

THE MAJOR PROPHETS

Jeremiah 1

This is another background lesson and the important thing, except for Primaries, is to see that the classes know who are meant by the Major Prophets, where their books come in the Bible, what their position was with reference to the history concerned, and what the function of a prophet was. Also essential are the meaning of the word *prophet*, the fact that the prophets spoke by inspiration, and something of the various types of inspiration.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord has never left men without sufficient truth to guide them. A prophet is a person who “speaks for” God. The whole Word is prophecy.

The Lord will always help us to speak the truth in the right way if we are looking to Him instead of to ourselves for knowledge and power.

Fruit represents the good which comes from obeying the truth.

Notes for Parents

In our Bible the Prophets are the last seventeen books of the Old Testament. There are four Major and twelve Minor Prophets, “Major” and “Minor” referring to the length of their books. Two books, Jeremiah and Lamentations, are attributed to Jeremiah. A prophet is one who speaks for the Lord. Again and again—more than fifty times—Jeremiah says “the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.” The Lord has always spoken to men through prophets, giving them the divine truth which they needed to correct their mistakes and lead them to heavenly happiness. In Luke 1:70 Zacharias says, “As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began.”

All the prophets, however, were not given messages for people of all time. Only a few were chosen for this work, and the Lord provided that their messages should be preserved and recorded in the Bible.

The four major prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. All of them prophesied to the people of Judah. We have seen that Isaiah lived in the time of king Hezekiah. Jeremiah lived about a century later in the last days of the kingdom of Judah. He prophesied its fall and lived to see his prophecies literally fulfilled. The book called Lamentations was written through him after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Ezekiel and Daniel were both among the captives carried away to Babylon, and they prophesied to their people there. But all four of these prophets have a message for us within the message which they delivered to the people of their day.

Primary

The chapter from Jeremiah contains enough “story” to interest the children. Be sure they understand what a prophet is. The teacher will probably not want to read the whole chapter in class. He should look it over beforehand and mark the sections he wants to read. Follow the outline given in the notes. Stress the fact that there were many prophets but that the Lord chose only a few of them for the writing of the Word.

Long ago, in the days when the Bible was being written, the Lord used to choose certain men to speak for Him to the people. Sometimes He appeared to them in dreams and told them what to say. Sometimes He spoke from inside their minds and they heard His voice although they did not see Him. But they knew that they must speak just the words He told them to speak. It was His message they were to give, and not anything they made up themselves. These men were called prophets.

You remember that Samuel was a prophet as well as a Judge.

Do you remember the names of the two great prophets who tried to save the kingdom of Israel?

Who was the prophet who was sent to Hezekiah?

Sometimes the prophets were told also to write the Lord's words in books so that people could always have them to read, and that is the way the Word was given to us. Everyone who wrote part of the Word was a prophet, but we do not know the names of all of them. However, we do know some of them. There were four great prophets who wrote quite long books. They were Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and because their books were long they were called the "Major" Prophets.

Jeremiah was a prophet in Judah about a hundred years after Isaiah.

In whose reign did he begin to prophesy?

What did Jeremiah say when the Lord first called him?

What did the Lord tell him?

What two visions did the Lord then give him?

Judah was near its end.

The people had become so bad that almost all of Jeremiah's prophecies were reproofs and warnings.

The people hated Jeremiah because all he had to tell them was bad news.

But he was the only prophet who lived to see his prophecies fulfilled.

He saw Judah taken captive by Babylon, and Jerusalem and the temple destroyed.

After that he wrote the book of Lamentations, which consists of five poems of mourning.

Some of the poorer people, whom the king of Babylon had left in the land, fled to Egypt.

They took Jeremiah with them against his will.

Some of the last chapters of the book of Jeremiah were written in Egypt.

The other two Major Prophets were Ezekiel and Daniel.

They were both among those carried away to Babylon, and they prophesied in captivity.

Junior

The Juniors should learn the names of the four Major Prophets and be able to find them quickly in the Bible. Have them look up the Bible references given in their notes and study a map to find the geographical location of various enemies mentioned in the book of Jeremiah. The story of Jeremiah's call and its consequences to him will interest the class.

What is a prophet?

What great Judge was also a prophet?

What prophet was sent to Ahab?

What prophet followed him?

Who are the four Major Prophets?

Where have we learned about Isaiah?

Jeremiah was also a prophet in Judah. He lived about a century after Isaiah in the last days of the kingdom of Judah.

In whose reign did Jeremiah begin to prophesy?

What did he say when the Lord called him?

What did the Lord tell him?

In verse 10 what opposite things is Jeremiah called to do?

This expresses the work of a prophet. The prophet speaks for the Lord, and the Lord's desire is to help each one of us to build a heavenly character, but this cannot be done except as the bad, selfish things in us are rooted out and destroyed. All the prophets had a message from the Lord for the people of their time, but what they were commanded to write down was also for all people in all times.

What was the first vision Jeremiah had?

Read Numbers 17:1-8. This incident happened during the wilderness journey. You remember that Aaron was the first high priest of the Jews. The people had been rebelling against Moses and Aaron, and the Lord gave them this sign to show that Aaron was really His minister. The almond was a symbol of goodness from the Lord, and the almond rod the symbol of truth from the Lord which leads to that goodness. So now the Lord shows Jeremiah a "rod of an almond tree" and tells him that it means that His Word will accomplish His purposes. Read Isaiah 55:11.

What was Jeremiah's second vision?

What did the Lord tell him it meant?

What did the Lord promise Jeremiah?

The Lord kept His promise. Jeremiah was faithful to his task all his life, and because the people of Judah had become so evil, they did not want to listen and they hated Jeremiah and tried in every way to get rid of him. They beat him, and put him in the stocks

and in prison, and kept him in a muddy pit with nothing to eat. But the Lord kept him alive and saved him each time. Jeremiah was the only one of the prophets who lived to see his prophecies fulfilled. Judah was taken captive by Babylon, and Jerusalem and the temples were destroyed. The book of Lamentations, which consists in the Hebrew of five poems of mourning, was written through Jeremiah to express the tragedy of such a fall. All the great men of Judah as well as many of the others were carried away captive to Babylon. Only the “poor” of the land were left to care for the fields and vineyards. Jeremiah told them to stay in the land and be patient, but many were afraid to stay and fled to Egypt, and they took Jeremiah with them against his will. Chapters 43 and 44 and probably some of the other later chapters of the book were written in Egypt. It is believed that Jeremiah died in Egypt. Chapters 46 to 51 are largely devoted to prophecies of the destruction of the enemies which had overcome Judah: Babylon, Egypt, the Philistines, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Kedar, and Elam, and the cities of Damascus and Hazor. Babylon, of course, was the great conqueror, but the constant harrying by the others had weakened Judah. If we think of the land of Canaan as the “promised land,” heaven or a heavenly character, we can see that all these enemies are pictures of the bad things in us which destroy heavenly character. The two great enemies are Assyria—which conquered Israel— and Babylon. Assyria as an enemy pictures our reasoning power when it is used to defend our own desires, and Babylon pictures the selfish love of getting our own way. The other enemies are all lesser evils which attack us from time to time and undermine our resistance.

The other two Major Prophets, Ezekiel and Daniel, prophesied from their captivity in Babylon. The four Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are called “Major” because more of their prophecies are preserved in the Word than of any of the twelve “Minor” Prophets. The books of the Minor Prophets are equally inspired.



Intermediate

The interpretation of the two visions in the chapter is important for this class as well as the study of the mission of all the prophets of the Word not only to their own time but to us in our lives.

In our lesson on Hezekiah we made the acquaintance of the great prophet Isaiah. The Lord had always sent prophets to carry His messages to mankind. A prophet is one who “speaks for” someone, especially for God. And because many of God’s messages have concerned the things which would happen in the future as a result of what men were doing, we have come to think of a prophet as one who foretells the future.

Verse 10 of our chapter for today, in which the Lord gives Jeremiah his commission, expresses the true work of a prophet. It has two sides: “to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy and to throw down” evil, and “to build, and to plant” good. The rooting out and throwing down must come before the building and planting, because we all have so many selfish feelings and wrong thoughts which stand in the way of the growth of the heavenly character which the Lord wants us to have.

There were four “Major” Prophets, so called only because more of their prophecies were preserved in the Word than of any of the twelve “Minor” Prophets. All four prophesied within a period of about two hundred and fifty years and to the people of the kingdom of Judah, but the last two, Ezekiel and Daniel, prophesied from captivity in Babylon. The books of these last two, as well as that of Isaiah, are full of prophecies of the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of true worship of the Lord. These prophecies brought comfort and hope to the few good people who remained faithful to the Lord through the dark days of the fall and captivity of Judah.

The book of Jeremiah is almost entirely given to condemnation and warning, although he, too, has a few prophecies of the restoration, such as we find in 23:3-8, 30:1-3, and 33:6-18. Jeremiah, as we learn from our chapter for today, was first called by the Lord in the reign of king Josiah, who was the last king of Judah to

attempt reforms. During the reigns of the four kings who succeeded Josiah, a period of less than twenty-five years, conditions became rapidly worse, until Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon finally destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and carried most of the Jews away to Babylon. Jeremiah lived through this period. By the favor of Nebuchadnezzar he was allowed to remain in his home along with the “poor” of the land who were left to take care of the fields and vineyards. He counseled them to stay at home and be patient, but a large number of them were afraid and insisted on fleeing to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them against his will. Chapters 43 and 44 and probably others of his later prophecies were written in Egypt. The book of Lamentations, which in the Hebrew consists of five remarkable poems, was also written through Jeremiah to express the mourning over the loss of goodness which is pictured by the captivity of Judah. Jeremiah is believed to have died in Egypt.

In our chapter two visions are given to Jeremiah, the vision of “a rod of an almond tree” and the vision of “a seething pot” with its face toward the north. These are both explained to Jeremiah by the Lord. Of the almond rod the Lord says, “for I will hasten my word to perform it.” The almond tree represents truth from the Lord and its fruit the good which comes from obeying that truth. (Read Numbers 17:1-8.) A rod always is the symbol of power—you remember the power Moses exercised through his rod. So the vision of the almond rod is a picture of the wonderful possibilities which the Lord gives to every one of us in His revealed truth. The other vision is a picture of what happens when we look to our natural, worldly ideas for guidance instead of to the Lord’s truth. The pot was turned toward the north. The cold north pictures the state of mind furthest from the Lord because, you remember, the Lord is the sun of our souls. When we turn away from the Lord, our minds become full of all sorts of conflicting ideas like the water boiling in the pot. We have no steady purpose and no peace of mind. And these false ideas finally take away our goodness, as the evil “out of the north” overcame Judah. This is one of the

places in the Word where the spiritual meaning is explained in the letter.

In the letter the prophecies of Jeremiah of course concerned the state of the Jewish nation in its last days and the inevitable results of its evils. But all the prophecies in the Word in their internal sense apply to the states of people of all times and nations. They go deep into our hearts and minds and point out what is wrong with us, and they tell us what must happen to us if we insist on going our own selfish way, and what wonderful things we may have if only we will obey the Lord. Jeremiah was the only prophet who lived to see his prophecies literally fulfilled.

Basic Correspondences

- a rod = power
 - the almond tree = truth from the Lord
 - the north = a natural and worldly state of mind
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Senior

With this class take up more of the history of the prophets and the meaning of their office as it is made evident in the letter of the Word. Also discuss the difference between the written Word and the prophetic utterances which were not divinely preserved.

In the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79), part of which we sometimes sing in church, are the familiar words, “As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began.” The Lord has never left men without sufficient knowledge of the truth to guide them if they chose to be led by Him. The Israelites call the books of the Bible from Joshua through II Kings (excepting the book of Ruth) “the Former Prophets.” Samuel, we recall, was recognized throughout the land as a prophet, and we all know the stories of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. But there were many other prophets all through the history of the Old Testament. In the time of Samuel they lived together in companies under the instruction and direction of Samuel (I Samuel 19:18-24). In I Kings 18:4 we read that Jezebel “cut off the prophets of the Lord,” and

that Obadiah saved a hundred of them and “hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water.” That those called prophets did not always speak from divine inspiration we learn in several places, notably in Isaiah 30:9-10, Jeremiah 14:13-16, and Matthew 7:22-23. We also learn from Amos 7:14 that the Lord did not always choose His prophets from among the companies of the prophets. But except for a period of a century or two before the call of Samuel when “there was no open vision” (I Samuel 3:1), there were always prophets of the Lord in the land who pointed out the wrongdoings of the people, predicted what would happen if they continued, and promised them blessing if they would return to the service of the Lord.

Every true prophet of the Lord had a message for the people of his time. The Lord alone sees the hearts of all men and knows what each will choose to do with the opportunities that are given him. So He is able to make provision for the salvation of all who wish to be good. His providence is over every individual life and over all history, insuring to everyone from day to day the opportunity to choose freely what he wants to be. But not all the prophets were given a message of universal import. Of the multitude of prophecies which must have been spoken through the ages, only a few were chosen by the Lord to be written down and preserved as part of the Word. The books of Moses are of course prophecy throughout. Moses and after him the “former” prophets wrote their message in the form of an account of the history of the nation, which could be directed by the Lord for that purpose. We do not know the names of these former prophets, who wrote the books of the Word from Joshua through II Kings.

The “latter prophets” are the sixteen whose books conclude the Old Testament. These books are not consecutive history, although they contain many references to circumstances and conditions of the times in which they were written. Some chapters thus had in the letter an obvious meaning for the people of that time, but the greater part of them were “dark” sayings. The fact is that it is the internal states of people which are described through the prophets.

During the history of the first Christian Church many attempts at interpretation were made, but without a knowledge of correspondence no consistent interpretation could be formulated. There are many verses indeed in which the inner meaning shines through the letter so clearly that they have become popular sermon texts and thus familiar to churchgoing people, but the study of the books of the prophets as a whole has in modern times largely deteriorated into textual study with a view to finding out just when the books were written and by whom, and whether or not, for example, the whole of the book of Isaiah could have been the work of one man. Study of the text is always interesting, but it is really fruitful only when it can be divorced from the premise that the human penmen were the real authors of the books.

The prophets all claimed divine inspiration. “The word of the Lord came . . .” is a common expression in all of them. They saw visions and heard the voice of the Lord speaking to them either from within or from without. Consider the call of Jeremiah, which we take as the basis of our lesson today. Verses 2 and 3 of chapter 1 tell us that the word of the Lord came to him first in the days of Josiah king of Judah, and then throughout the remaining years of the kingdom. The rest of the chapter is the record of a conversation with the Lord in which Jeremiah was reluctant to assume a task which called for addressing the people, and the Lord promised to put the words in his mouth and also to protect him against the wrath of the people, who would not want to hear the truth he would speak. We sometimes lose opportunities for doing good because we are afraid to “speak out” against things we know to be wrong. It will help us to remember that, if we can forget ourselves, the Lord is always presents to help us say the right thing. Jeremiah was given two visions—of the “rod of an almond tree” and of “a seething pot” whose face was toward the north—and the Lord explained to him the meaning of both visions. The whole chapter is the account of a direct communication from the Lord and a compelling commission to go out and speak the message of the Lord. The expression “the word of the Lord” occurs more than

fifty times in the book of Jeremiah.

The four Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Isaiah, as we have seen, lived in the time of Hezekiah. Jeremiah lived to see some of his prophecies literally fulfilled, for he saw Jerusalem and the temple destroyed and the greater part of the people of Judah carried away to Babylon. The latter part of the book of Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations were written after this took place. Ezekiel and Daniel were among the young men carried away, and they prophesied to the captives in Babylon.

Adult

The general place and message of the Major Prophets and of Jeremiah in particular will offer many points for discussion, as well as the meaning of his original call and visions and his prophecies concerning the nations other than Judah. This is a good lesson in which to remind the Adults of Swedenborg's characterization of the Word as like a man clothed but with his hands and face bare [S. 55, E. 778⁶].

The people of the Most Ancient Church before the fall had open communication with the heavens and were led by a dictate in the will, but that after the will became evil, man had to receive instruction in his understanding and by obedience develop a new will there. Through the prophets, therefore, the Lord spoke to the understanding of men. All of the Ancient Word and of our Word was given through prophets. We sing in the Benedictus: "As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began."

Only a very small portion of what was spoken by the prophets is recorded in the Word. The message given to most of the prophets was for the people of their time and was not preserved. Its general character, however, must have been the same, because it came from the Lord and had one fundamental purpose: to point out the evils into which men had fallen and to give them the truth they needed to lead them out of evil into good. In the first chapter of Jeremiah, which we have chosen as the example on which to base our study today, this purpose is expressed in verse 10: "See, I have

this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.”

All of the Word is prophecy, a divinely given message from the Lord. In the letter a distinction is made between the Law and the Prophets, but the “Law,” the five books of Moses, is full of direct assertions of revelation, visions, angel appearances, the voice of the Lord speaking, and even appearances of the Lord, as well as various signs and wonders. The Hebrew canon classes the books from Joshua through II Kings (excepting the book of Ruth) as the “former” prophets, recognizing that these books also were given through divinely inspired prophets, though their names were not known. The Pentateuch and these books of the former prophets fell into the form of a narrative of ancient Jewish history. They had a literal meaning as well as a universal and eternal inner or spiritual meaning. But the books of the “latter” prophets, the books which we customarily think of as the prophets, have only very limited reference to the Hebrew nation. Even the book of Jeremiah, written just before the end of the kingdom of Judah, contains many cryptic statements which are hard to relate to the events of his time. The people of that day interpreted the Messianic prophecies as promises of their restoration as the leading nation of the world, but these promises in this sense have never been fulfilled and never will be. Under the figure of the Judaic people and nation Jeremiah and the others were given to speak of a spiritual kingdom of truth and righteousness, the Church which the Lord’s coming was to reestablish.

The latter Prophets are divided into four “Major” and twelve “Minor” Prophets. The four Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Their historical position is clear, as it is stated in the letter. They all prophesied to the people of Judah. Isaiah was prophet in the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. It was by heeding his warnings and advice that Judah was saved from the destruction which befell Israel at the hands of Assyria. Jeremiah, as our chapter tells us, was first called to be prophet in

the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah, the last good king of Judah. He prophesied the end of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and he lived to see his prophecies literally fulfilled. Through the favor of Nebuchadnezzar, he was not himself carried to Babylon, but he was taken against his will by some of his own people to Egypt, where he is believed to have died. Some of his later prophecies (Jeremiah 43:8) and possibly the book of Lamentations were written in Egypt. Ezekiel and Daniel were both among the captives taken to Babylon and were called to prophesy to the people of Judah in captivity. To these people, upon whom the calamities had fallen which Jeremiah had prophesied, the “bad news” for which they had so hated him, the promises of restoration given through Ezekiel and Daniel were welcome comfort. So Ezekiel and Daniel, almost alone among the prophets, were popular and rose to positions of eminence.

Jeremiah was beaten, put in stocks, cast into prison, let down into a pit where he sank in the mire, left without food, and threatened with death. All these things picture what men do to the truth when it crosses their worldly and selfish desires. But the truth prevails in the end and vindicates itself. The command and promise to Jeremiah in verses 17-19 of our chapter express the Lord’s unfailing provision that the truth shall be made available and His protection over it.

The two brief visions given to Jeremiah at the beginning of his work are interesting in their correspondence. We recall that the rod of Aaron (Numbers 17:1-8), the only one of the rods of the twelve tribes which blossomed and bore fruit, was an almond rod. See the passages from AC 5622² and 8408³ below. The texts referred to in both these instances are among those places in the Word where the Lord in the letter clearly indicates the internal meaning. Verse 12 gives you the meaning of the almond rod, and verse 16 that of the seething pot.

The greater part of the book of Jeremiah is taken up with the condition of Judah—symbol of the Church as to good—and prophecies of its end. But a few chapters (46 to 51:58) prophesy the

doom which will eventually overtake the enemies of Judah: Egypt, the Philistines, Moab and Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Hazor, Elam, and finally the arch-enemy Babylon. We can see in these a series of enemies to our spiritual progress: Egypt, the reliance on natural memory-knowledges; the Philistines, knowing the truth without doing it; Moab and Ammon, “adulterated good and falsified truth”; Edom, turning aside from good by despising truth; Damascus, perversion of knowledges of truth; Kedar, not being in truth because not in good; Hazor, the falsity of evil; Elam, the spiritual church desolated; Babylon, the love of dominion from the love of self. This is a searching catalogue of the temptations which must be met and overcome by us as individuals and by the Church and the world. At first glance they may seem repetitious, but if we consider each one carefully, looking for examples of it in our own thought and in the thought and life of the world about us, we shall see not only differences among them but a natural progression from one to the other, leading us away from trust in the Lord and His Word to a final setting up of our own will and intelligence as the center of the universe, which everything and everybody else should serve.



From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 5622²: “Almonds signify goods of life corresponding to the truths of good of the interior natural . . . This tree itself signifies in the spiritual sense a perception of interior truth which is from good, its ‘blossom’ interior truth which is from good, and its ‘fruit’ good of life thence derived. In this sense the almond tree is spoken of in Jeremiah . . . a ‘rod’ denotes power; ‘almond tree’ the perception of interior truth.”

Arcana Coelestia, n. 6000: “Revelations were made either by dreams, or by night visions, or by day visions, or by speech within the man, or by speech without him from angels that were seen, and also by speech without him from angels that were not seen.”

Arcana Coelestia, n. 8408³: “Here a ‘boiling pot’ denotes a people whom falsities have taken possession of; ‘the north’ denotes the sensuous and corporeal of man from which evil springs. The end of the church is here treated of,

when the external, consequently the sensuous and corporeal, and with these falsity and evil, rule; for the Lord's church goes successively from internal to external, and then expires."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Where did the prophets get their messages? *from the Lord, in visions or dreams*
- J. What work were they called to do? *warn people about their evils, exhort them to do good*
- J. Can you name the four Major Prophets? *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel*
- J. In what time did Isaiah prophesy? *reign of Hezekiah*
- J. When did Jeremiah begin to prophesy? *Josiah's reign*
- P. What did he say when the Lord called him? *I cannot speak: for I am a child*
- P. What did the Lord tell him? *I will put my words in your mouth*
- J. What two kinds of work was he to do? *tear down, build up*
- P. What was the first vision he had? *"rod" of almond*
- J. What did the Lord tell him it meant? *"I shall hasten to perform my work"*
- P. What was his second vision? *boiling pot in the north*
- J. What did it mean? *evil was to come from the north*
- J. What great tragedy did he witness? *Babylonian invasion*
- J. What is the book of Lamentations about? *mourning the fall of Jerusalem*
- J. In what country did Jeremiah do most of his work? *Judah*
- J. In what other country did he later prophesy? *Egypt*
- J. How did he happen to go to Egypt? *taken against his will by rebellious people*
- J. Where did Ezekiel and Daniel prophesy? *Babylon*
- J. How did they get to Babylon? *taken with captives*