

Chapter 4

The Prophets and the Hope for a Messiah

KEY WORD

prophet

We all get on the wrong path of life sometimes. For some people, the wrong path means holding on to anger and resentment. For other people, the wrong path could mean telling little lies that turn into bigger and bigger lies. And for others, the wrong path could be as serious as underage drinking, illegal use of drugs, cheating on exams, or inappropriate use of social media.

What kind of friend would you want to have if you start going down a wrong path of life? A friend who is brave and honest enough to tell you that what you are doing is wrong and that you need to change? Or a friend who pretends that everything is okay? The friend who is honest enough to tell you that you need to change is a true friend indeed. That friend loves you so much that they are willing to risk your friendship by telling you a truth that you need to hear, even if you do not want to hear it.

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CONNECT with GOD

Lord, help me go into the world to care for those who are oppressed and needy, to speak out against injustice, and to proclaim the Good News. Grant me the gifts of the prophets who have gone before me.

Grant me courage.
Moses, pray for me.

Grant me humility.
Jeremiah, pray for me.

Grant me trust.
Isaiah, pray for me.

All you holy people, pray for me! Amen.

The prophets were the true friends of the Chosen People, the people with whom God made a special agreement with in the Old Testament. When God called the prophets to tell the Israelites to change their lives, they bravely spoke the truth. Many times this caused trouble for the prophets because the kings and the people did not want to change. The prophets were ridiculed and imprisoned. Some even had their lives threatened. Yet they were faithful in speaking God's Word because of their great love for God and his people.

The Non-Writing Prophets

A **prophet** is someone who speaks for God. In the earliest record of our faith, there was no need for prophets because God spoke directly to people like Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham. But as history progressed, God spoke directly to special individuals only—the prophets, who then carried his message to his people. Moses was the first of these special people. Joshua was another, followed by the judges. All these people can be considered prophets.

When Israel was ruled by kings, the prophets were an important part of history. It seemed that the more the kings focused on the things that kings do—fighting wars, building forts and cities, making laws—the more they forgot their covenant, or agreement with God. So God kept sending prophets to remind the kings to keep their promises to him. Today we can read the words of some of these prophets in their books, found in the fourth section of the Old Testament. But some prophets who preached during the time of the kings do not have their own books. We learn about them in the historical books of the Old Testament. Those prophets are called the non-writing prophets. Let's take a closer look at the most famous non-writing prophets, Elijah and Elisha.



prophet ➡ A person God chooses to speak his message of salvation. In the Bible, primarily a communicator of a divine message of repentance and hope to the Chosen People.

We read about Elijah in the First Book of Kings. God sent Elijah to speak to King Ahab. Ahab was a king of Israel, the northern kingdom. He was one of the worst kings we learn about in the Bible. Ahab married a foreign woman, Jezebel, who became queen. Ahab and Jezebel worshipped Baal and Asherah, a false god and goddess (see 1 Kings 16:29–33). This is what the Bible says about Ahab: “Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than any of the kings of Israel before him” (1 Kings 16:33). So God sent Elijah to confront this evil king and queen.

To prove to Ahab, Jezebel, and the people that the Lord is the true God, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest (see 1 Kings, chapter 18). In the contest, Elijah and the prophets of Baal each made altars and piled them with wood and a sacrifice. Then they each prayed to their god to light the fire. The prophets of Baal prayed and prayed, but nothing happened. Then Elijah prayed, and the Lord incinerated the sacrifice, the wood, and the stones of the altar! No one could doubt whose god was real. Elijah also performed several miracles, including bringing a boy back to life. You can read about Elijah in 1 Kings, chapters 17–19, and 2 Kings, chapters 1–2.

Elijah recruited Elisha to be his helper (see 1 Kings 19:19–21). At the end of his life, Elijah was taken into Heaven in a chariot of fire. Then Elisha took Elijah’s cloak to wear (see 2 Kings 2:1–8), symbolizing that Elijah’s role as prophet passed to Elisha. So Elisha became a mighty prophet who performed many miracles.

Through the power of God, Elisha multiplied olive oil for a poor widow, multiplied loaves of bread to feed hungry prophets, and brought a dead boy back to life. (Elisha’s miracles may remind you of Jesus’



good
to KNOW

The most reluctant prophet in the Bible is Jonah. When God called him to go to Nineveh with his message, Jonah ran in the opposite direction!

miracles.) You can read about Elisha in 2 Kings, chapters 2–8. Through the words and actions of Elijah and Elisha, we learn that God punishes evil people and takes care of those who are poor and suffering.

The Classical Prophets

In the Old Testament, the words and actions of sixteen prophets are recorded in sixteen books named after them. These prophets are sometimes called the classical prophets or the writing prophets. Let's look at one minor prophet, Amos, and one major prophet, Ezekiel. (See “Check This Out!” for an explanation of these terms.)

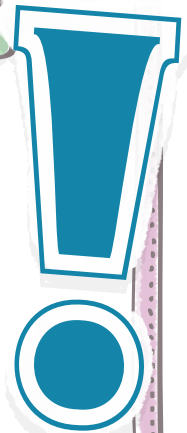
Amos was the first of the classical prophets. He prophesied in Israel almost eight hundred years before the birth of Christ. We know little about the life of Amos. He was not a full-time prophet; rather, he was a shepherd and tree pruner (see Amos 7:14–15).

God called Amos from his simple life to challenge the injustice in Israelite society. During this time, both wealthy and poor people lived in Israel. But the wealthy were not sharing their abundance with the poor. On the contrary, they were cheating the poor of what little they had. When the rich grew richer and the poor grew poorer, this created a social and economic gap. This gap was a source of scandal and

CHECK *this* OUT

Major Prophets and Minor Prophets

The Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are quite long, so these three prophets are called the major prophets. The other prophets, whose books are shorter, are called the minor prophets. These labels do not mean that the major prophets are more important than the minor prophets. They only describe the length of the books of the prophets.



worked against social justice, equality, human dignity, and peace. It was an injustice that went against God's covenant with his Chosen People.

Amos was a clever preacher. In chapter 1 of the Book of Amos, we read how he condemned the sinfulness of foreign nations. So his listeners might have been thinking, Oh good, he's not talking about us. But by chapter 2, we can see that Amos began to condemn the sins of the people of Israel. He did not hold back at all:

Thus says the LORD:
For three crimes of Israel, and now four—
I will not take it back—
Because they hand over the just for silver,
and the poor for a pair of sandals;
They trample the heads of the destitute
into the dust of the earth,
and force the lowly out of the way.

(Verses 6–7)

As terrible as the sins of the other nations were, God considered the sins of Israel even worse because they had the advantage of their covenant relationship with him. Amos continued his prophecies, predicting the destruction of Israel (see Amos, chapter 6). His words were mostly words of condemnation and doom. But his book concludes with hope-filled words, saying that God would rebuild the nation after its destruction (see Amos 9:11–15).



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The biblical prophets called the people to return to God when they began to worship false gods and disobey God's Law. Then during the Exile, the prophets also reassured the people that God had not abandoned them. If the prophets were alive today, what societal situations do you think God would call them to address? What false idols would God tell them to warn us against?

Ezekiel lived about two hundred years after Amos. He was a priest in the first group of people taken to Babylon during the Exile. He did all his prophesying from this foreign country. Jerusalem and the Temple had not yet been destroyed, so Ezekiel's early preaching was a warning that the final end of the kingdom was coming. To get his point across, God had Ezekiel perform symbolic acts. Ezekiel had to lay on his side for 430 days to symbolize the number of years the people of Israel and Judah would be punished. He had to bake his food on cow dung to symbolize that the Israelites would eat unclean food during the Exile (see Ezekiel 4:4–15). He even had to cut off all the hair on his head and then burn a third of it, chop up a third, and scatter a third in the wind. This symbolized how the Chosen People would be killed and scattered by the Babylonians (see 5:1–12).

The Book of Ezekiel isn't all doom and gloom though. The last third of the book contains many hopeful prophecies that God would rescue his people after their punishment. Ezekiel described God as the Good Shepherd who would rescue his sheep after the destruction (see



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Ezekiel 34:11–31). In another famous prophecy, Ezekiel saw dry bones coming back to life:

[God] said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel! They are saying, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off.’ . . . You shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and make you come up out of them, my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may come to life, and I will settle you in your land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.” (37:11,13-14)

As a priest, Ezekiel was very interested in the Temple in Jerusalem. The last chapters of his book describe a vision that the Temple will be rebuilt. Because the Temple is a symbol of God’s presence with his Chosen People, this vision is a promise that God has not abandoned his people.



PRAYING TOGETHER

The Prophets Today

In our liturgy, the prophets still speak the Word of God to us today. During Advent, we often read the beautiful messianic prophecies of the prophet Isaiah. Other prophets we hear during Advent include Jeremiah, Baruch, and Micah. During the Sundays of Lent, we hear the words of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and, during the Easter Vigil, the six readings include the words of three prophets: Isaiah, Baruch, and Ezekiel. During Ordinary Time, we read many different sections of the Old Testament, including the prophets.

The only time we do not read from the Old Testament at Mass is during the Easter season. At that time, the first reading is from the Acts of the Apostles, which recounts how the Apostles spread the Good News of Christ’s Resurrection, which was the fulfillment of the hopes of all the prophets.

LIVING the GOSPEL

Live the Prophetic Mission

Whom does God call to be a prophet today? You! By virtue of your Baptism, you are called to participate in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly ministry of Christ. That means you don't need to be an ordained priest to share the Good News with the world. You can witness to Christ through every word and action, in every circumstance in which you find yourself.

How can you be a prophet to your community today? What messages about faithfulness to God's Law do your friends, family, or school need to hear? What social causes need you to speak out? Whom can you reassure about God's love amid suffering? Take some time today to pray for the courage to live your faith publicly and to share your faith with others.

The Hope for a Messiah

Through their words and actions, the prophets prepared the Chosen People for the coming of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. They reminded the people to show their faith in God by following the Law and the covenant. They told the people about God's love and forgiveness. They urged the people to take responsibility for their actions and to ask God to forgive their sins. These are teachings that Jesus Christ emphasized and fulfilled. But the most important way the prophets prepared people for the coming of Christ was by telling them that God would send a savior, who would also be called the Messiah. *Messiah* is a Hebrew word that means "anointed one" (the Greek word *Christ* means the same thing).

Let's look at one prophet, the prophet Isaiah, to see what he revealed about the Messiah. Isaiah was a famous writing prophet who lived during the period when the Assyrians were invading Israel and Judah. Isaiah offered many prophecies that were fulfilled in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. For example, the Book of Isaiah foretold that a virgin would give birth to a child named Emmanuel, meaning "God is with us" (see Isaiah 7:14). Isaiah also explained that the Messiah would be filled with the Lord's Spirit for his public ministry: "To bring good news to the afflicted, / to bind up the brokenhearted, / To proclaim liberty to the captives, / . . . To comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:1–2). And several passages in Isaiah describe a servant who would be beaten, insulted, and finally put to death for the forgiveness of our sins (see 50:4–9, 52:13–53:12).

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As we know, all these prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He was the Son of God who became man and was born of a virgin, Mary. The angel Gabriel told Mary that Jesus would be called Emmanuel (the Son of God) (see Luke 1:34–38). The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his Baptism (see Mark 1:10). In fact, Jesus began his public ministry by reading that same passage of Isaiah 61:1–2 in the synagogue, concluding, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). And we now understand that Jesus was the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah—the servant who was beaten, insulted, and crucified for the forgiveness of our sins (see Mark 15:16–20, Matthew 26:26–28, Luke 24:44–47).

It is amazing to see how prophetic books like Isaiah clearly described Jesus and his mission. Through them, God prepared the Chosen People for the completion of his plan of salvation, through the life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ.



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roots of faith

Prophetic Missionaries and Saints in Latin America

Beginning in the 1500s, Europeans sailed to Latin America to colonize the lands and conquer the Indigenous peoples. They were accompanied by missionaries who sought to share the Gospel of Christ with the Indigenous peoples. Many missionaries cared for the poor and sick, and they worked to defend and protect the Indigenous peoples as well as the African slaves the Europeans were transporting to the New World.

Saint Martin de Porres, the illegitimate son of a freed slave and a Spanish noble, personally experienced the cruel treatment of the lower classes in his native Peru. He dedicated his life to caring for people who were poor and mistreated in Peru. Saint Peter Claver, a Spanish missionary working in Colombia, was horrified by the plight of African slaves who were brought to Cartagena in unspeakable conditions. He tended to their physical needs, but he also actively and publicly defended their rights. And Bartolomé de las Casas, another Dominican friar and Spanish missionary, was an outspoken defender of the Indigenous peoples who were suffering at the hands of European colonizers. His message was simple: You will win over many more converts to Christ if you treat them with respect and dignity.

Can you think of other saints and holy people who, like the prophets, called for justice in their societies?

Chapter 4

The Prophets and the Hope for a Messiah

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the young people identify the role of the prophets in salvation history. The prophets can be grouped into two categories: the writing prophets and the non-writing prophets. The prophetic mission is to speak for God, calling God's people to be faithful to their covenant with him. The prophets reminded God's people that faithfulness brings restoration, redemption, and salvation—a promise that was ultimately completely fulfilled through Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Background for the Catechist

What is your understanding of a prophet? Is a prophet equivalent to a sort of fortune-teller for God? Do you think a prophet primarily points to the future or to the past? The answer is somewhere in between.

God's people entered into a covenant with him in which he agreed to be their God and they agreed to be his people. God promised that if his people obeyed the law of the covenant, they would be greatly blessed and prosper. However, if they disobeyed his covenant, they would most certainly encounter suffering, difficulty, and trial. So when the Israelites found themselves on the brink of civil war, attacked by other nations, or in exile in a foreign land, the prophets reminded them that they must repent, turn back to God, and obey God's commandments. In this regard, the prophets pointed backward. They pointed back to the commandments and the requirements of the covenant.

The good news for those who did these things was the certain hope for God's deliverance. The prophets reminded the people that God is always faithful and would restore his people—regardless of how far they had fallen away. Some prophets promised a future redeemer, and the Israelites began looking forward to the day that God's promises would be completely fulfilled. In this regard, prophets point toward the future—a future that we are now living in!

Catechist's Prayer

Lord, give me the courage I need to speak what is true in the varying circumstances of my day. Help me speak this truth with gentleness, compassion, hope, and creativity so that the young people might hear the voice of God through the words you have given me. Grant this request through Christ Jesus, the Lord. Amen.

Teaching Tip

To bring your study of the prophets into the present, help the young people see that through Baptism, we share in the prophetic ministry of Christ, calling others back into a relationship with God through our words and actions. We challenge others to avoid sin and encourage them to have hope in the saving power of God. Like the prophet Jeremiah, the young people might protest that they are too young. Gently encourage them to have faith in God and to share their faith with others.

Getting Ready

Connect! Bringing Faith to Life, pages 262–273

Core Understanding

God spoke directly to the prophets, and they prepared the Chosen People for the coming of Jesus Christ—the Messiah and Son of God.

Materials Needed

- Bibles, one for each participant
- index cards, one for each participant

Key Word

- prophet

Catechism Pillar

- The Creed

Catechism Connection

- Paragraphs 64, 201, 218, 522, 762, 1964, 2581, 2595 (Role and Mission of Prophets in Israel)
- Paragraphs 522, 555, 702 (Announcing the Messiah)

Opening Prayer (5 minutes)

1. **Make** the Sign of the Cross, and lead everyone in saying, “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.” *(Pause.)*
2. **Pray** the following:
 - God, you call all people to hear your voice, transform their lives, and bravely tell others about you. Help me, Lord, hear your voice and speak your truth in a way that others can hear it and understand it. Help me be the courageous prophet our world needs. Amen.
3. **Invite** the participants to offer any special intentions for which they would like to pray.
4. **Close** with the Sign of the Cross.

Engage Activity (10 minutes)

1. **Engage** the young people’s experience by brainstorming answers to the following questions:
 - What is a true friend? Give me your answers as quickly as you can, and I will write them where all can see. *(someone who likes you, who likes to be with you, who does things with you, who tells you the truth and doesn’t lie to you, who helps you with homework and your chores, etc.)*

- Let's think about this: a true friend tells you the truth. Can you think of a time when a true friend had to tell you a hard truth, something hard to hear, or you had to tell a friend something hard to hear? Can you give me an example?
- As we learn about the prophets, let's remember that they were true friends of God and true friends of the people of Israel. And they are our friends today too.

Core Content (15 minutes)

1. **Engage** the young people in a review of pages 264–272 in the *Connect!* book by dividing the material into sections, such as the following:
 - “The Non-Writing Prophets,” pages 264–266
 - “The Classical Prophets,” pages 266–269
 - “The Hope for a Messiah,” pages 270–272
2. **Assign** each young person one of the sections of material. They can read silently to themselves or gather in small groups with others who share the same assigned material. If opting for small-group reading, ask one person from each group to read the material aloud.
3. **Invite** volunteers to report key ideas from each section of the material to the large group. Be prepared to expand on the reports as necessary to ensure key concepts are covered.
4. **Write** the names of the prophets where all can see as they are mentioned in the reports: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Ezekiel, Isaiah.

Teaching Tip

If collaborative reading and reporting is not the best choice for your group, consider using one of the following options or another of your choosing:

- **At-home reading option:** Invite the young people to read the chapter prior to the session.
- **In-session individual reading option:** Ask the participants to read the chapter during the session, or read it aloud to them.
- **Presentation option:** Give a short presentation that incorporates the key points listed on the handout “Chapter 4 Summary” on page 40 of this guide.

Core Learning Activity (20 minutes)

It Was Foretold

Objective: To discover some Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ.

1. **Post** the following Scripture verses where all the participants can see them:
 - Isaiah 7:14
 - Isaiah 50:4–9
 - Isaiah 52:13–53:12

- Isaiah 61:1–2
 - Matthew 12:15–21
 - Matthew 26:31
 - Mark 1:1–3
 - Luke 4:18–21
 - John 19:23–24
 - John 19:31–37
2. **Arrange** the young people into small groups of three or four. Distribute the Bibles. Tell the participants that some of the posted Scripture passages are from the Book of Isaiah. The other passages are from the Gospels, which are quoting Old Testament prophets.
 3. **Direct** the groups to look up each of the posted Scripture passages and to read them together. (Or give each group just a few passages to look up.) If the verse is from Isaiah, they should discuss how it relates to Jesus' life. If it is from a New Testament Gospel, they should discuss why the Gospel author applied this quote from an Old Testament prophet to Jesus. They should take notes on each passage.
 4. **Ask** each group to share their findings, so that each passage is discussed. Conclude by reading aloud Luke 24:44–47, in which Jesus explains how the prophecies of the Old Testament had come true in his life. Make the point that through these amazing prophecies, God was preparing his Chosen People for the coming of Jesus Christ. These prophecies helped them better understand Jesus' saving mission and purpose.

Session Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

1. **Invite** volunteers to share key things they learned during the session. Ensure that the following points are made:
 - The prophets spoke God's truth to Israel.
 - The prophets prepared the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.
2. **Distribute** the index cards. Instruct the participants to write the following question on their cards:
 - How can I be more like a prophet in my life this week?
3. **Direct** the young people to take the cards home and refer to them a few times during the week. Ask them to answer the question for themselves or to share their cards with friends or family members and discuss their answers with them.

Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

1. **Direct** the participants to find "Connect with God" on page 263 in their books. Instruct the group to pray the first paragraph aloud together. Choose four volunteers to read the first sentence of the next four petitions, and ask the group to respond with the second line. (In the last petition, the reader should stop at the comma, and the group should respond with the remainder of the petition.)
2. **Close** by making the Sign of the Cross.

Optional Activities

Materials Needed

- poster board, one sheet for each small group of three or four
- markers

Schoolhouse Prophet (20 minutes)

Objective: To enable the young people to identify with the role of the prophet.

1. **Explain** in these or similar words:
 - The word *prophet* comes from a word that means “a mouthpiece” for God! God uses the mind and the mouth of the prophet to speak what God wants his people to hear—and often these messages are things that many people do not really want to hear. God speaks powerfully through young people as he calls them to be his prophets too. Let’s see if you’re willing to be a prophet!
2. **Arrange** the participants into small groups of three or four. Give each group a sheet of poster board and some markers.
3. **Instruct** the young people to imagine that they are a group of prophets evaluating some aspect of their world—maybe their schools, their towns, their churches, or the country as a whole. They are to see their world through God’s eyes and allow God to speak through them with words of challenge, mercy, and love. On their poster board, they are to write down three things:
 - **A problem they see.** This problem should be something happening that is not in keeping with the will or Law of God.
 - **God’s response to the problem.** What do they imagine God would say to people about how they need to change to address the problem?
 - **God’s promise for obedience.** What good would happen if people changed their ways in response to God’s command?
4. **Conclude** by asking the groups to share their prophetic statements. If there are injustices that you, as their catechist, are able to bring to the attention of administrators or public officials for positive change, then do it! The young people will truly appreciate the value in the prophetic voice.

Prophetic Encouragement (15 minutes)

Materials Needed

- index cards, three for each participant

Objective: To participate in the prophetic work of offering words of consolation and encouragement to those who need them.

1. **Ask** the young people to read “Living the Gospel” on page 270 in their books. Remind them that prophets didn’t speak just doom and gloom but also offered hope and reassurance to God’s people about God’s faithfulness and love amid their suffering.

2. **Explain** in these or similar words:
 - Prophets speak the words of God—and not just warnings but also words of help, hope, and reassurance. God also calls us to speak his words to others in need. Everywhere we look—globally, nationally, locally, and even at this school and in your families—there are people who need words of hope and encouragement. Today, we are going to think about someone we know who is in need of these words.
3. **Distribute** three index cards to each participant, and ask the young people to think about two or three people they know who could really use some words of encouragement today. They may write to friends, family, school personnel, or others. The people do not need to be close friends. On their index cards, the participants are to write encouraging messages to the people they have thought of.
4. **Set** the tone for thoughtful reflection, and encourage the young people to speak from the heart to those they love.
5. **Collect** the cards at the end of the session for review if you wish, and then return them when finished. Encourage the young people to deliver their messages to the people in need of God’s consolation.

What Is a Prophet? A Review

Materials Needed

- the video “The Old Testament Prophets (Major and Minor)” (4:19), available on YouTube

Objective: To review the definition of a prophet, the meaning of the prophetic message, and the biblical division into major and minor prophets.

1. **Introduce** the video “The Old Testament Prophets (Major and Minor)” as a short review of chapter 4, “The Prophets and the Hope for a Messiah,” and then show the video.
2. **Lead** the group in brainstorming various parts of the video they remember, even if they are fragmentary. These might be classifications of prophets, names of prophets, the meaning of the prophetic message, and so on.
3. **Write** the responses where all can see, and add your own recollections to make the responses more complete, as needed. You may want to note the video’s comparison of the prophetic message (“Love God, love your neighbor”) to the Ten Commandments, and also to Jesus’ articulation of the Greatest Commandment in Matthew 22:34–40: “The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:40).
4. **Ask** the group to scan chapter 4 again and see if there is anything in the book that should be added to the list to make the notations more complete.
5. **Conclude** by reminding the young people that the prophets were “mouth-pieces for God” and gave their lives to bring God’s Word to his people.

Chapter 4 Summary

The Prophets and the Hope for a Messiah

1. The prophets faithfully spoke God's Word to God's people.
2. God sent prophets to his people to remind them to keep their covenant with him.
3. Two famous non-writing prophets were Elijah and Elisha. Elisha was Elijah's helper and took on Elijah's role as prophet after Elijah was taken up to Heaven.
4. The writing prophets are also called the classical prophets. These are divided into major prophets and minor prophets.
5. Amos is an example of a minor prophet, and Ezekiel is an example of a major prophet.
6. The prophets prepared God's people for the coming of the Messiah.
7. Isaiah is a major prophet, and the prophecies about the Messiah found in the Book of Isaiah were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

