

Meet The Minor Prophets (Part Three)

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Though it would only be partially true, one could contend that the Minor Prophets deal with the decline, fall, and return of Israel/Judah. As was noted in Part Two, only a small fraction of the people of Judah returned after their Babylonian Exile, while very few Israelites of the Northern Kingdom found their way back to the land of their fathers. Most Israelites remained in the lands of their captivity until incursions from the south forced their migration to the north and ultimately to the west, into Europe.

Beyond this fact, we must remember that these twelve small books were written by prophets of God, and while they wrote about existing cultural and social declines, as well as current political and military activities, their—and especially God's—intent was to inform and motivate, not just the prophets' contemporaries, but also future readers. In having these books written, God was chronicling a prophetic type that could be seen as a pattern for believers down through history to measure the conditions of their own day, particularly those who would live in the time of the end, just before the return of Christ.

In this way, the decline and fall of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, are very relevant to us. They provide a foreshadowing of general trends, attitudes, and events that will be present in the antitype, the fall of modern Israel and Judah. The specifics will, of course, be different—the downfalls are separated by more than 2,500 years—but there will be enough similarities to discern the fulfillment of prophecy and gauge a rough prediction of the timeline to Israel's collapse.

The earliest of the Minor Prophets—Hosea, Joel, and Amos—describe conditions in Israel in her last years and call for her repentance. Even so, after the death of Jeroboam II in 753 BC, the Northern Kingdom swiftly plunged to its destruction in 722 (about forty years after Amos' ministry). Not only did political infighting and moral decline weaken the nation, but a powerful warrior, Tiglathpileser III, also known as Pul, usurped the throne of Assyria and began to expand his empire to the southwest.

During his reign (c. 752-742 BC), Israel's King Menahem bowed the knee to Assyria, paying heavy tribute (II Kings 15:19-20). After a two-year reign, his son, Pekahiah, was assassinated by Pekah, who was in turn killed by Hoshea in about 731 BC. Hoshea took the opportunity of Pul's death in 727 BC to rebel against his son, Shalmaneser V, who promptly imprisoned Hoshea and commenced a three-year siege of Samaria (II Kings 17:4-5). As II Kings 17:6 records, "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria [by this time, Sargon II] took Samaria and carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes." Verses 7-23 provide the real reasons for their defeat, captivity, and exile: disobedience—particularly idolatry—and rejection of their covenant with God.

Judah's destruction, beginning about 120 years later, is similar and perhaps more spectacular. The 55-year reign of Manasseh (c. 696-641 BC), a time of almost unbridled immorality and idolatry to the point of child sacrifice to Molech (see II Kings 21:1-16; II Chronicles 33:1-9), sealed the doom of the kingdom. Even a good, righteous king like Josiah (c. 640-609 BC) could not reverse Judah's spiritual deterioration, and under his weak successors, the Southern Kingdom fell with great dispatch.

In the meantime, in 616 BC, Assyria's capital, Nineveh, had fallen to an alliance of Babylonians and Medes, led by Nabopolassar of Babylon. His son, Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BC), carried on his work of subjugating the entire Near East into a Babylonian empire. Nebuchadnezzar took Jewish captives in 605-604 BC, among whom was the prophet Daniel (Daniel 1:1-2). After a failed rebellion by Jehoiakim and subsequently by his son Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah or Coniah), Babylonian armies captured Jerusalem in 597 BC and took much of the aristocracy, the upper classes, and the nation's artisans, as well as the Temple's treasure, back to Babylon (II Kings 24:1-16). His successor, Zedekiah, foolishly rebelled a decade later, and Nebuchadnezzar, having had his fill of Jewish resistance, sent his army to Judah. In 586 BC, the Babylonians slaughtered thousands, took the remnant captive, and destroyed Jerusalem, breaking down the wall and destroying everything with fire, including the Temple (see II Chronicles 36:11-21).

These momentous events are the background stories of the Minor Prophets.

Nahum

The book of Nahum could be called the sequel to the book of Jonah. Its central event, the fall of Nineveh, takes place in 616 BC, about a century and a half after the ministry of Jonah, in whose time the great capital of Assyria was spared God's wrath due to its inhabitants' humble repentance. This time, as Nahum relates in impassioned lyric poetry, she would be humbled and left "empty, desolate, and waste" (Nahum 2:10).

Little is known about Nahum the prophet besides his name (a shortened form of Nehemiah meaning "comfort" or "consolation") and his hometown, Elkosh. Details about him are so scarce that no one is certain even where Elkosh is, although it may be the same as the well-known New Testament town, Capernaum ("the village of Nahum"). However, since Nahum and Nehemiah were common names in Israel, we cannot be sure Capernaum was named after the prophet. If not, then he probably lived somewhere in Judah; the southern town of Beth Gabra, modern Beit-Jebrin, 15 kilometers east of Gath, has been suggested as a likely site.

The three-chapter book begins, "The burden against Nineveh" (Nahum 1:1), and throughout his prophecy, the prophet speaks directly to Assyrians. The first chapter introduces these foreigners to the might and majesty of Israel's God, who has sent Nahum with a message of woe. The date of this message has been debated, but since Nahum 3:8-10 speaks of the destruction of Thebes (663 BC) as a historic fact, most modern scholars date the book between 660 and 630 BC, late in Manasseh's reign or early in Josiah's.

What makes this prophecy of Nineveh's complete destruction so incredible is the fact of Nineveh's size, strength, and duration (it had been founded in the time of Nimrod; see Genesis 10:11). It was thought to be indestructible, having been constantly fortified and expanded through the riches brought in by both conquest and trade. Sennacherib himself claimed that the walls of his city were 60 feet thick and 100 feet high. At its largest, its metropolitan population may have been upwards of a million inhabitants.

In his article, "Nahum, Nineveh and Those Nasty Assyrians" (*Bible and Spade*, Fall 2003), Gordon Franz uses what has been discovered at Nineveh to show the accuracy of Nahum's descriptions of Assyria's fall. The prophecy even presents the detail that "the palace is dissolved" (Nahum 2:6), and

such a strange thing actually occurred! Heavy rains in the third year of the siege caused flooding that broke down the walls, and the Babylonians assisted by opening up the canals of the Tigris River. All this water undermined the palace, "dissolving" it!

Unlike many of the other Minor Prophets, the book contains no outright Messianic prophecies, dealing as it does strictly with the downfall of Nineveh. However, it does contain the well-known exclamation, "Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace!" (Nahum 1:15), an echo of Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7. While Jesus did indeed proclaim good news—the gospel—to Judah, this verse specifically refers to the "good tidings" of the fall of Judah's longtime nemesis, Assyria.

Habakkuk

Like Nahum, Habakkuk the man is another mystery. All that is said of him is that he was a prophet, and the only clue that we can glean from his name is that it means "one who embraces." The postscript at the end of his third chapter (Habakkuk 3:19) hints that Habakkuk may have been a Levite or even from a priestly family, but little is known for certain. We can, though, say that he prophesied in and to Judah.

Because so little is known of him, the dating of his short prophecy is also open to conjecture. The book's placement among the Minor Prophets suggests a time not too far removed from the fall of Nineveh, when Babylon began its meteoric ascendancy over the Near East. Behind the book is the looming specter of the approaching Chaldeans, who were conquering nations one by one, and Judah lay in their way. This places Habakkuk as writing just before the Babylonian invasion and as being a contemporary of Jeremiah in Jerusalem. A date of 610-605 BC is likely.

The bulk of the first chapter revolves around two questions that Habakkuk poses to God: 1) How long will You refuse to answer my prayer for deliverance? and 2) Why are You sending such wicked people to punish Judah? The prophet cannot grasp how his holy God can do such things, for are not the Israelites God's holy people?

God's answer to the first question is that, this time, He will not deliver Judah. He has raised the Chaldeans to punish His people for their treachery against the covenant and their mounting sins. He answers Habakkuk's second question in Habakkuk 2:4, "Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith." In other words, God is justified in punishing for sin in whatever manner He sees fit, and the righteous will trust God to do what is best.

The rest of the second chapter is a succession of five "woes" that describe why God has seen fit to punish Judah. At its end, when it is clear that God's judgment is just, He says, "But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Habakkuk 2:20). Chapter 3 is Habakkuk's response, a prayer to God, upon understanding His mind on the matter. It is a hymn of praise and faith in recognition of the righteousness of God. Though He must punish for sin, He will also save and exalt those He favors.

Habakkuk contains only one prophecy of the coming Messiah: "You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for salvation with Your Anointed. You struck the head from the house of the wicked, by laying bare from foundation to neck. Selah" (Habakkuk 3:13). This may be an allusion to the woman's seed striking the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15), describing how Christ brings complete salvation through His sacrifice for sin (see Hebrews 7:25).

Zephaniah

Unlike the previous two authors, Zephaniah provides the reader with more information about himself and his times. He was "the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah" (Zephaniah 1:1). This pedigree reveals that he was not only a Jew but also of royal blood, the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah and a distant cousin of Josiah. That he prophesied during Josiah's reign makes him a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum, and probably Habakkuk.

The prophet's name means "the LORD hides" or "he whom the LORD hides," and this idea appears in his prophecy. He writes in Zephaniah 2:3, in one of the book's more memorable verses, "Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger." His calling of Judah to repentance in this chapter has spurred commentators to speculate that Zephaniah may have worked closely with Josiah during that king's reforms of the nation beginning around 621 BC (see II Kings 22-23; II Chronicles 34-35). This year is an approximate date for the book.

The Day of the Lord is Zephaniah's theme, using the expression more than any other Old Testament author does. In the first chapter, God announces that His judgment is near and that it will be "a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and alarm" (Zephaniah 1:15-16). The chapter closes with the dire words, "For He will make speedy riddance of all those who dwell in the land" (verse 18).

The second chapter begins with a brief call to repentance, proffering a morsel of hope to those who return to God. This is followed by a longer section that promises judgment on nearby nations too: Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Ethiopia, and Assyria. In chapter 3, God takes wicked Jerusalem to task, saying, "Despite everything . . . they rose early and corrupted all their deeds" (Zephaniah 3:7). Thus, God must "pour on them My indignation" (verse 8). However, one day, a faithful remnant, "a meek and humble people, . . . [who] shall trust in the name of the LORD" (verses 12, 18-20), will be brought back from the lands of their captivity.

Zephaniah's Messianic prophecy appears in Zephaniah 3:15, 17:

The LORD has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall see disaster no more. . . . The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.

Clearly, this is a prophecy of Christ's second coming, when He will put down all of His enemies and establish peace and justice in His Millennial Kingdom.

Haggai

The prophet Haggai, whose name means "festal" or "festive," is the first of the post-Exile prophets, and his prophecy is dated to "the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month" (Haggai 1:1; see Ezra 4:24), which corresponds to the late summer of 520 BC. Haggai says nothing of himself in his book other than that he was a prophet. His prophecy covers only four months' time, from the sixth to the ninth month of that year.

The book is divided into four dated prophecies, one covering the entire first chapter and three appearing in the second (Haggai 2:1-9; 10-19; 20-23). The first two prophecies are addressed to both Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, as representing all of the people. The third prophecy concerns a question of law that Haggai is to ask the priests, and the fourth is spoken to Zerubbabel alone.

The historical background of Haggai is found in the book of Ezra. Those Jews and Levites who had first returned to Judea after Cyrus had released them from their Babylonian captivity had been in the land for roughly eighteen years, and God's Temple, which they had been sent back specifically to build (II Chronicles 36:23; Ezra 1:2-4), still lay unfinished. However, the people had taken the time to settle themselves and build their own homes. As God puts it, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4). Haggai's first prophecy is a rebuke to the leadership and the people to resume work on God's House.

His second prophecy is more encouraging, refuting the common notion that their Temple could not compare in glory to the one Solomon had built. God reveals, "The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former" (Haggai 2:9), for this would be the Temple, refurbished and beautified by Herod, to which His Son, Jesus Christ, would come.

Haggai's third prophecy is based on a principle of God's law that holiness cannot be transferred between people, yet spiritual impurity can be. God uses this principle to declare His people to be unclean, as well as their works (Haggai 2:14). However, now that they had repented and begun to work on the Temple again, God would lift His curse on them for their disobedience (see Haggai 1:5-11; 2:16-17) and bless them with bountiful harvests.

The final prophecy, addressed to Zerubbabel, is in reality a prophecy of the end-time Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the governor of Judah stands as a type of God's greatest Servant. God promises the overthrow of kingdoms and great destruction, but "Zerubbabel My servant" (Haggai 2:23) is to be made "like a signet ring," a symbol of great value and honor, representing the full authority of the ruler. Such is Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16; see Matthew 28:18; I Corinthians 15:24-25).

Part Four will conclude this brief introduction to the Minor Prophets.