

What is Biblical Prophecy?

What Biblical Prophecy is NOT, and What It Really IS:

Contrary to what many fundamentalist preachers or late-night radio hosts would have you believe, biblical prophecy is *not* primarily about “predicting the future” or finding clues in the Bible that correspond to people or events in our own day and age! The prophets of Ancient Israel did *not* look into some kind of crystal ball and see events happening thousands of years after their own lifetimes. The books they wrote do *not* contain hidden coded messages for people living in the 20th or 21st centuries!

Rather, biblical prophets were mainly speaking to and writing for the people of their own time. They were challenging people of their own world, especially their political rulers, to remain faithful to God’s commandments and/or to repent and turn back to God if they had strayed. They were conveying messages from God, who had called or commissioned them, rather than speaking on their own initiative or authority. However, because the biblical prophets were transmitting messages on behalf of God (as Jews and Christians believe), much of what they wrote for their own time is clearly *also* relevant for people living in the modern world. The overall message of faith and repentance is timeless and applicable in all ages and cultures.

To understand what biblical prophecy really is, let’s look more closely at the origins, definitions, and uses of some *key biblical words*.

In the Hebrew Bible, the word for “prophet” is usually *nabi’* (lit. “spokesperson”; used over 300 times!), while the related feminine noun *nebi’ah* (“prophetess”) occurs only rarely. Both words are derived from the root verb *naba’* (“to prophesy; to speak on behalf of another”). The root meaning of “prophet” is clearly expressed in several biblical passages, such as when God tells Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Exod 7:1). Aaron’s role was not to predict the future, but rather to be the spokesperson or mouthpiece of Moses, who evidently did not wish to speak to Pharaoh directly (see Exod 4:10-17). Later, God also tells Moses, “I will raise up for [the Israelites] a prophet like you from among your own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command” (Deut 18:18).

Two other Hebrew words (*ro’eh* and *hozeh*) are closely related, but usually translated “seer” rather than “prophet.” The word *ro’eh* seems to be older, as explained in the Bible itself: “Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, ‘Come, let us go to the seer’ (*ro’eh*): for the one who is now called a prophet (*nabi’*) was formerly called a seer (*ro’eh*)” (1 Sam 9:9). In contrast, *hozeh* seems to be a newer word, since it is used mostly in the Chronicles. All three words are used of three different people in 1 Chronicles 29:29: “Now the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the records of the seer (*ro’eh*) Samuel, and in the records of the prophet (*nabi’*) Nathan, and in the records of the seer (*hozeh*) Gad.” In other texts, *nabi’* and *hozeh* are practically synonymous and are sometimes even used for the same people.

Hebrew	English	Torah/Law	Fmr. Proph.	Ltr. Proph.	Writings	HB Total
<i>naba’</i>	to prophesy	3	17	87	9	116
<i>nabi’</i>	prophet; spokesperson	14	100	156	47	317
<i>nebi’ah</i>	prophetess	1	2	2	1	6
<i>nebu’ah</i>	prophecy; message	-	-	-	4	4
<i>hozeh</i>	seer	-	2	4	10	16
<i>ro’eh</i>	seer	-	4	1	6	11

Note: The four sections of the Hebrew Bible (HB) are the Torah, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets, and other Writings.

In the biblical Greek of both the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the OT, abbreviated LXX) and the New Testament (originally written in Koine Greek), the word for “prophet” is *προφητης* (*prophetes*), which stems from two other words: *pro* + *phemi*. The verb *phemi* simply means “to speak.” The preposition *pro* has many different possible meanings, depending on the context in which it is used; it can mean “before” (which is why many people think “prophets” are those who “speak before” something happens, thus “pre-dicting” it), but it can also mean “for” or “on behalf of” (which is why most biblical scholars insist that “prophets” are those who “speak on behalf of God”). Which of these two possible meanings is more appropriate should be judged from the actual usage in the Bible.

Greek	English	Pent.	Hist.	Wisd.	Proph.	LXX Total	Mark	Matt	Luke	John	Acts	Paul	Hebr	Cath	Rev	NT Total
<i>προφητεια</i>	prophecy	-	6	7	3	16	-	1	-	-	-	9	-	2	7	19
<i>προφητειν</i>	to prophesy	3	22	4	87	116	2	4	2	1	4	11	-	2	2	28
<i>προφητης</i>	prophet	15	172	18	120	325	6	37	29	14	30	14	2	4	8	144
<i>προφητικος</i>	prophetic	-	-	-	-	0	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	2
<i>προφητις</i>	prophetess	1	3	-	1	4	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
<i>ψευδοπροφητης</i>	false prophet	-	-	-	10	10	1	3	1	-	1	-	-	2	3	11

Note: The four sections of the Septuagint (LXX) are the Pentateuch, Historical Books, Wisdom/Poetic Books, and Prophetic Books. For the subdivision of the NT books, see my overview of the NT Canon.

A careful study of the hundreds of relevant texts shows that biblical prophets rarely speak about future events as if they were inevitable, but much more often transmit various kinds of messages on behalf of God to the people, conveying God's interpretation of the *past, present, and future* aspects of people's lives. Thus, a "prophet" in the Bible is primarily a "spokesperson for God," someone who receives messages from God and conveys them to other people. If a prophet speaks words that are not from God, he or she is considered a false prophet or sometimes called a prophet of another god (e.g. "prophets of Baal" in the OT).

The messages transmitted by the biblical prophets are not only or primarily about the future, but about the past and present as well. They provide interpretations--from God's perspective--about past events, present circumstances, as well as future possibilities. Note that I say "future possibilities" rather than "future events," because when biblical prophets speak about the future, it is usually *not* about what *will* inevitably happen, but *rather* about what *might* happen, depending on how people choose to react and act: whether they listen to the prophetic message and live their lives accordingly, or ignore the words of the prophets and suffer the consequences.

- For example, when God sends the prophet Jonah to the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria (one of ancient Israel's fiercest enemies), Jonah's initial message seems to be one of inevitable doom: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:1-4)
- Contrary to Jonah's own expectations, however, the Ninevites respond to his preaching by believing in God, proclaiming a fast, covering themselves with sackcloth and ashes as signs of repentance, and praying to God not to destroy them. (3:5-9)
- As a result, God changes his mind and does not destroy the city of Nineveh after all. (3:10)
- This turn of events does not please Jonah at all, since he had been looking forward to the destruction of the capital city of this great enemy empire! So God tries to teach Jonah further that God is more interested in mercy and forgiveness than in punishment and destruction! (4:1-11)

What can we learn from this story? At least one crucial point about the nature of biblical "prophecy," namely, that even when prophets speak about the future, they are not predicting an inevitable, unalterable future! Rather, they are warning people about a *possible* future that *might* come upon them if they continue in their evil ways and do not turn back to God. But if the people do listen to the prophet's message and react appropriately, with prayer, repentance, and faithfulness to God, then the future will look very different than what the prophet had foretold!

Of course, not all biblical texts make the conditional nature of the future so explicit; the two alternatives ("If you don't repent, here's what will happen; but if you do repent, then God will be merciful to you.") are not always clearly stated, but might remain implicit. Some texts may even presuppose that people will not repent, and thus will be punished for their wickedness; but if they do, even contrary to all expectations, then the disasters foretold by the prophets will not come about after all!

The role of biblical prophets as spokespersons for God, speaking God's words primarily to people of their own time (and only secondarily to people of future generations), can also be seen in the various "introductory formulas" found so often in the prophetic books of the Bible. The messages God wishes to convey through the prophets to the people are often preceded by some very familiar phrases:

- "Thus says the Lord,..." (used over 400 times in the Hebrew Bible!)
- "The word of the Lord came to [someone], saying..." (over 100 times!)
- "Thus shall you say to [someone],..." (43 times)
- "Hear the word of the Lord,..." (37 times)
- "Speak to [someone], saying..." (14 times)

Moreover, when biblical prophets convey God's messages to the people, they do so not just in words but sometimes also in deeds, not just by speaking or writing, but also by performing various symbolic and/or miraculous actions. Examples are found throughout the Bible, esp. in the stories surrounding the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the books of Kings and in the book of the prophet Ezekiel:

- Anointing people to rule as king (1 Sam 9:16; 16:13; 1 Kgs 1:34, 45; 19:16)
- Showing unusual power over nature (1 Kgs 17:1-8, 41-46)
- Feeding people by miraculous means (1 Kgs 17:8-16; 2 Kgs 4:1-7; 4:38-44)
- Healing people (2 Kgs 5:1-19) or causing others to fall ill (2 Kgs 5:20-27)
- Raising the dead (1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:8-37)
- Performing other miraculous and/or symbolic actions (1 Kgs 18; 2 Kgs 6)

The Prophetic Books of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament:

Which books of the Bible are considered "prophetic"? The answer depends on *which* Bible you mean! Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians all use slightly different versions of the Bible, count different books among the "prophets," and arrange them in different orders in their respective Bibles.

- The Hebrew Bible (for ancient & modern Jews) has three main sections; the second is usually called "the Prophets" (*Nevi'im*).
 - This section is usually subdivided between the books of the "Former Prophets" (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and those of the "Latter Prophets" (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and one book containing "The Twelve" shorter prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).
 - The books of Daniel and Lamentations, however, are *not* considered part of this group, but instead are found among the miscellaneous "Writings" (*Ketuvim*) in the third main section of the Hebrew Bible.

- In all Christian Bibles, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are not classified as “prophetic books” but rather as “historical books.” In contrast, the “prophetic books” (including four “major prophets” and twelve separate books of the “minor prophets”) are placed at the very end of the Old Testament in Christian Bibles, although there are further differences:
 - The final section of most Protestant Bibles has Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the twelve shorter prophets.
 - Catholic Bibles contain all of the above, but also the book of Baruch and a longer version of Daniel (with two additional chapters)
 - Orthodox Christian Bibles contain the same books as Catholic versions, but they are arranged in a significantly different order.
 - For more details and a visual overview of all of the above, see my [Comparative Chart of Jewish and Christian Bibles](#).

So what? Well, the categorization of a biblical book can significantly affect how you interpret it, especially in the case of the Book of Daniel. Is this a “prophetic” book much like all the other prophets, as some Protestant Christians emphasize? Or is it somewhat “prophetic” but more accurately described as an “apocalyptic” book, as other Protestants and most Catholics maintain? Or is it not really “prophetic” at all, but rather belonging to a different literary genre that should be read differently, as most Jews agree?

Moreover, most biblical scholars emphasize that in order to interpret the writings of the biblical prophets properly, one must understand the *historical context* in which the prophets lived, since they were primarily addressing the people and political situations of their own day. To complicate matters, the canonical order of the prophetic books (how they are arranged in our Bibles) is not the same as the historical order (when they were originally written):

Era / Century BCE	Prophetic Books [with other named Prophets]
Pre-Monarchy (13th-11th Cent.)	Books of Moses, Joshua, Judges, beginning of 1 Samuel
Early Monarchy (10th Cent.)	1 & 2 Samuel, most of 1 Kings [incl. Gad, Nathan, Ahijah]
Divided Monarchy (9th Cent.)	rest of 1 & 2 Kings [esp. Elijah & Elisha]
Fall of Northern Kingdom of Israel (8th Cent.)	Hosea, Amos, Micah
Fall of Southern Kingdom of Judah (7th Cent.)	Isaiah 1-39, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Nahum
Babylonian Exile (6th Cent.)	Isaiah 40-55, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah 1-8
Post-Exilic Restoration (5th-4th Cent.)	Isaiah 56-66, Jonah, Zechariah 9-14, Obadiah, Joel, Malachi
Hellenistic Era (3rd-2nd Cent.)	Daniel 1-6 (more prophetic); Daniel 7-12 (more apocalyptic)

Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel:

In addition to the prophets who have separate biblical books named after them (and who are sometimes also mentioned in other biblical books), quite a few other people are also called “prophet” or “prophetess” in the Hebrew Bible. Many of them are *true prophets* (who speak for the God of Israel), while some are *false prophets* (who serve other gods of other nations). Moreover, whole *groups* of prophets (lit. called “the sons of the prophets”) appear in certain biblical stories. The following are some of the most important individuals referred to as “prophets” of God. Only a few of these are within the Torah, with many more examples in the Historical Books of the HB:

- **Abraham** (Gen 20:7)
- Moses’ brother **Aaron** (Exod 7:1) and their sister **Miriam** (Exod 15:20)
- *Seventy elders* in the desert, including **Eldad** and **Medad** (Num 11:25-29)
- **Moses** (Deut 34:10) and “a prophet like Moses” who is to come later (Deut 18:15-19)
- **Deborah** (Jdg 4:4), also known as a “judge”
- **Samuel** (1 Sam 3:20; 19:20; 2 Chron 35:18; etc.), also called a “seer” (1 Sam 9:11-19; 1 Chron 9:22; 26:28; 29:29)
- **Saul**, just after he was anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 10:5-13; 19:20-24)
- **Gad** (1 Sam 22:5), also called King David’s “seer” (2 Sam 24:11; 1 Chron 21:9; 29:29; 2 Chron 29:25)
- **Nathan** (2 Sam 7:2; 12:25; 1 Kings 1:8-45; 1 Chron 17:1; 29:29; 2 Chron 9:29; 29:25)
- **Ahijah** the Shilonite (1 Kgs 11:29; 14:2-18; 2 Chron 9:29)
- **Shemaiah** (1 Kgs 12:22; 2 Chron 12:5-15)
- An *anonymous old prophet* in Bethel (1 Kgs 13:11-29)
- **Jehu**, son of Hanani (1 Kgs 16:7-12; 2 Chron 19:2; 20:34)
- **Obadiah** and a hundred prophets who hide from Jezebel (1 Kgs 18:4)
- **Elijah** (1 Kgs 18:22—19:16; 2 Chron 21:12)
- **Elisha**, son of Shaphat and successor of Elijah (1 Kgs 19:16; 2 Kgs 2:3—9:1)
- **Micaiah**, son of Imlah (1 Kgs 22:8-23; 2 Chron 18:7-22)
- **Zedekiah**, son of Chenaanah (1 Kgs 22:11-25; 2 Chron 18:10-23)
- *Groups of prophets* at **Bethel** (2 Kgs 2:3), at **Jericho** (2:5-15), and associated with Elisha at **Gilgal** (2 Kgs 4—6)
- **Jonah**, son of Amittai (2 Kgs 14:25)
- **Isaiah**, son of Amoz (2 Kgs 19:2—20:14; 2 Chron 26:22; 32:20, 32)
- **Huldah**, the wife of Shallum (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chron 34:22)

- **Iddo** (2 Chron 13:22), at first called a “seer” (2 Chron 9:29; 12:15)
- **Azariah**, son of Obed (2 Chron 15:8)
- **Hanani** the “seer” (2 Chron 16:7-10; 19:2)
- **Eliezer**, son of Dodavahu (2 Chron 20:37)
- **Obed** (2 Chron 28:9)
- **Asaph** and his descendents (2 Chron 29:30; 35:15)
- **Jeduthun**, the king’s “seer” (2 Chron 35:15)
- **Jeremiah** (2 Chron 36:12)
- **Haggai** and **Zechariah**, son of Iddo (Ezra 5:1; 6:14)
- **Amos** (also called a “seer” in Amos 7:12)
- [Note: **Daniel** is never called a “prophet” in the Hebrew Bible!]

Although all of these prophets speak on behalf of God, rather than on their own authority, how they came to be prophets or when God first commissioned them for this role is only rarely narrated or alluded to in the Bible. The best know stories include:

- The call of Samuel (1 Sam 3:1-21)
- The call of Elisha (1 Kgs 19:16-21)
- The call of Amos (Amos 7:15)
- The call of Isaiah (Isa 6:1-13)
- The call of Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-10)
- The call of Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1—3:27)

False prophets, or prophets serving other gods, are sometimes also mentioned in the Bible. Several biblical texts mention explicit criteria for distinguishing true vs. false prophets (Deut 13:1-5; 18:20-22), while other texts name certain groups or individuals as false prophets:

- Prophets of Baal and/or prophets of Asherah (1 Kgs 18:19-40; 2 Kgs 10:19; Jer 2:8)
- False prophets opposed to Jeremiah (Jer 5:31; 14:13-15; etc.)

Prophecy and Prophets in the New Testament and Early Christianity:

Most of the NT references to “prophets” (mentioned 144 times in the NT, 116 of which are in the Gospels and Acts) are to the prophets of the OT, either generically as a group or often explicitly naming individual prophets (esp. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Elijah, but sometimes also Jonah, Daniel, Elisha, Joel, Moses, Samuel, and even King David!). Some NT passages speak of the role of prophets in general, such as when Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward” (Matt 10:41).

In addition to these references to the ancient Hebrew prophets, the NT also refers to certain people of its own day as “prophets,” including John the Baptist, Jesus, and many early Christian leaders, either individually or generically:

- All four Gospels use “prophet” to refer both to *John the Baptist* (Mark 11:32; Matt 21:46; Luke 1:76; 7:26; 20:6; cf. John 1:21) and to *Jesus* (Mark 6:15; 8:28; Matt 14:5; 16:14; 21:11, 46; Luke 7:16, 39; 9:19; 24:19; John 4:19; 6:14; 7:40; 9:17).
- The infancy narrative in *Luke’s Gospel* also mentions an old “prophetess” named *Anna* who frequented the Jerusalem Temple, where she encounters the Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus (Luke 2:36).
- The *Letters of Paul* mention “prophets” right after “apostles” when listing various categories of early Christian leaders (1 Cor 12:28-29; cf. 14:29-37).
- The *Acts of the Apostles* names five men as “prophets and teachers” of the church in Antioch: *Barnabas*, *Simeon* who was called Niger, *Lucius* of Cyrene, *Manaen* a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and *Saul* [i.e. Paul]” (13:1). Acts later also mentions Christian prophets named *Judas* and *Silas* (15:32) and *Agabus* (21:10), and asserts that the *four daughters of the evangelist Philip* “had the gift of prophesying” (21:8).
- The *Book of Revelation* mention saints, apostles, and/or prophets together in several passages (11:18; 16:6; 18:20-24, where the references are most likely not (or not only) to the OT prophets but mostly to early Christian leaders (this is especially clear in 22:9). Near the beginning of Revelation, in the letter to the church in Thyatira, a woman named *Jezebel* is also denounced as a false “prophetess” (Rev 2:20).

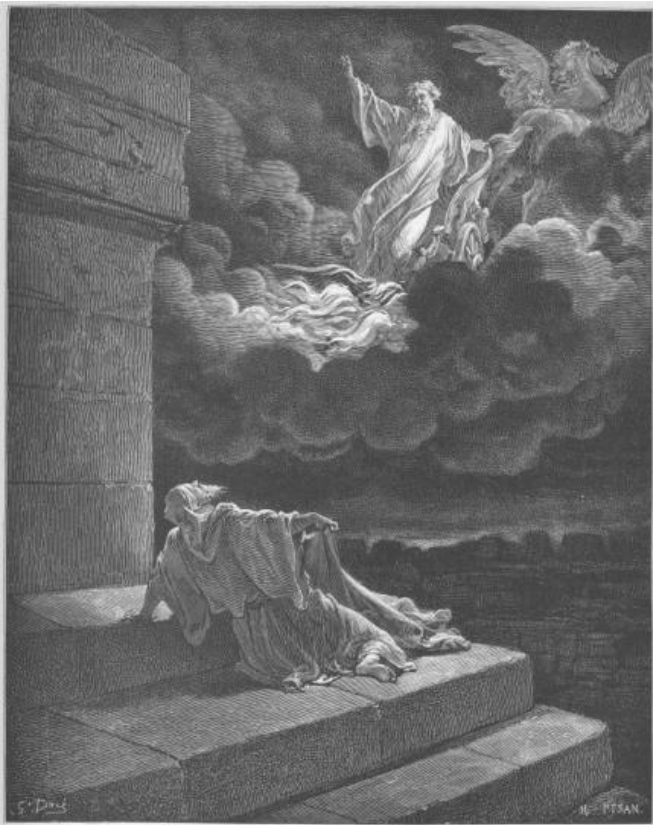
In addition to all the individuals named “prophets,” the gift of “prophecy” (Gk. προφητεία / *propheteia*) and the action of “prophesying” (Gk. προφητευσω / *propheteuso*) are very important in the life of the early Christian communities, as seen in various NT texts:

- In several letters, Paul speaks of prophecy as one of the gifts given to some Christians for the benefit of the community (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10; 13:2, 8; 14:6, 22; 1 Thess 5:20; cf. 1 Tim 1:18; 4:14).
- Paul also refers to praying and “prophesying” and other spiritual practices as normal parts of the worship services of his early Christian communities (1 Cor 11:4-5; 13:9; 14:1-40).

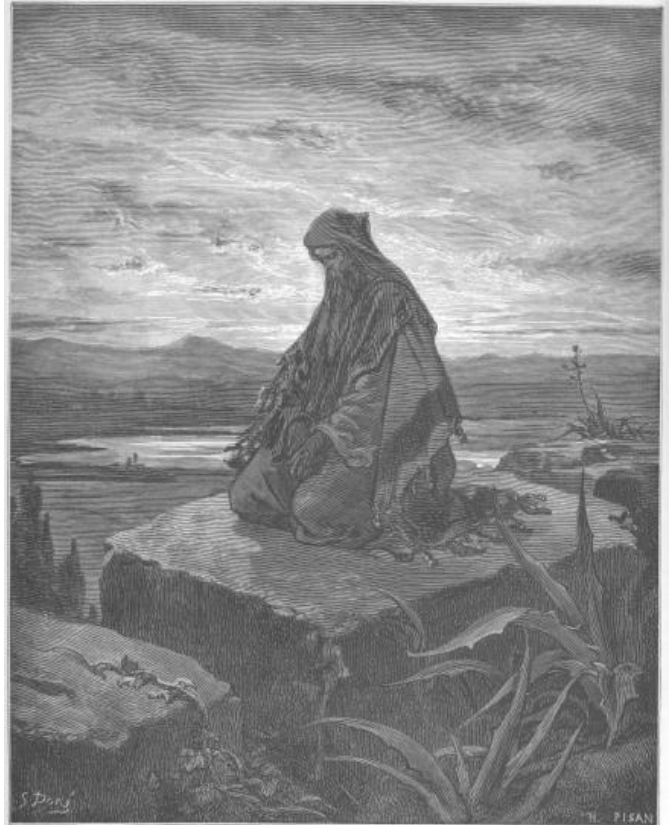
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Kings and Prophets of the Hebrew Bible – Historical Overview

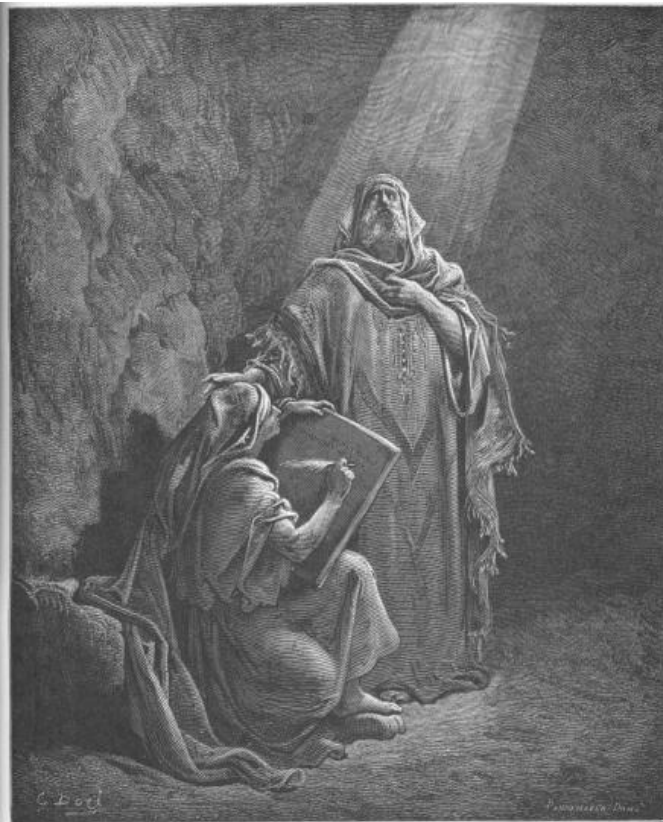
Period	Northern Kings	Northern Prophets	Southern Kings	Southern Prophets
United Kingdom: under Kings Saul, David, Solomon (c. 1030 – 931) <i>prophets Samuel, Gad, and Nathan</i>				
Divided Kingdom	Jeroboam (931-910) Nadab (910-909) Baasha (909-886) Elah (886) Zimri (885) Omri (885-874) Ahab (874-853) Jehoram (852-841) Jehu (841-814) Jehoahaz (814-798) Jehoash (798-782) Jeroboam II (793-753) Zechariah (753-752) Shallum (752) Menahem (752-742) Pekahiah (742-740) Pekah (752-732) Hoshea (732-722)	<i>Ahijah</i> <i>Jehu</i> Elijah <i>Obadiah</i> Elisha Amos Hosea	Rehoboam (931-913) Abijah (913) Asa (911-870) Jehoshaphat (873-848) Jehoram (853-841) Queen Athaliah (841-835) Joash (835-796) Amaziah (796-767) Uzziah (790-740) Jotham (750-731) Ahaz (735-715) Hezekiah (715-686) Manasseh (695-642) Amon (642-640) Josiah (640-609) Jehoahaz (609) Jehoiakim (609-597) Jehoiachin (597) Zedekiah (597-586)	<i>Shemaiah</i> Micaiah <i>Zedekiah</i> Isaiah Joel Micah <i>Huldah</i> Jeremiah Zephaniah Habakkuk Obadiah
Babylonian Exile				2 nd Isaiah Jonah Ezekiel
Post-exilic Prophets			Zerubbabel, governor Nehemiah, governor	3 rd Isaiah Nahum Haggai Zechariah Malachi
Hellenistic Era: [Daniel – not among the “Prophets” of the HB, but rather the later “Writings”]				



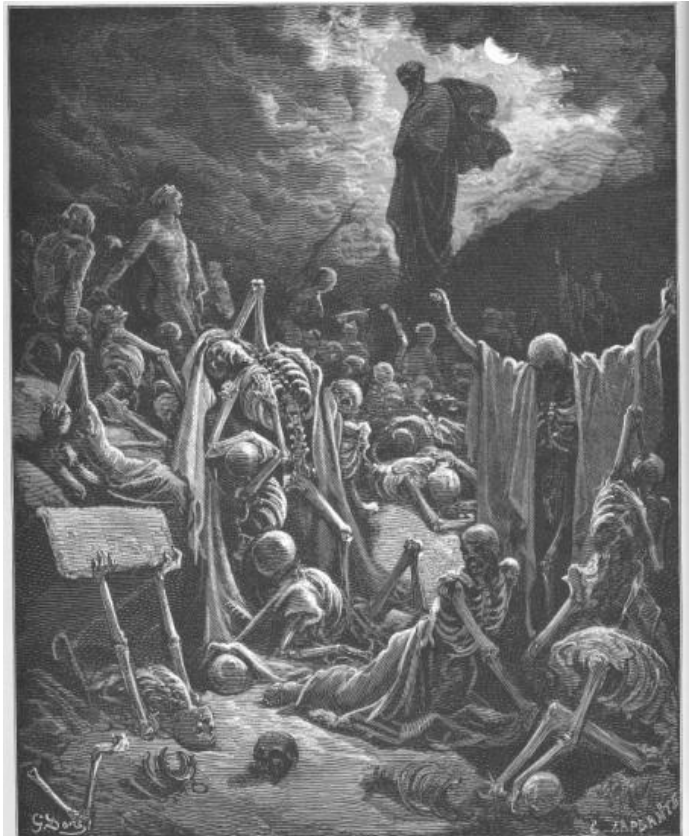
ELIJAH TAKEN UP TO HEAVEN IN A CHARIOT OF FIRE
 Behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more. . . . (I Kings 2:11, 12) (2:11)



ISAIAH
 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. . . . (Isaiah 6: 8)



BARUCH WRITING JEREMIAH'S PROPHECIES
 Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah; and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord, which he had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book. . . . (Jeremiah 36: 4)



THE VISION OF THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES
 And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. . . . (Ezekiel 37: 3)