

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

The Prophets: and Ethical Exegesis (refer to Glossary)

I. Intro / Overview: The biblical prophets are NOT merely predictors of distant events; they are WITNESSES and interpreters of communal crisis. Their words emerge from ancient Israel and Judah, yet they continue to disturb modern readers and our sense of normalcy because they expose the places where religion, politics, economics, and identity become morally disordered. To read the prophets responsibly today requires **1)** historical care, **2)** resistance to reductionism, and **3)** a willingness to let these texts confront every community that uses “God-language” to protect power.

The Christian Old Testament traditionally names Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel as the **Major Prophets** because of their length and scope, while the twelve shorter books—Hosea through Malachi—are called the **Minor Prophets**, though not because they are less important; by contrast, the Jewish **Tanakh**¹—an acronym for Torah (“teaching” or “instruction” – the Law or Pentateuch – Gen - Deut), **Nevi'im** (Prophets including “**Former Prophets**” Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and “**Latter Prophets**” like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve), and **Ketuvim** (or Writings, which includes poetry, wisdom, and books such as Ps., Prov., Job, Ruth, Daniel, Ezra-Neh, and Chron.)—contains many of the same books but arranges them differently, placing the prophets within the **Nevi'im** and ending with Chronicles rather than Malachi. Why?

The **Christian Old Testament ending with Malachi** creates a forward-looking movement toward prophetic expectation, which Christians often connect to John the Baptist and Jesus.

The **Jewish Tanakh ending with Chronicles** closes with exile addressed by return, temple restoration, and renewed communal identity.

II. Suggestions for a Responsible Reading of the Prophets:

1. Stop reading the prophets primarily as “fortune-tellers.” Prophets chide kings and protest unjust oppressive powers and systems. They are social critics, political theologians, poets, religious dissidents, interpreters of catastrophe, and covenantal witnesses. Amos, for example, does not merely announce distant events; he exposes a society where **prosperity rests on exploitation and worship disguises injustice.**

2. Put Israel “inside” the Ancient Near East. Israel’s prophets spoke from within a wider cultural world shaped by Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and other societies. Comparative study does not erase theological meaning; it shows how Israelite writers inherited, adapted, challenged, and transformed common ancient forms.

3. Think Adaptation not simply Borrowing. Biblical authors often use familiar ideas—kingship, divine warfare, covenant, temple, lament—but turn them toward covenantal accountability. **The prophets especially use Israel’s own religious language against its own political and economic establishment.**

4. Ask who produced the book we actually have. Prophetic books are not always simple transcripts of one individual’s speech. They are often **composite literary works** shaped by memory, transmission,

¹ Remember the Hebrew Bible has a canonical order or “hierarchy” of importance: Torah, then Prophets, then Writings.

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editing, and later interpretation. **Isaiah** is a clear example: many scholars distinguish **First or Proto-Isaiah** (likely the historical prophet, ch. 1–39, 8th c. BCE), **Second or Deutero-Isaiah** (anonymous exilic prophets, ch. 40–55, 6th c. BCE), and **Third or Trito-Isaiah** (ch. 56–66, anonymous post-exilic prophets or editors, late 6th to 5th c. BCE), reflecting different historical settings before, during, and after the Babylonian exile. A careful reader distinguishes the historical prophet, the developing prophetic tradition, and the final literary book.

5. Do not limit the prophets to “Social Justice.” The prophets care deeply about economics, oppression, and power, but also about God, worship, idolatry, holiness, land, exile, judgment, hope, and cosmic order. Their imagination is religious, political, economic, ecological, psychological, and poetic at once. **Still, the economic critique is real.** Amos and others attack societies where wealth, courts, land, and political influence become “systems of extraction” (or structures that systematically transfer wealth, labor, resources, or power from one group to another, usually from people with less power to people with more power). Religious festivals, offerings, songs, and assemblies are meaningless when the society producing them is unjust.

6. The prophets debunk Transactional Theology or “wealth equals blessing.” They ask not only whether someone is wealthy, but **how that wealth was gained**, who paid the price for it, and whether institutions protect wealth accumulation at the expense of social responsibility.

7. The prophets attack Political Nationalism. The prophets complicate any claim that a nation’s particular relationship with God gives it moral immunity. Israel and Judah may understand themselves as having a distinctive covenantal relationship with YHWH, but that relationship is repeatedly presented as a **responsibility rather than a guarantee of divine protection**. The same prophetic imagination that condemns Israel and Judah also condemns Assyria, Babylon, and other imperial powers. No nation can presume that military strength, political success, religious identity, or claims about divine favor place it beyond moral judgment.

8. Resist Supersessionist Readings (refer to Glossary). Christian readers should not automatically translate Israel into the Church, Zion into heaven, or every Davidic hope into Jesus without first respecting the text’s Jewish and historical setting. Supersessionism has a long Christian history, but it often erases the original referent.

9. Beware of Christological Retrojection (refer to Glossary). A historical-critical reading should **resist the impulse to begin with Jesus and work backward into the prophets.**

Christian interpretation has often **retroactively projected later Christological claims back into texts whose original audiences could not have understood them in those terms**. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophetic traditions can be read retrospectively through Christ, but that does not mean that their authors were secretly predicting Jesus, nor that their original historical referents should be displaced by later Christian ones. **Allow the prophets to remain Jewish.** If every prophetic text becomes a Jesus prediction, then Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, Israel, Judah, Babylon, Assyria, and the actual crises of history disappear. Letting the prophets remain Jewish and historically situated can make Christian interpretation richer, not poorer.

10. Utilize the Liberation Lens. Ask what Scripture looks like from below rather than above. For example, read Amos from the perspective of the landless, the economically exploited, and those denied

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justice, and the text's critique of institutions becomes sharper. **Ask who benefits from the economy, who loses land or housing, whether courts protect the poor, and whether religious institutions challenge exploitation or bless it.**

11. The Prophets DO NOT Baptize Power. The prophets expose the danger of saying, "God is on our side," when that claim protects a nation, ruler, economy, or institution from critique. They challenge every form of religious certainty that privileges power. **Ask the most interesting question:** What happens when a religious community discovers that its own institutions have become incompatible with the values it claims to uphold?

12. Resist Relativistic Readings. In a postmodern world marked by an intellectual agency that privileges relativism, the prophets are not satisfied with ambiguity; they demand ethical embodiment. Their words cannot be safely admired from a distance while communities repeat the very patterns they denounce. **To embody the prophets ethically is to practice truth-telling without arrogance, justice without self-righteousness, worship without evasion, and solidarity without romanticizing suffering.** The prophetic tradition becomes credible when readers allow it to form public courage, economic responsibility, institutional humility, and compassion for those most exposed to harm. The prophets do not merely need to be explained in the postmodern world; they need to be lived.

III. The Liberation Legacy:

"Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."
Isaiah 1:17

"Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed."
Jeremiah 22:3

"Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land..."
Amos 8:4–6

"Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees... to turn aside the needy from justice."
Isaiah 10:1–2

"Do justice... [and] do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow."
Jeremiah 7:5–7

"Woe to him who builds a town by blood and founds a city on iniquity!"
Habakkuk 2:12

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free...?"
Isaiah 58:6–7

"What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"
Micah 6:8

Amos 5:24

Isaiah 61:1

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal blue or grey lines across its entire width, typical of notebook paper. The lines are uniform in thickness and spacing, providing a guide for handwriting. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.