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Dating the Prophetic Books of the Bible

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The background dating of the kings of Judah forms the basis for dating the prophets (see More Seed & Bread No. 282, Dating the Kings of Judah).

The prophecy of Jonah is the first book (850 BC). Jonah was sent to the great city of Nineveh to call it to repentance. Jonah was a patriot and didn't want to follow God's instruction because he saw that the Assyrians were becoming powerful and soon would destroy smaller countries like Israel. God gave him a message, to be delivered to the Assyrians, with the result that then the people of Nineveh (perhaps more than 200,000) believed in God, and they called a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them (Jonah 3:5). When God saw their submission He relented and withdrew the prepared calamity. Jonah followed Jehovah's word.

Joel was a prophet following Elijah (875-850 BC). The book makes no mention of the Assyrians, but calls attention to the historical enemies of Israel, the Philistines, Phoenicians, Egyptians and Edomites (Joel 3:4, 3:19). The content indicates a date about 830 BC, before the Assyrians became a super power. This is called "dating by the content" since no king was mentioned. Joel is primarily written to the northern ten tribes, calling them to repentance and to return to the Lord from their idolatry. The book of Joel is very difficult to date exactly, but Ussher says about 800 BC (Halley's Bible Handbook dates it about 840-830 BC). Since all the kings of Ephraim-Israel were idolatrous (either the golden calf or Baal worshippers) from the time of Jeroboam (about 980 BC), the appeal is for them to return to God, and perhaps He would erase the evil things that were predicted to happen (Deut. 29:18-29 and 32:15-31). God promises His blessing on Israel in Joel 3:18-21 along with the deliverance presented in Joel 2:18-32. Peter's speech, on the day of Pentecost, quotes from this passage and makes it clear that the Kingdom of God will be this deliverance, reestablishing the nation and its worship of Jehovah.

The next prophet is Amos who spoke (and wrote) his prophecy **concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah (810-758 BC), and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash, king of Israel (824-782 BC), two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1)**. Amos was written about 800-780 BC which falls within the range of years of these kings. This book is addressed to both nations but especially to the northern ten tribes. God speaks His judgment

on the neighboring nations as well as on Judah and Israel, but as with Joel, God explains there will be a restoration of Israel (Amos 9:11-15) and they will have the blessings of God on them.

The prophets, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah are nearly concurrent. Hosea's prophecy transpired **during the days of Uzziah (810-758 BC), Jotham (758-742 BC), Ahaz (742-726 BC), and Hezekiah (726-696 BC), and during the days of Jeroboam son of Joash (824-782 BC), king of Israel (Hos. 1:1).** It is apparent that Hosea's prophecy lasted several years, about 780-720 BC, and he probably saw Israel's defeat and exile into Assyria accomplished (about 721 BC). He tells of Israel being punished, but he also tells of future restoration (Hos. 2:14-23) and blessings (Hos. 14:1-9). God's love for Israel is reaffirmed (Hos. 11:1-12), and He denounces their idol worship. This is mostly directed to the northern ten tribes.

The book of Isaiah begins: **The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah (810-758 BC), Jotham (758-742 BC), Ahaz (742-726 BC), and Hezekiah (726-696 BC), kings of Judah (Isa. 1:1).** This is the same set of kings mentioned in Hosea's introduction. But Isaiah is thought to have died at the hands of Manasseh (696-641 BC), the evil son of Hezekiah, shortly after he began his reign. So Isaiah's prophecy extends about 755-700 BC.

The word of the Lord came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham (758-742 BC), Ahaz (742-726 BC), and Hezekiah (725-696 BC), kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem (Micah 1:1). While Micah is a more compact book than Isaiah, it covered about 745-720 BC. Like Isaiah and Hosea, he probably lived to see the Assyrians take Israel into captivity and exile into the land of Kir with the Syrians (Amos 1:5).

There is a period of prophetic silence for about 70 years from Isaiah until the time of Zephaniah who wrote his prophecy about 630 BC. The first verse of Zephaniah says, **The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah, son of Amon, king of Judah (Zeph. 1:1).** This four-generation genealogy is unprecedented among the prophets but most likely was given so that the familial relationship between the prophet and king Josiah becomes clear. They were both related to Hezekiah and hence they were distant cousins. Since Josiah became king at age 8 (639 BC), he was probably about 18 when confronted with Zephaniah's prophecy. Clearly, God made this book instrumental in bringing the king to repentance. The Jews had been 55 years under the evil king Manasseh, so there were many people still worshipping Baal and other idols. After the warnings and dangers of disobedience, the prophet predicts the regathering and return of Israel.

The book of Jeremiah begins: **The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, of the priests of Anathoth in the land of Benjamin., to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah (640-609 BC), the son of Amon king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign (627 BC). It came also in the days of Jehoiakim (608-597 BC), the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the eleventh year of Zedekiah (586 BC), the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month (Jer. 1:1-3).** Thus Jeremiah's

prophetic call extended 627-586 BC. His last chapter details the final destruction of Jerusalem. His father, Hilkiah, had found the unused Torah in the temple. He brought it to Josiah, and after reading it, the king tore his clothes and asked Hilkiah to inquire of God for him (2 Kings 22). The Lord responded to his humbling himself and he made many reforms and removed idols from the land.

The prophecy of Nahum was sent as a warning to Nineveh that they were to be destroyed and completely ruined. Its date is uncertain, though not likely in Hezekiah's reign. The Egyptian capital of Thebes had fallen to the Assyrians about 661 BC, so Nineveh was going to fall in a similar horror (Nahum 3:8-10). The date of Nahum is about 630 BC, (about 20 years before the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians in 609 BC).

The prophecy of Habakkuk is somewhat obscure, but since it details the fact the Chaldeans were going to send Judah into exile, it dates about 610 BC or shortly before the battle of Carchemish (606 BC) in which Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh-necho of Egypt. This book represents a final warning to the kings of Judah who continued to ignore the prophets, like Jeremiah. God's deliverance of His people is also included.

Obadiah's prophecy warns against Edom (586 BC), Judah's archenemy of who joined Nebuchadnezzar in the final destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Short and to the point, it tells of Edom's destruction, coming about at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar afterwards.

The prophecy of Daniel begins: **In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah (606 BC), Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it** (Dan. 1:1). Daniel went into captivity then. Daniel served Chaldean kings. When the Medes and Persians took over, Daniel served Babylonian and Persian kings (Belshazzar, Cyrus). Chapter 6 introduces Darius, acting as regent at the time of Daniel's position (536 BC) as first president in Persia. Chapter 8 goes back to the third year of Belshazzar (538 BC) and this is the time when the Persians defeated the Chaldeans. Chapters 9 and 11 occur at the first year of Darius (536 BC), and give insights into the book of Revelation and the last days of the kingdom.

Ezekiel went into captivity in the land of the Chaldeans in 597 BC, and Ezekiel 1:2 tells us that the word of the Lord came to him in captivity in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile or about 593 BC. In chapter 11 God's departure from the temple is pictured (586 BC). The various chapters are well dated and keep the Jewish captive informed about their homeland. Refugees reported that Jerusalem had been taken (586 BC). Ezekiel's prophecies cover about 21 years from 593 to 572 BC.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are not prophecies but history, and in the original Hebrew, both books were one text. Ezra details the proclamation of Cyrus (536 BC) that sent Joshua, the priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor, to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. As they rebuilt the temple, the city encountered much opposition from the local populace. The foundations of the temple lay unfinished for 16 years, until Haggai the prophet and Zechariah came along, charged by God to foretell its completion and get the people back to work. They

got the support of another King Darius who examined the edict of Cyrus and it was finished in four years (about 516 BC). The history of Ezra was written about 454 BC when Artaxerxes I (Longarmus) sent him back to Jerusalem (Ezra 8).

The dating of Malachi is estimated to be about 400 BC. Bullinger gives a date of about 370 BC because he considers the 400 years of silence to be measured from Malachi to Christ's ministry. Malachi decried the priest's insulting God's law by making blemished animal sacrifices and again permitting intermarriage with non-Hebrew peoples, as both Ezra and Nehemiah condemned. The book prophesies of God's plan to regather and bless Israel, telling us that **behold I am going to send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and notable day of the Lord, and he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers . . .** (Mal. 4:5-6). God took care, through these prophets, to clarify to Israel that He wanted them to **remember the Law of Moses My servant . . . which I commanded him in Horeb (Sinai) for all Israel** (Mal. 4:4).

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