

Meet The Minor Prophets (Part One)

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A special group of men, most of them largely unknown except for their names—and they had some strange ones—wrote some of the most memorable lines of the Bible:

"They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind."

"So rend your heart, and not your garments. . . ."

"Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?"

"Though you ascend as high as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down. . . ."

"When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple."

"But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid. . . ."

"Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace!"

"But the just shall live by his faith."

"Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath. . . ."

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Consider your ways!'"

"'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts."

"For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob."

These twelve quotations were culled from the rich, prophetic teaching of the books of the Minor Prophets, one quotation from each in the order they appear in our English Bibles. Though these may be among the most memorable verses, they in no way comprise the extent of the beautiful teaching and language distilled in these twelve short works. Despite our calling this short section of the Bible the "Minor Prophets," its instruction, preserved for our edification (see Romans 15:4), is deep and valuable.

Over the next few issues, we will meet the twelve Minor Prophets, obtain an overview of their books, and take away a concentrated dose of their most meaningful teaching for us today. These books contain a great deal of prophecy regarding the increasingly unsettled time just ahead of Christ's return and beyond, so it is a good idea to be familiar with their basic themes and warnings to God's people.

Minor Prophet Basics

However, before we learn more about the individual prophets and their writings, it will help to know a little bit about the subsection of the Bible that is designated the Minor Prophets. Once we have looked into this grouping, we will see that it is minor only in size!

Jesus, using a common Jewish method of organizing the Scriptures (only the Old Testament at that time), breaks it down into three sections: ". . . all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me" (Luke 24:44). Even today, Jews group them in these same sections: Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nevi'im*), and Psalms or Writings (*Ketuvim*). Thus, Hebrew Bibles are called *Tanakh*, a word made up by combining the three initial Hebrew letters of each major section of Scripture.

The section of the Prophets is itself divided into two major parts, the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets are the historical books of Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel, and I & II Kings. The Latter Prophets are the named prophets from Isaiah to Malachi (excluding Daniel, whose book is included in the Writings). The twelve works that comprise the Minor Prophets are a subset of these, which the Jews consider to be, not twelve little books, but one large book, the fourth of the Latter Prophets, balancing the four books of the Former Prophets (I & II Samuel are considered one book, as are I & II Kings). As such, the Minor Prophets were often written on one scroll.

As a group, they are often called simply "The Twelve" or "the Twelve Prophets." Sometimes, the section is more formally named "The Book of the Twelve." The title "Minor Prophets" derives from the length of the individual books, which range from one to fourteen chapters, and even the longest, Hosea, is well short of the lengthy Isaiah (66 chapters), Jeremiah (52 chapters), and Ezekiel (48 chapters).

Despite their short lengths, they pack a concentrated punch of teachings, warnings, calls to repentance, and promises of vengeance and blessing. Included are several prophecies that relate to the coming of the Messiah, both as Redeemer and conquering King. There are tantalizing dates, scenes concerning Christ's return, horrifying descriptions of war and devastation because of sin, and visions of the peace and prosperity of the Millennium. These prophets write mostly in poetry, using metaphor and parallelism to increase our understanding and give their words a greater emotional impact by allowing us to see in our mind's eye what God revealed to them.

In the order in which they appear in our English Bibles, the Twelve are roughly arranged in chronological order, stretching from the eighth to the fifth centuries before Christ. Among the first half-dozen, all except Joel and Jonah contain internal dates in referring various eighth-century Judean and Israelite kings, and even Jonah can be dated fairly accurately to the reign of Jeroboam II (c. 786-746 BC). The last half-dozen books appear to be later, having been written no earlier than King Hezekiah's reign (c. 715-686 BC), with Malachi, the last of the Old Testament writings, having been penned perhaps as late as around 425 BC.

Finally, a tantalizing progression of themes runs through the twelve books, indicating that those who compiled them into one scroll were inspired to arrange them to present a unified teaching. For instance, Hosea shows how far the Israelites have transgressed—to the point that they are "not My people" (Hosea 1:9). Joel begins where Hosea leaves off, making extended calls to repentance. Amos repeats Joel 3:16 in Amos 1:2, as if taking up Joel's cry of warning about the coming wrath of God. Obadiah expands on the mention of the downfall of Edom in Amos 9:12. Jonah then narrates the story of God's judgment on another of Israel's enemies, Assyria, but the Assyrians, unlike the Edomites, repent!

The next book, Micah, cautions the Israelites that God is also judging them. Nahum's opening poetry continues Micah's warning about God's indignation, turning it once again toward Assyria, and confirming that, despite its earlier repentance, Nineveh will soon fall to Babylon. Habakkuk then prophesies that once Babylon conquers Assyria, it will turn its sights on Judah. Zephaniah takes us to the time when Babylon is about to strike, showing just how sinful Judah has become, but the book ends in hope, promising that her captives will return. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi deal with those exiles who have returned, illustrating their shortcomings and emphasizing that One whom God has chosen will come to save His people.

Looking at the Minor Prophets in this way reveals the hand of God in its composition and vital part in the canon of the Old Testament.

Hosea

The prophet Hosea has the honor of opening the Minor Prophets with the longest of the twelve books. He begins his work with one of the more informative introductions, letting us know among other things that his father's name was Beerī, which means "man of the well," and perhaps metaphorically, "expounder" or "enlightener." We later find out that his wife's name was Gomer and that they were the parents of two sons—Jezreel and Lo-Ammi—and a daughter, Lo-Ruhamah. God Himself names the children, giving them prophetic names to foretell the fate of the unfaithful nation of Israel.

The prophet also tells us that he served God during the reigns of four Judean kings—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—and one Israelite king, Jeroboam II. This would seem to put his ministry within the bounds of Jeroboam II's prosperous 41-year reign (c. 793 to 753 BC). However, since Hezekiah did not come to the throne as co-regent of Judah until 719 BC, it appears that the mention of Jeroboam II is included only to give the reader the starting point and context of Hosea's message. Most Bible historians date Hosea's ministry from about 755 to 710 BC, a period that essentially covers the entire downfall of Israel from the last days of her wealth and power to her destruction by Assyria and a few years beyond.

Hosea means "help" or "salvation," and despite the recurring theme of Israel's unfaithfulness to God, the eventual salvation of Israel is the main subject of the prophecy. God uses the prophet's marriage to Gomer, "a wife of harlotry," to illustrate the relationship between God and His people. Gomer is not faithful to Hosea, yet God commands the prophet to take her back, just as He would restore Israel to Himself:

For the children of Israel shall abide many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They shall fear the LORD and His goodness in the latter days. (Hosea 3:4-5)

The remainder of the book expounds and expands on this pronouncement, making intermittent calls for repentance. Several sections include Judah within the prophecy (see Hosea 5:5, 10-15; 6:4, 11; 8:14, etc.), showing that Hosea's prophecy, though preached primarily to the northern ten tribes, is in reality aimed at all twelve tribes of Israel. God accuses both Ephraim (Israel, also called Samaria) and Judah of running to other nations, particularly Egypt and Assyria (Hosea 5:13; 7:11), when threatened rather than to God. In the same way, all Israel loves to pursue idols—Baal seems to have been a favorite—rather than their Maker (see Hosea 4:12-14; 8:14; 12:11; etc.).

Hosea also contains a well-known Messianic prophecy, found in Hosea 11:1: "And out of Egypt I called My son." This foretells of Joseph and Mary being warned by an angel to take the newly born Jesus to Egypt to avoid the cruelty of King Herod, and once Herod died, the family returned to live in Nazareth (see Matthew 2:12-23). The Minor Prophets contain several of these "obscure" prophecies, many of which are highlighted in Matthew's gospel.

Joel

Hosea is followed by the three-chapter book of Joel, which may well be the earliest of the Minor Prophets, although it cannot be dated with any confidence. Although modern critical scholars make Joel a contemporary of Haggai and Zechariah, conservative commentators often place his ministry in the reign of Joash, who ruled Judah for much of the late ninth century BC (c. 835-796). As II Kings 11 and 12 relate, Joash was placed on the throne at age seven in a coup that rid the kingdom of his evil grandmother, Queen Athaliah. His uncle, Jehoiada the priest, functioned as regent and chief counselor of the young king, so that as long as Jehoiada remained alive, Joash did well. However, as soon as the good priest died (at age 130!), Joash apostatized. He died by assassination in his bed at the hands of his own servants (see II Chronicles 24).

If the conservative view is correct, this was the atmosphere when Joel prophesied in Judah (this conclusion is derived from the fact that he mentions "Israel" only twice, while speaking of Judah, Jerusalem, Zion, and the Valley of Jehoshaphat more frequently). This makes him a contemporary of the prophet Elisha, whose ministry centered in Israel. Some believe that Joel was also a priest due to his call for the priests to mourn and consecrate a fast in repentance (Joel 1:13-14) to beseech God to spare His people (Joel 2:17).

Joel is the son of Pethuel ("God delivers"), but of him and his father we know little else for sure. His name, a popular one among Israelites (Scripture mentions at least thirteen men named Joel), means "the LORD is God," a name that fits in well with the themes of his book. He shows that God is in control of nature and of history, and in light of God's overwhelming power, Joel calls his countrymen to repentance.

The most striking aspect of Joel is his use of a devastating locust plague to picture the destruction of the coming Day of the Lord, a central idea in his prophecy. Judah had been laid waste as successive waves of locusts devoured every bit of greenery in the land (Joel 1:4, 7). He proclaims it to be a divine judgment on the sins of His people, and he urges them to humble themselves and seek forgiveness.

Chapter 2 uses similar language, ramping up the martial imagery, foreshadowing the specter of the real armies that will march over the earth during the Day of the Lord. Again, Joel takes the opportunity to declare the need for the people to

. . . rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him . . . ? (Joel 2:13-14)

The third chapter takes the reader to the actual Day of the Lord—far in Joel's future but on our near horizon—prophesying of the gathering of all nations in the Valley of Jehoshaphat near Jerusalem for judgment. The timing shown in Joel 3:15 parallels the wonders that occur at the return of Jesus

Christ, as shown in Matthew 24:29. Then and there, God will show who is really in control, defeating His enemies and setting up His Kingdom.

Joel is quoted in the New Testament by the apostle Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost in AD 31 (see Acts 2:17-21). Peter had just seen God manifest His Spirit on his fellow disciples in the sound of a mighty wind and in tongues of flame, and Joel's words in Joel 2:28 immediately sprang to mind: "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions." Joel actually speaks of a yet future day when God's Spirit will be available to all, but this Pentecost miracle typifies the power of God's gift to His elect.

Over the next few issues, we will meet the remaining ten prophets and examine their helpful and ultimately encouraging prophecies.