

# ANSWER KEY

how to profit from the  
**OLD TESTAMENT  
PROPHETS**



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# How to Profit from the Old Testament Prophets

Getting the Most Out of Some Difficult Books

## I. Introduction

“If you examine the Bibles of even the most diligent students you may find a telltale band of white on the paper edges just over halfway through, a mark of cleanness indicating how seldom fingers touch the Old Testament prophets. Although those seventeen books [including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel and the 12 minor prophets] fill about a fifth of the Bible’s bulk, they tend to go unread. Why? I put that question to a Bible study class, and a graduate student bluntly summed up the class’s sentiments: ‘The prophets are weird and confusing, and they all sound alike.’ As I thought about his answer, I realized he had captured the very problems that kept me away from the prophets for many years” (Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, p. 171).

Imagine you were sitting in Yancey’s Bible study class and he asked *you* why the prophets tend to go unread? What response(s) would you give?

## II. Getting into the Prophets

### A. Stirring Your Motivation: Three Reasons You Don't Want to Pass these Books Up

“...the prophets [are] the most ‘modern’ writers imaginable. In chapter after chapter they deal with the very same themes that hang like a cloud over our century: the silence of God, economic disparity, injustice, war, the seeming sovereignty of evil, the unrelieved suffering that afflicts our world. These, the same themes that surface periodically in Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and even Deuteronomy, the prophets bring into sharp focus, as if examining them under a microscope. Prototypical books of Old Testament realism, the prophets eloquently express the doubts, pains, and complexities that we all feel - that I feel. I came to see them as an acute witness to the dilemma of being human.”

- Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, p. 174

1. The prophets are closer in proximity to our lives than we often acknowledge.
2. The prophets give us important insight into who God is, and how to live in light of that. We get unique insight into God's character and hear God sharing His thoughts like few other places in Scripture.

“Why read the prophets? There is one compelling reason: to get to know God. The prophets are the Bible's most forceful revelation of God's personality” (Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, p. 180).

“Through the prophets the invisible God becomes audible” (Bruce Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 805).

As God reveals Himself and speaks through the prophets, some of the important things we learn about Him include:

- a. We learn that God takes sin seriously.

Sin really is that big of a deal. If we won't respond to God's offers of grace, judgment comes. Sin really is that big of a deal. And as we discover God's perspective on sin, we learn that sin is a bit more nuanced than we may sometimes think.

- ▶ Ultimately sin is about our **heart**: Isaiah 29:13; Jeremiah 4:4, 14; 17:9; Ezekiel 36:26-27; cf. Mark 7:21-23
- ▶ The root of sin is **idolatry**: see Jeremiah 2:11-12; cf. Isaiah 46:5-10
- ▶ **Social justice matters**. A lot. Isaiah 58:1-14; Jeremiah 5:26-29; Amos 2:6-8
- ▶ The possibility of **religious pretense** is real, and it's not good: Isaiah 58:1-3; Jeremiah 6:16-20

- b. We learn about God's power and love.

e.g. Isaiah 40:10-11, 27-31; 49:15-16

- c. We learn about God's plan- what He is doing and what He will do.

e.g. Isaiah 49:8-26; Habakkuk chs. 1-3

**Luke 24:27 (NIV)**

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

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**Genre:** a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content

3. The prophets help us appreciate the person and work of Jesus Christ.

B. Equipping you with Methods: Three Tools for the Toolbox

1. Think in terms of genre.

2. Factor in the historical context.

3. Identify the message.

a. Work to find the unit of the message.

A word to learn here is "oracle." Do your best to determine the boundaries, define the type, and discern the message.

i. Determine the boundaries

ii. Define the type

iii. Discern the message

b. Remember the framework that the prophets - and those they were ministering to - would have been operating within: the covenant God had already established with His people.

"The prophets were inspired by God to present to their generation the essential content of the original Mosaic covenant's warnings and promises (curses and blessings). Therefore, when we read the prophets' words, what we read is not new in concept but new in wording - in each prophet's own style and vocabulary - of the same message in essence delivered by God originally through Moses. The exact wording may be unique, and in that sense 'novel,' but the concepts expressed restate faithfully what God had already expressed to his people in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy" (Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 187).

"...the writings of the prophets can be among the most confusing parts of the Old Testament and are often the objects of the most disagreement and - dare we say it - abuse at the hands of those who try and interpret these texts. It's one thing to see these various types of prophecies on the pages of the OT; it's quite another to know how to apply their words of disaster and salvation, whether they occur as forthtelling or foretelling. Several steps can help us navigate through the mysterious and frustrating writings of the OT prophets.

- Klein, *Handbook for Personal Bible Study*, p. 203

c. Don't sacrifice the present (then) for the future.

i. Not all prophecy is predictive.

ii. Some prophecy is predictive.

Some predictive prophecy is in the "near future" for the prophet - predicting something that will happen in their lifetimes. Other prophecy is what I'll call "center future" - looking ahead to the coming of the Messiah that has now happened, and still other prophecy is what I'll call "far future" - looking ahead to the end of time and the final restoration of all things. This is future not only for the prophets, but also for us.

What gets tricky is that the prophets aren't always concerned about parsing these things out (even if they even could have?). All three "futures" blend into one at certain places in the prophets; interpretation should be aware of this and move forward carefully, and accordingly.

There's one more important thing to mention: The point of this predictive prophecy isn't to be "so future minded we're of no present good," nor is it to late out a timeline we can set our watches by today in the 21st century. Predictive prophecy is always supposed to influence the present in some way: looking ahead in hope, for perseverance, to be reminded that God is in control, to promote reflection and repentance, etc...

"...we can think of the prophets as preachers of their day, addressing issues of their day, who sometimes pointed to what God would do in the future as part of their message. Much of the prophetic literature does not involve prediction of the future, but prediction plays an important role in motivating the people to take seriously the prophets message from God."

- in Guthrie, *Read the Bible for Life*, p. 137



- d. Know the questions to ask first. (And keep coming back to these.)
  - i. God: What does this tell me about God?
  - ii. Good: What does this tell me about how to live for God?
  - iii. Goal: What does this passage tell me about God's plan? And what should that do to/in me?
  - iv. Gospel: How does the coming of Jesus add color to how I understand this - *why* Jesus needed to come and *what* He accomplished?

### III. A Closer Look at the Book of Daniel

#### A. Historical context

## B. Genre

## C. Drilling into Daniel 7: Genre, Message, and Application

### 1. Observations

#### **Daniel 7:13 (NIV)**

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

## 2. Conclusions

“When it comes to God’s message, the prophets ‘tell it like it is’ so God’s people will clearly know what he thinks of their behavior and faith. In fact, that describes the crucial role of prophecy for us: What does God think of our behavior and faith?”

- Klein, *Handbook for Personal Bible Study*, p. 203

## IV. Conclusion and Q&A

# Reflection Questions

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## How to Profit from the Old Testament Prophets

- ▶ What is your experience with the prophetic books in the Old Testament? Are you brand new to them? Or have you read much of the material before - maybe multiple times? Also share what prompted you to be a part of this seminar today.
  
- ▶ Review the material on pp. 4-5, where we looked at things to “stir our motivation” for reading the prophets. What was most helpful or insightful for you from this section? Explain.
  
- ▶ Why are the methods we use when reading and interpreting the prophetic books important? To help get your thinking started, imagine what could happen if some of these methods that were mentioned are neglected.
  
- ▶ Spend time on each of the three “methods” or “tools” introduced on p. 6. Briefly explain each in your own words, and share why this method is important to keep in mind.
  
- ▶ What stood out to you most from the “closer look at the book of Daniel”? How does this whet your appetite to either dig more deeply into Daniel, or into another part of prophetic literature?
  
- ▶ From this material that was covered what are 1-2 things that are sticking out to you in a big way? Any lingering questions or other things you want to talk about related to this material?

## **For Further Study**

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How to Profit from the Old Testament Prophets

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