structure that relies on the poetry of prophesy to continue to explore Israel’s religious infidelities and resultant punishments (First Isaiah), probe the challenges of exile (Second Isaiah), and contemplate themes of eschatological judgment (Third Isaiah).

Schökel suggests that the rhetorical power of this book lies in the “…distance he [the writer] places between experience and the poem. That is, rather than allowing the experience, however traumatic, to break out spontaneously like a scream, he transforms it consciously into poetry” (166). Such is the distinction between our latter prophets and their forebears, you will remember – this is highly stylized text that was crafted over a period of hundreds of years. As such, it also plays a critically important theological role for both the Jewish and Christian traditions: what greater questions to ponder of human experience and divine involvement, of judgment and salvation (for Christians, in the revelation of a Messiah), of suffering and purpose? Further evidence of this significance
lies in the fact that “two major copies of the book of Isaiah and a number of shorter Isaian texts were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran” (Sweeney 967).

Fig. 10. Great Isaiah Scroll. A portion of a photographic reproduction of the Great Isaiah Scroll, the best preserved of the biblical scrolls found at Qumran. It contains the entire Book of Isaiah in Hebrew, apart from some small damaged parts. This manuscript was probably written by a scribe of the Jewish sect of the Essenes around the second century BCE. It is therefore over a thousand years older than the oldest Masoretic manuscripts. This picture shows all of Isaiah 53, and it is mostly identical to the Masoretic version.

There is yet another way to think about Isaiah structurally and it might be the most straightforward – two halves, one focusing on the punishment of and promises for restoration in Israel and one exploring the realization of that restoration with eschatological urgency.
It begins as we have come to expect, with a superscription that establishes our rhetorical frame, in this case for both First Isaiah as well as the entire book: “The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). What follows in chapter 1 is terrific example of a courtroom scene in which Isaiah, the prophet, stands as the accuser of Israel, and God serves as the judge, “Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes!” (1:24). What you see at work here is not only the case being adjudicated between a God and his sinful followers, but a case of a God who claims omnipotence. That claim is furthered in chapters 2-6 where we see that key term, “sovereign,” repeated alongside various oracles concerning the purging of Zion for its future role as the center for the Lord’s world rule, “On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel” (4:2). Schökel points us specifically to the beginning of chapter 2 and asks us to stop and visualize along with Isaiah the coming together of Judah and Jerusalem, “A variety of tribes, perhaps with an array of different accents and garments, converge or assemble, ascending the mountain in response to the allure of the sanctuary where the Torah is read and the word of God proclaimed; peace and harmony mingle within diversity,” reminding us of the tension that existed between the two kingdoms (172).

You will note as you complete your own reading that the litany of sins reflects the same social justice focus as we saw in Amos and Hosea as well claims of idolatry, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! For you have forsaken the ways of your people...” (2:5-6).

We see evidence of another literary style common to the latter prophets at the beginning of chapter 5 with a terrifying song for Israel and Judah. It is known as “Isaiah’s song of the vineyard” and uses another extended metaphor within to pose the Lord as a disappointed friend of the prophet. While it starts with the lovely sentiment, “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard” (5:1), the tone escalates to, “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured” (5:5) just a few verses later. Read the song out loud, or have someone read it to you, to help absorb the language and follow the prophecy: imminent death and/or exile to the unfaithful.

Isaiah tells directly about his divine calling through a rich visionary account in chapter 6. It starts with an image of God similar to Hosea’s and adds startling details:
In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. (6:1-2)

When Isaiah cries out in response that he is “a man of unclean lips” (6:5), the vision continues with “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out” (6:6-7). Isaiah internalizes this cleansing immediately for, when God next asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?,,” – that is, who will be the representative voice on Earth - Isaiah replies, “Here I am; send me!” (6:8). And here our prophet is formed. And tasked with a sensitive charge: “Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed” (6:10). The use of such paradoxical language points to deep philosophical engagement with the challenge of navigating an imperfect world—who are we to trust if not our own eyes and ears? What does it mean to “comprehend with [their] minds”?

When we say that the book of Isaiah is theologically significant—indeed, according to some Christian theologians, it is the most important book of the Old Testament—we can look to chapters 24-27 as evidence. Here we find a powerful prophetic message describing a new world order that will be based in Zion at some future date: “And on that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem” (27:13). Here we see evidence of the Israelite’s God’s sovereignty that extends beyond the covenant relationship and also reflects a changing Jewish tradition.

God’s power does not stop at earth, however:

On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and on earth the kings of the earth. They will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory. (24:22-23)

This God is the God of all creation, of all time, of all things, of omnipotence.
Further, this collection of passages is filled with examples of laments, as the Earth as it has been known withers away amidst God’s punishment; and, songs of praise, as people wake up to the power of God and recognize him as their protector. As you enjoy the poetry of First Isaiah, reflect on the relationship between his message, his readers, and his position in the canon.

Second Isaiah

The resurgent themes of restoration and hope dominate Second Isaiah as an anonymous prophet writes from the depth of exile. According to Schökel, many scholars and other readers think him among the greatest of religious poets, one whose poetry “exhibits a freedom and joy sufficient to close distances, boldness that reaches to the sky” (174). We can consider his opening cry as a sign: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (40:1-2). There is no superscription here, no editorial introduction to ground the readers in context—it is a deliberate and yet gentle call to attention.

Theologian Martin Buber posits that the strength of Second Isaiah lies in the omitted facts:

[H]e clearly understood himself as a posthumous disciple of Isaiah’s. Among the prophets he was the man who had to announce world history and to herald it as divinely predestined. . . God speaks here as not only having foreknown but also having foretold what now takes place in history – the revolutionary changes in the life of the nations and the liberation of Israel consummated in it. There is no longer room here for an alternative: the future is spoken of as being established from the beginning. (Buber 178-9)

What message could the distressed people of Israel and Judah possibly hear, then, except one of hope? The punishment has arrived, their temple has been destroyed and their people displaced. Once Second Isaiah has called Jerusalem to attention, he uses the next several passages to praise God in all his power: he is God is the creator, he is God in control of human events, he is God the savior. He takes readers with him on a desert highway journey (see Isa. 40:3). As he does so, he guides them to remember God’s protection along the way, “He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless” (40:29). As you read, keep notes of the specific claims to omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience as well as of the literary devices through which they are offered.
You might also note the clues that set us up for the next passage, a prose speech interlude that returns to the courtroom setting in chapter 44. Who is on trial? The idol and its makers:

The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arms; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. (44:12-14, italics added for emphasis).

What power lies in the repetition of the word, “it,” and what energy in the description of its making! Our prophet trusts that his audience will come along with him as he mocks the various mundane uses of that same fire that forges the idol, “‘Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!’” (44:16b). Schökel notes that this scenario hearkens back to the “rival gods” of Exodus and describes how “the poet grants these gods a fictitious reality for the sake of creating a public contest. He does this to show their ontological nullity —their total incapacity to foretell or to bring events to pass” (175).

Second Isaiah continues the poetic charge of reminding his audience of God’s power by leaning on the Deuteronomistic principle and explicating how God can use rulers to act in the process of Jerusalem’s restoration: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him...” (45:1a). Indeed, it was under this Persian king’s rule that the Babylonian exile ended.

Chapters 46-47 continue to provide evidence of God’s power, offering “…Jerusalem [as] the focus and personification of the whole Judean community” while “…the Babylonian capital represents the entire enemy nation” (Schökel 176), while chapter 48 offers a summary speech and closing hymn.

You may have noticed the lack of references to women in the works of these latter prophets. We could attribute that to the nature of the literature for these are not cohesive narratives establishing genealogy, religious lineage, and cultural and religious law, such as the books of the Torah or Former Prophets. We could also attribute that to cultural customs of the era when the books were written in which women were not as likely to be recognized as having the authority to speak for God. When we have seen references to women in these works, it is often in negative light (for in what other light could we
perceive the equation of Israel to “whoredom” in Hosea, for example?) designed to portray Israel or Judah, or whatever the oracle’s target, as weak and fickle. Maybe that is why the repeated personifications of Zion as a woman we find in the restoration oracles of chapters 49-55 stand out so powerfully. The first example happens in chapter 49:14, “But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” What other examples of this personification do you find?

Finally, as we reach the end of Second Isaiah, there is more clear evidence of the way in which the latter prophets serve as transition between the historical books and wisdom literature in the following proverb from chapter 55:

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (55:6-9)

**Jeremiah**

Jeremiah is the second of the three major prophets. Scholars have struggled to describe the structure of the text because of its internally disorganized sense of chronology and wide ranging literary style, but we do know that it was first recorded as an oral dictation by Jeremiah to his scribal colleague Baruch on single scroll, c. 605 BCE.

Stephen L. Harris adds this fascinating historical detail in the eighth edition of his textbook, *Understanding the Bible*: Upon hearing the scroll, King Jehoiakim had it burned and called for the writers’ arrest! Jeremiah and Baruch had already fled to safety, however, and went on to produce a second scroll. Some evidence of this are the first-person accounts in the opening chapters (187) and in chapter 36.

The table below (Fig. 8) shares a widely accepted chronological explanation for the book’s structure, based on this scroll, though there are other theories that rely on the literary styles of poetry, prose sermons, and prose history as their structural guide (see Rosenberg).
Fig. 11. Structure of Jeremiah.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jeremiah: One Scroll, Dictated by Jeremiah to his colleague scribe Baruch in 605 BCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cycle #1:</strong> Jeremiah 1-25, Jeremiah’s call and complaints; oracles toward Israel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cycle #2:</strong> Jeremiah 26-45, Jeremiah’s conflict with the Temple and royal court; reading of the scroll and Jeremiah’s imprisonment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cycle #3:</strong> Jeremiah 46-51, The oracles against the nations. Note: this placement represents the order of the Masoretic Text (MT); the Septuagint (LXX) uses these oracles as bridge in chapter 25; evidence such as the Dead Sea Scrolls suggest that the LXX version more accurately “preserves earlier and better traditions concerning the oracles, the language of the text, and the character of Jeremiah” (Hutton 1058).</td>
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Jeremiah begins with an editorial superscription and a remarkable record of his calling: “Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (1:4-5). That sense of historical agency is continued in verses 9-10: “Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” It seems that Jeremiah is promised to be a prophet unlike any other, one whose significance began before he was even born.

He continues with the type of oracles familiar to readers of Amos, Hosea, and First Isaiah, listing sins of Israel and pondering the weight of their disobedience and disloyalty. Contrary to the intimacy of his opening, much of Jeremiah’s book is not written as the firsthand experience of the prophet himself, as we saw in Amos, for example, but stands as “…a voice filtered through memory and tradition, and thus a sign of the baroquely tortuous chronological sense that informs the book as a whole. The prophet speaks and is remembered speaking” (Rosenberg 188).

One of the more striking passages happens in chapter 8 where we see Jeremiah using images of the natural world as human foil: “Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord” (8:7). The tone is as bleak as the images lovely, and the pain of the suffering Lord is laid bare. The chapter ends on this balancing act with the mournful reminder that the people of Judah have caused their own pain with their idolatrous ways, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then
has the health of my poor people not been restored?” The great irony is that there is, indeed, “balm in Gilead,” for it was an area in northern Israeli territory known for its medicinal herbs. The prophet is reminding the people that they already have what they need in order to make sense of their situation. That type of covenant reminder, along with evidence of its brokenness, carries into chapter 11 which opens with, “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (1-2).

The great literary style of lament is on full display in chapter 15 with a call-and-response structure between Jeremiah, the prophet representing Judah, and God. The Lord cries, “You have rejected me...you are going backward; so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you – I am weary of relenting” (15:6), and Jeremiah bemoans, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts, I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation” (15:16-17).

Additionally, the book of Jeremiah is the latter prophets’ closest connection to the Deuteronomistic principle and, perhaps because of this, it can be a challenging text to read. In it, we fully see: “The denunciations of sin—whether of the neighbor nations or of Israel—and the announcements of judgment—whether by fire, earthquake or foreign army” and can imagine ourselves part of the audience that was subject to Jeremiah’s constant messages of doom (Hubbard 88). To illustrate this connection to Deuteronomy, consider these verses:

But even in those days, says the Lord, I will not make a full end of you. And when your people say, ‘Why has the Lord our God done all these things to us?’ you shall say to them, ‘As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve strangers in a land that is not yours.’

As for you [Jeremiah], do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.

From the day that your ancestors came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me, or pay attention, but they stiffened their necks. They did worse than their ancestors did.

(Jer. 5:18-19; 7: 16; 25-26)
Here we see an act of reciprocal justice and witness the phrase, “stiffened their necks,” a direct mirroring of the looming God of Deuteronomy. We also find evidence of this Deuteronomistic principle at work in chapters 18-20. Here, Jeremiah uses an extended metaphor involving pottery – with God as the potter – to deliver a complex oracle about divine justice, “Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings” (18:11). As the allegory follows this Deuteronomistic trajectory, the clay serves as a striking symbol of a creation always pliant at the hands of its creator under the guise of their own free will, “‘It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will’” (18:12).

Buber offers this theological framework for understanding this feature of Jeremiah:

The communication to him as the chosen nabi, the ‘announcer’ – that is, the one who utters the speech of heaven – comes to him now in exact relation to the language of the summons, expanded in meaning, while the lower potter’s wheel revolves before him and the vessels are formed on the upper wheel, the successes to remain in the world, the failures to be rejected and shaped anew. Thus the divine potter works on the historical shapes and destinies of human nations. (Buber 174-175)

Jeremiah’s allegorical trajectory peaks at the end of chapter 19 with grim predictions of divine punishment: “And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters,” (19:8) before concluding with a reminder of his commission by God and a parting sentence: “I am now bringing upon this city and upon all its town the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks, refusing to hear my words” (19:15).

Chapters 20-25 and the final chapter, 52, build tension toward Jeremiah’s ultimate prophecy: Jerusalem will fall to Babylon under the weight of its sins: “For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the Lord: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire” (21:10). There are oracles directed toward false prophets, “See, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who use their own tongues and say, ‘Says the Lord,’” (23:31) and historical documentation of the final days of the Judean monarchy (the time of King Zedekiah). Indeed, much of chapter
52 recalls 2 Kings almost exactly as it warned of the Babylonian practice of deporting conquered peoples.

Ultimately, the book of Jeremiah is a complex weave of immediacy and reflection, of future and past, with the prophet himself as the extraordinary conduit.

**Ezekiel**

But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe. He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. (Ezek. 2:8-3:3)

This prophetic commissioning of the last of the three major prophets, Ezekiel, is quite possibly the most dramatic, with its words bolstering the weight of its feelings: Mortality! Rebellion! Woe! Such is part of our early introduction to the last of the three major prophets. In this book, we see a return, of sorts, to the type of bizarre (or ecstatic) prophetic behavior more common to the historical prophets as he becomes a character within his own text even as he also serves as narrator. Joel Rosenberg describes the book as having “the quality of a journal” due to its “disjunction and heteroglossia” (195).

The man Ezekiel was from the priestly Zadokite lineage, of Jerusalem, who found himself swept up in the sixth-century Babylonian exile. It is from this place of exile that he delivered his prophesies toward those who remained Judah and Jerusalem and to fellow exiles. If we thought Jeremiah consternating with his endless predictions of doom, we fall even deeper with Ezekiel’s for his predictions must, “convince his audience that their hope of independence and well-being—fanned by prophecies of Ezekiel’s rivals—was false. Underpinning this hope was the constant encouragement Egypt gave anti-Babylonian forces throughout this period” (Greenberg 14). This is perhaps due in part because, unlike his latter prophet peers, Ezekiel’s words were recorded from the very beginning with an eye toward a future audience, rather than contemporary, according to

Rosenberg further explains of Ezekiel’s unique burden that, because he, “A priestly prophet [was] by heritage and training a conciliator, a consoler, a sealer of consensus. It was at times necessary for a blunt prophet...to moderate or disguise his message for the ears of his less reflective constituents by fashioning a discourse difficult to pin down, addressed past the emotional multitudes to those who shared his concerns” (Rosenberg 199). Thus, we readers need to proceed with a careful eye and an open imagination.

Such care in reading is necessary from the start. Though Ezekiel’s superscription begins like most others with a contextual frame as introduction, we see a fascinating perspective shift between the personal “I,” — “In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God” (1:1) — and the objective “He” — “...the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was on him there” (1:3) – the only break of its kind in the entire book. It is Ezekiel’s voice that moves us through the fantastic description of his calling, involving a vision of heavenly “living creatures” whose “spirit” – and gigantic wings - impels the wheels on an enormous throne-chariot, and of which, when in action, caused Ezekiel to hear, “the sound their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army; when they stopped, they let down their wings” (1:24). This vision – indeed, much of Ezekiel - has inspired poets and artist for centuries, most notably William Blake, John Milton, and Dante. You might have a chance to put your own creative energies toward its representation in class, and you might also find it edifying to continue researching the subject.

The vision builds into the awe-inspiring theophanic moment when Ezekiel is met with “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord,” upon which he, “fell on [my] face, and [I] heard the voice of someone speaking” (1:28). Such high symbolism endures as Ezekiel’s call to prophecy commences and the “spirit” of the Lord “entered into” him, enabling this “mortal” the ability to hear the word of God (2:1). What follows is the scene described in the opening of this section, and a dialogic pattern established between “O Mortal” and “the Lord God.”

Ezekiel’s life as a prophet begins when he is lifted by the spirit to appear to fellow exiles (3:14-15) and undergoes a series of performative oracles of doom toward Judah and Israel.
in chapters 4 and 5. It is easy to miss the performative aspect if you read quickly, so be sure to slow down and note just what Ezekiel is directed to do and why.

Some of the most striking images and scenes from Ezekiel are as follows:

- **God as Shepherd.** We can appreciate this image for its profoundly meditative quality and also to recognize Ezekiel’s participation in the literary prophets’ pattern of “doom” and consolation,” most notably in this series of oracles from chapter 34:

  
  **Doom** -> “...Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (34:2b-4).

  
  **Consolation** -> “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land” (34:11-13).

- **Ezekiel the Sentinel.** The Lord appoints Ezekiel as “sentinel for the house of Israel” (3:17). That image appears again in chapter 33, “So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me” (v. 7), and continues throughout the text.

- **Ezekiel and the “silent sigh.”** If he passed his first challenge, by ingesting the scroll of lamentation and woe, he is met with another heartbreaking task that begins in the narrative moments of 3:22-27; deepens in 24:5-15; and is reconciled in 33:22. Ezekiel, the prophet, it seems, is subject to restraints similar to Jeremiah. In a heartbreaking act of obedience to God (“Mortal, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes” [24:16a]), Ezekiel follows God’s commands to keep his silence and forego mourning rituals upon the death of his wife: “Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead” (24:17). He is to be silent until the day comes when Jerusalem is destroyed and the people lose everything just as Ezekiel must (he is to be a witness
to the truth of the Lord) and an escapee shall appear to him as a sign: “Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; but he had opened my mouth by the time the fugitive came to me in the morning; so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer unable to speak” (33:22).

- *Ezekiel and the Valley of the Dry Bones.* In a startling testament to the powerful relationship between prophet and God, Ezekiel is faced with the literal prospect of bringing the dead back to life in the allegorical vision of the valley of the dry bones in chapter 37: “I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (37:10). Scholars and theologians unpack the dense imagery in a variety of ways, but the pure literary feat is universally acknowledged. See Fig. 12 below.

*Fig. 12. The Vision of Ezekiel* (*Ezekiel* 37:8) *by Nicolaes de Bruyn,* 1606.
• *Gog of Magog oracles* Chapters 38-39 provide an early apocalyptic narrative that reveal the eschatological urgency of the times. There are clear literary features that help us understand this:

**Predestinarianism** -> An implied fixed course of action is exemplified here through its call to wait for an appointed time in the future in which they will be called upon to act in God’s vengeance: “Be ready and keep ready, you and all the companies that are assembled around you, and hold yourselves in reserve for them” (38:7).

**Universalism** -> No one and no thing will be safe from judgment. God’s wrath and judgment will be poured down with “torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulfur,” and the “mountains shall be thrown down” and “the cliffs shall fall” and all who inhabit the Earth, even the “creeping things that creep on the ground,” will quake in his presence, so that all nations “shall know that I am the Lord” (38:22, 20, 23).

We opened this section on Ezekiel as witnesses to the moment when Ezekiel became the mouthpiece for a suffering God of a suffering people, a spokesman whose entire emotional life became subordinated to the duty of relegating the course of human events in divine terms. Let us end as witnesses to his, and his fellow latter prophets’, monumental gift in turning their personal sacrifice into literary promises of hope:

They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God.

(34:30)

**Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion**

1. As you read the Latter Prophets, find examples of varying literary styles and explain how you identified them. What do you think the style adds to the rhetorical or emotional power of the text?

2. Follow the changes between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person tenses as you read the Latter Prophets. What do these shifts tell us about those texts, their aims, or the editorial process?
3. What are some examples of Amos’s focus on social justice? What does he criticize in chapter 6?

4. In Hosea and Isaiah 1-6, track the legal language, such as “indictment” and “guilt.” How does this kind of language shape the meaning of the text? What impact does it have on readers?

5. Follow the various ways the vineyard allegory is used in Isaiah 27. Why do you think the writer made those literary choices?

6. Make a visual representation of Isaiah’s calling or transcribe it using different symbols. Reflect on the choices you made in creating that representation and come ready to discuss its overall purpose.

7. Discuss the personification of Zion as a woman in Second Isaiah. How would you characterize its message and the writer’s use of femininity? How does that image compare to other representations of women? What can we learn here?

8. Discuss the connections between Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. What do those connections reveal about Jeremiah’s audience?

9. What does this oracle pronouncement from Jeremiah reveal about a key thematic concern for all the latter prophets, “Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place” (22:3)?

10. Using your respective talents, create a different representation inspired by your favorite image from Ezekiel (i.e. a drawing, a poem or song, a short drama, a social media post, etc.). What is the tone of your creation? How does that tone reflect your understanding of Ezekiel?

11. Look up the word “sentinel” as you read Ezekiel. What does it mean to act as sentinel? Can you think of other examples?

12. In your reading of Ezekiel, locate the occurrences of the phrase, “I fell on my face. The spirit entered into me, and set me on my feet.” Perform a close reading or exegesis of those lines and discuss what its repetition adds to the text.
13. Reflect on the rhetorical situation of prophecy by reading an oracle out loud, and/or taking turns with a partner who will also read to you. How does it feel to be the speaker? the listener? an observer? How would prophets be treated? Do we have any contemporary examples?

14. If you were to imagine yourself as a prophet, what kind of oracle do you think you would write, one of doom or one of consolation? Who would your audience be?

15. Compare and contrast the relationship each of the major prophets has with God. What are the details of their calling, for example, and how does their dialogue work?

Works Cited and Further Reading


