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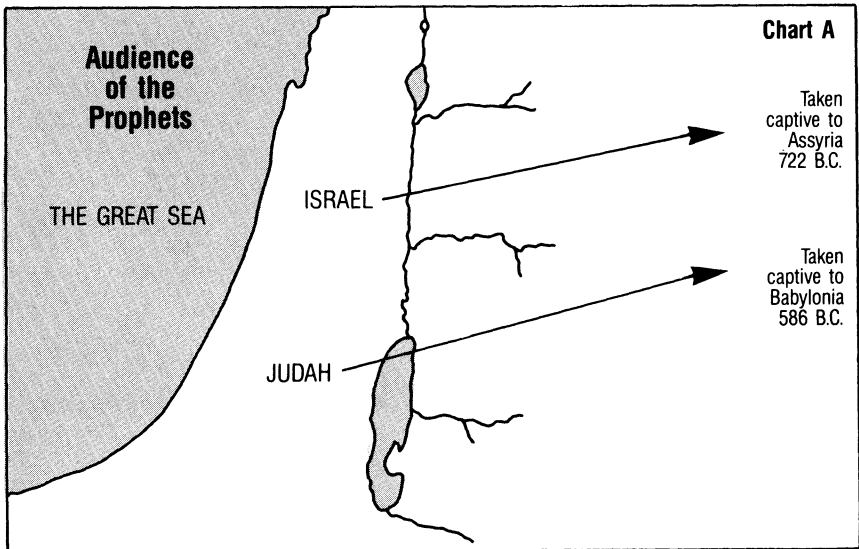
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PROPHETS IN GENERAL

Lesson 1

The Audience of the Prophets

Most messages of the Old Testament prophetic books were addressed to the generations of God's people who lived approximately between the years 840 and 420 B.C. The ten tribes, known specifically as the kingdom of Israel, lived in north Canaan (New Testament areas of Samaria and Galilee) before they were deported by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The two tribes, known as the kingdom of Judah, lived in south Canaan before they were taken captive by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. This is shown on Chart A.

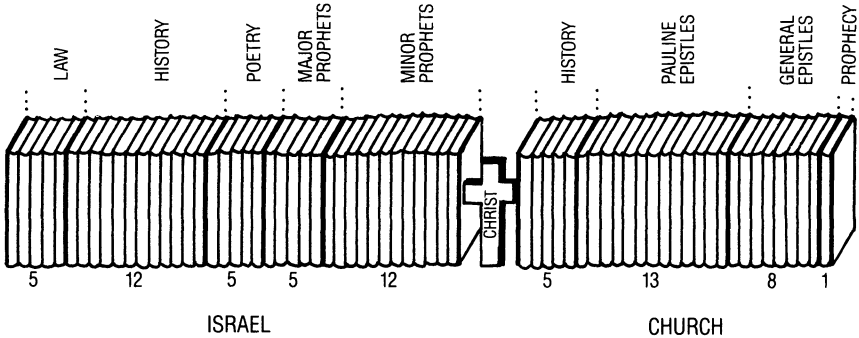


ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH IN THE BIBLE

Chart B

OLD TESTAMENT: 39 BOOKS

NEW TESTAMENT: 27 BOOKS



ISRAEL		
LAW	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	5
HISTORY	Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther	12
POETRY	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon	5
MAJOR PROPHETS	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel	5
MINOR PROPHETS	Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	12

CHURCH		
HISTORY	Matthew Mark Luke John Acts	5
PAULINE EPISTLES	Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus Philemon	13
GENERAL EPISTLES	Hebrews James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude	8
PROPHECY	Revelation	1

The people of God were not always divided into two camps. The split of the kingdom came at the end of Solomon's reign. Jeroboam I was the first king of the north, and Rehoboam the first king of the south. This story is recorded in 1 Kings 12-16.

The name Israel in the Old Testament sometimes refers to the entire nation; otherwise it refers to just the northern tribes. In this manual the name is used in the general sense unless otherwise stated. It is important for the student of the prophetic books to be acquainted with the audience of the prophets. In this lesson we shall learn about Israel's history and spiritual condition in the days of the prophets and also about the nation's place in God's sovereign plan.

I. ISRAEL COMPARED WITH THE CHURCH

Broadly speaking, the great subject of the Old Testament is *Israel*, and the great subject of the New Testament is the *church*. Notice on Chart B how the structure of the Old Testament is built around *Israel*.

1. In the Pentateuch (books of Law) is recorded the *founding* of Israel.

2. In the twelve History books is recorded the *history* of Israel.

3. The five books of Poetry were written by spiritual leaders of Israel and contain *instructions* to Israel.

4. The seventeen books of Prophets contain *prophecies* concerning Israel.

The structure of the New Testament in the same way centers on the *church*.

1. In the gospels and the first two chapters of Acts is recorded the *founding* of the church.

2. The book of Acts narrates the *history* of the church for one generation.

3. The twenty-one Epistles were written by spiritual leaders of the church and contain *instructions* to the church.

4. The one book of Prophecy contains *prophecies* concerning the church.

There are many correspondences between Israel and the church concerning God's *purposes* in choosing them, *promises* given to them, and the *conditions* laid down for their blessing. Look at these on Chart C

ISRAEL	CHURCH
PURPOSES	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Witness. Witnessing unto the true God amid idolatrous nations of the world. 2. A Demonstration. Showing the blessedness of being God's people. 3. A Repository. Preserving the revelations that God made to Israel of His character and His purposes. 4. A Channel. Being a channel through which God's blessings might flow out to the surrounding Gentile nations. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Witness. Witnessing unto the Savior Jesus amid a lost world. (Read Acts 1:8.) 2. A Demonstration. Showing the blessedness of living in Christ. 3. A Repository. Preserving the marvelous truths of Christian doctrine that God has revealed to the church. 4. A Channel. Being a channel today through which His blessings are reaching the whole world.
PROMISES	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Purity. Israel could be a pure nation spiritually and physically, by observing the Levitical laws of sacrifices and cleanliness. (Read Heb. 9:13.) 2. Wealth. All other nations would borrow from Israel (Deut. 15:6). 3. Might. No alliance of nations could conquer Israel (Ex. 33:2; Josh. 9:1-2). 4. Reign. Israel could be the ruling nation of the world, a theocracy, with God on the throne (Deut. 15:6). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Purity. "How much more shall the blood of Christ . . . purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb. 9:14). 2. Wealth. "Joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). 3. Might. "Greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father" (John 14:12). 4. Reign. Reigning with Christ in the Millennium (Rev. 20:6), and around the throne of God "for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:5).
CONDITIONS	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Surrender. The basic requirement for blessing was absolute and unconditional surrender to the will of God. This meant faith in God and obedience to His Word in all things (Deut. 26:16; Isa. 1:19). 2. Separation. Israel was to be a separated people ("a peculiar people," Deut. 14:2), not intermarrying, intermingling, or indulging in the manners or customs of the idol-worshiping nations surrounding them (Ex. 33:16; Deut. 7:1-5). 3. Service. The surrendered, separated Israelite was to serve his Lord. "And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul" (Deut. 10:12). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Surrender. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). 2. Separation. "Ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world" (John 15:19). "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:11). 3. Service. "Be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord . . ." (1 Cor. 15:58). "With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men" (Eph. 6:7).

II. ISRAEL'S HISTORY BRIEFLY SKETCHED

The history of Israel, as given in the Old Testament, generally falls into four periods, which may be remembered by four words, each beginning with the letter *C*: Camp, Commonwealth, Crown, Captivity. See Chart D.

ISRAEL'S HISTORY BY PERIODS

Chart D

IN EGYPT AND THE WILDERNESS	IN CANAAN UNDER JUDGES	IN CANAAN UNDER KINGS	IN ASSYRIA AND BABYLON
CAMP	COMMONWEALTH	CROWN	CAPTIVITY
660 YEARS	360 YEARS	460 YEARS	160 YEARS
PENTATEUCH	[JOSHUA JUDGES RUTH	1 and 2 [SAMUEL KINGS CHRONICLES	[EZRA NEHEMIAH ESTHER

The *Camp Period* extended from the call of Abraham, the founder of the nation, to Moses' bringing the people up to the "gate" of Canaan, in the plains of Moab. This period lasted for about 660 years, the history of which is given in the Pentateuch.

The *Commonwealth Period* extended from Israel's entrance into Canaan under Joshua to the crowning of their first king, Saul. This period of about 360 years is described in Joshua, Judges, and Ruth.

The *Crown Period* extended from the crowning of their first king, Saul, to the Babylonian captivity. The period lasted about 460 years. Its history is recorded in the six books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

The *Captivity Period*, including the restoration, extended from the Babylonian captivity to the end of Old Testament history, a period of about 160 years. Its history is told in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

Let us look more closely at Israel's history during each of these four periods.

A. The Camp Period

This period is so called because during these years Israel was not permanently settled in any land as a nation. The people were first travelers from Ur to Canaan; then temporary dwellers in Canaan; then slaves in Egypt; and finally sojourners in the wildernesses of the Sinai Peninsula. Tents were their homes on all their journeys.

The Bible's record of this era of Israel's life is a fascinating one. We read how highly God favored this nation, visiting them in their bitterness and slavery in Egypt, and delivering them from their bondage. The story goes on to tell of His taking them into covenant relationship with Himself, choosing them from all other people to represent Him in the world, giving them laws that could not be surpassed, manifesting His presence among them, and giving them promises almost unbelievable in their scope and richness. God made possible for Israel, by fulfilling the two clear conditions of obedience and separation, to be the purest, richest, and most powerful people on the earth, and, as representatives of God, the rulers of the earth.

B. The Commonwealth Period

This new period began auspiciously. The nation, strong in faith, crossed the river Jordan under the leadership of Joshua. They conquered the enemy, drove most of them out of the land, and took possession of their inheritance. For a while they lived as God would have them live, true to Him and separated from all He had forbidden. For this God wonderfully blessed, protected, and empowered them. The greatest enemy cities, the strongest nations, and the most formidable alliances staggered before Israel when God was with them. And God was with Israel just as long as they were true to Him.

But soon the nation began its downward course. First, petty jealousies arose among the tribes. Next, there was distinct quarreling among themselves. Then there was a laxity in observing God's laws, and the people began to intermarry with idol worshippers. All through the Commonwealth Period there was growing discontent. Israel looked around on all the surrounding nations: Egypt to the southwest, Syria to the north, Assyria to the northeast, and Babylon to the east. They observed one thing that all these nations had in common: a human king sitting on a throne surrounded by courtiers and servants, with all the pomp and glitter and display that are so dear to the unregenerate human heart. Instead of glorying in that they were different from all these nations above which God had highly placed them, Israel began to despise their

place of peculiarity and to be ashamed that they had no visible king as had these other nations.

Toward the end of Samuel's life this discontent broke out into open revolt, and the nation demanded a king. Chapter 8 of 1 Samuel tells the heartbreaking story (read this chapter now). The nation gave the plausible excuse for this step that Samuel was old and his sons wicked, but the real reason was that they despised their place of peculiarity and wanted to be "like all the nations," as is seen by verses 5, 19, and 20. God saw plainly that it was rejection of the Lord as King (v. 7). In verses 9 to 17 we have the description of a human king. Observe the emphasis on the personal pronouns in those verses, and you will see that the chief characteristic of those human kings was selfishness.

In spite of God's solemn warning of the consequences, the nation insisted upon having human kings. The kingdom was established, and for nearly five hundred years Israel struggled along under human kings, some good, some bad, some indifferent, but all immeasurably inferior to the divine King whom they had rejected. This is the story of the next period, the Crown Period.

C. The Crown Period

When Israel demanded a human king to replace their leader Samuel, they were really not rejecting Samuel, but the Lord. "The Lord said unto Samuel . . . they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Sam. 8:7). One might wonder then, if they rejected the Lord, why the Lord would have any more to do with them. One reason is that although they rejected the Lord as their *King*, they still recognized Him as *God*. Their rejection of Him was not total. A stronger reason is that God, in His love and mercy, would offer them a new opportunity, in the new governmental setup, to recognize His authority by accepting *His* choice of kings and also by obeying those kings. (Read 1 Sam. 8:22; 9:16.)

The writing prophets, whose books we are studying in this Bible study series, ministered to Israel during much of the Crown Period, when the people were ruled by kings. It is important for us, therefore, to become acquainted with this era of human kings. A study of the books of Kings and Chronicles is good preparation for the study of the prophetic books.

The Crown Period covered about 460 years, extending from 1043 to 586 B.C. Look at Chart X and note the following:

1. *United kingdom*. Saul, David, and Solomon, the first three kings, each reigned over all twelve tribes of Israel. This constitut-

ed what is known as the United Kingdom. No writing prophets ministered at this time.

2. *Divided kingdom.* At the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam took the throne. But Rehoboam acted in such a foolish, overbearing manner (1 Kings 12) that ten of the twelve tribes revolted and formed a new kingdom, choosing Jeroboam as their king and forming a new capital, Shechem in Samaria. For about two hundred years there were two kingdoms in Palestine, the ten tribes in the northern part of the country under the name of "Israel" and the two tribes still true to Solomon's son in the south, under the name of "Judah." This situation constituted what is known as the Divided Kingdom.

The kingdom of "Israel" was founded on idolatry (see 1 Kings 12:25-30) and went from bad to worse. All of Israel's nineteen kings were evil rulers. By 722 B.C. the ten tribes had grown so stubbornly idolatrous that God would bear with them no longer; He allowed the Assyrians to conquer them and take them out of their country as captives (see Chart A).

3. *Surviving kingdom.* After the ten tribes had been carried out of the land into captivity, the two tribes known as the kingdom of Judah remained in Canaan for almost 140 years. Judah had several good kings who brought the people back to a measure of obedience to God, but the poison of idolatry that had ended the northern kingdom destroyed Judah as well, and in 586 B.C. the two tribes were taken into Babylonian captivity, where they served seventy years (see Chart A).

D. The Captivity (and Restoration) Period

From the books of Esther, Daniel, and Ezekiel we get some idea of the life of the Jews in Babylon during their seventy-year captivity. Although the oppression cannot be said to have been severe, the hardships of physical, social, and religious deprivations were felt by all. Those of the believing remnant who determined to be true to their God especially felt the persecution of scorn and penalty.

In 539 B.C. Babylon fell to Cyrus, king of Persia, who favored the Jews by allowing them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1-4). This was the first of two groups to return.

1. *First return.* Responding to Cyrus's permit, about 43,000 returned with Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. Work on the Temple was not begun until 536 B.C., seventy years after Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem in 605 B.C.

2. *Second return.* In 458 B.C. another company of Jews, about 1,800, left Babylon for Jerusalem. This return was under the lead-

ership of Ezra, who was granted permission by Artaxerxes for the group to return. The purpose of Ezra's return was to carry out much needed religious reform among the Jews of the first return who had already drifted into apostasy.

Were the Jews of the two returns described above only from the kingdom of Judah? The answer to this question is furnished by the answer to another question: What eventually happened to the northern ten tribes, which had been taken captive by the Assyrians? T. Nicol writes,

It must not be supposed that they became wholly absorbed in the population among whom they were settled. We can well believe that they preserved their Israelitish traditions and usages with sufficient clearness and tenacity, and that they became part of the Jewish dispersion so widespread throughout the East. It is quite possible that at length they blended with the exiles of Judah carried off by Nebuchadnezzar, and that then Judah and Ephraim became one nation as never before.¹

Thus the captive Jews living around Babylon who were finally allowed to return to their homeland represented both the northern and southern kingdoms. In heart they were one people.

E. Israel's Crucial National Steps

Israel's history, from the time of the nation's calling to the present, is summarized in Chart E.

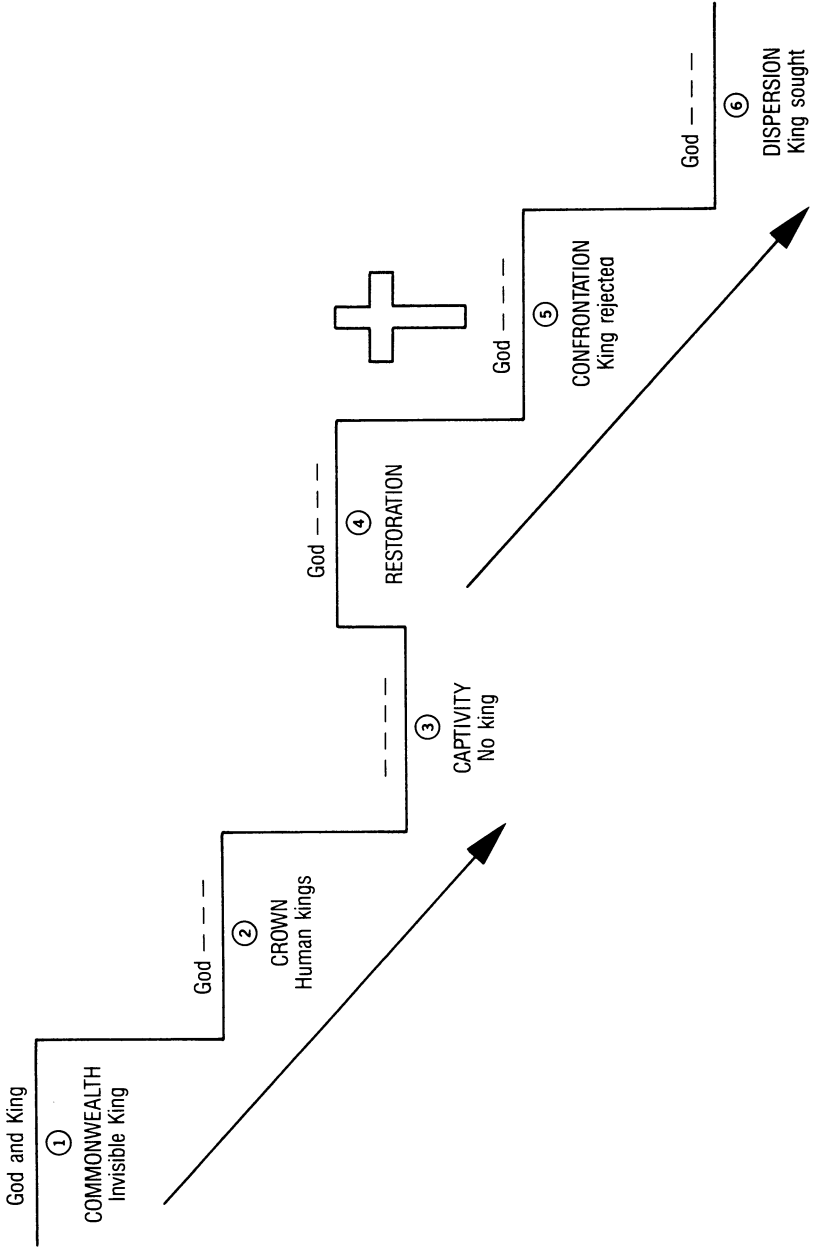
Note the following:

1. At the beginning of the Commonwealth Period, Israel was on a high pinnacle of opportunity. Jehovah was not only their God but He was their invisible King. His law regulated their conduct in every particular and in every walk of life. As long as Israel maintained this position of true worship and absolute obedience, nothing was impossible for them, for all the power of almighty God was theirs.

2. At the close of the Commonwealth Period the nation took a fearful downward step and rejected Jehovah as their King, demanding a human king to be their leader, counselor, and lawmaker. During the Crown Period, Jehovah appeared as their God but not as their King.

1. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1: 571.

ISRAEL'S CRUCIAL NATIONAL STEPS



3. At the close of the Crown Period the nation took the second fearful downward step. They rejected Jehovah as their God, preferring the worship of idols made of wood and gold. So in the Captivity Period God did not appear in their *national* life or thought, either as God or King. There were individual Jews, however, who sought and worshiped God, and these composed a remnant of believers.

4. With permission from their captors, the believing remnant returned to their land, rebuilt the Temple, and began the worship of Jehovah as Lord, thus taking one big step upward.

5. When God appeared in the flesh, in the person of His Son, He offered Himself as their King, the Messiah, for whom they had been looking. This was Israel's great confrontation, the grand invitation to the kingdom of God, but the Jews rejected Jesus and crucified Him. ("His own received him not," John 1:11.)

6. Just as Israel was scattered among the nations for rejecting God as King during the Crown Period (Captivity), the Jews were dispersed throughout the world for rejecting Jesus as King (Dispersion). The Millennium will see the restoration of a remnant.

In this lesson we have surveyed the historical setting of the prophetic books. Our special interest has been the spiritual condition of God's people in the centuries just before and during the years when the prophets ministered. For these people were the *audience* of the prophets. Knowing something about the audience will help us to appreciate and understand the prophets' messages.

As a review for this lesson, write out the answers to the following questions:

1. What are some of the main differences between the Old and New Testaments?

2. Compare Israel of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament.

3. Write out the fourfold purpose of God concerning Israel and the church.

4. In your own words describe the four main periods of Israel's history in the Old Testament. Cite major events at the beginning and end of each period. Try to recall the significant dates.

5. Name and describe the three divisions of the Crown Period.

6. After Solomon's death, what caused ten of the tribes of Israel to revolt?

7. How many kings of the northern kingdom were evil?

Were any of Judah's kings good men?

8. In which books of the Bible do we see the Jews as captives in Babylon?

9. What were some of the factors leading to the Jews' return to their land?

Who was their leader in the first return?

In the second return?

10. Name and describe Israel's six crucial national steps.
