

Meet The Minor Prophets (Part Two)

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The twelve books of the Minor Prophets finish off most versions of the Old Testament. In that position, stationed between the Major Prophets and the four gospels of the New Testament, they are often overlooked by readers of the Bible on their way to better-known and better-esteemed parts of Scripture. While they may not be "popular" books, they are important and interesting in their own right, setting the stage for the coming of Messiah a few centuries after they were written.

For the most part, the Minor Prophets were penned during the downfalls of Israel and Judah, while a few originated after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. Most of them contain depictions of the apostasy of God's people and appeals for them to repent and return to Him. It is clear, however, that those appeals fell on deaf ears, and the Israelites and Jews both fell to foreign powers. In the aftermath, the people looked for a future deliverance, a time when their national fortune would be reversed, and they would once again be "the chief nation" (Amos 6:1).

Many of the Minor Prophets provide hints of such a future restoration of the Israelitish people. There are frequent allusions to a return to the Land of Promise after wholesale repentance once the Israelites have been humbled by national calamity in the forms of natural disasters, war, and captivity. Yet, such a return to God and the land of Israel did not occur after the captivity of Israel under the Assyrians or after that of the Jews to the Babylonians. In fact, the Israelites remained in the lands of their captivity for many years before they began migrating northwestward toward Europe. In a similar way, the vast majority of Jews either remained in Mesopotamia or scattered over the Mediterranean basin, thus beginning the Diaspora.

One can only conclude that the great repentance and return to the Holy Land did not take place under Zerubbabel or Ezra, and in fact, it has *never* occurred in history. The few Jews, Levites, and Benjamites who returned to Jerusalem from exile in the fifth and sixth centuries before Christ merely set the stage for the coming of Messiah more than 400 years later, allowing Him to live and work among His own people, who "did not receive Him" (John 1:11). About forty years after His death, the Romans razed Jerusalem, and the Jews of Judea fled or were taken as slaves to all parts of the Empire, completing the Dispersion.

Thus, the return of Israel to the land and the restoration of the nation to prominence under its Deliverer is still future. The time of each man sitting "under his vine and under his fig tree" (Micah 4:4) lies yet ahead after a period of terrible, horrifying destruction—one that falls on the modern descendants of Israel because of their sins, both personal and national. Then, a humbled people will return to God, weeping and repenting of their idolatries before Him, and He will restore them to their land and to greatness (Hosea 14:1-8; Micah 7:8-13; Zephaniah 3:18-20).

Amos

The prophet Amos lived and preached during one of Israel's most prosperous periods in its history. His book's opening verse relates that his ministry took place during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah (767-739 BC) and Jeroboam II of Israel (782-753 BC). He says specifically that it occurred "two years before the earthquake," which was evidently one of such ferocity and destruction that, to those who

experienced it, the quake became an indelible time-marker (so much so that, a few centuries later, Zechariah mentions it in Zechariah 14:5). We can date Amos' preaching to a short timespan within about five years on either side of 760 BC.

Though Amos was probably a Jew (his hometown, Tekoa, sits about six miles south of Bethlehem in the heart of Judah), his ministry was to the kingdom of Israel. This fact, together with the date of his ministry, implies that God sent him with a final message of warning and call to repentance to idolatrous Israel roughly forty years before sending Assyria to punish them. He was even more of an outsider, not being a "professional" prophet but "a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit" (Amos 7:14). He could be totally objective when observing and commenting on the apostasy of Israel.

The reign of Jeroboam II experienced the height of Israelite prosperity since the days of Solomon, and with it came a corresponding increase in power. Despite these positives, the era also revealed a great many negative aspects of Israelite culture: immorality, arrogance, oppression of the weak, greed, extravagance, and hypocrisy, among others. Amos counters these failings with warnings and illustrations of the righteousness and justice of God. Notice this unflattering warning to Israelite women:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, "Bring wine, let us drink!" The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness: "Behold, the days shall come upon you when He will take you away with fishhooks, and your posterity with fishhooks. You will go out through broken walls, each one straight ahead of her, and you will be cast into Harmon," says the LORD. (Amos 4:1-3)

As is evident in this passage, the fact of Israel's sinfulness and God's threat of impending judgment and destruction appear throughout the book. Through Amos, God implores the citizens of the Northern Kingdom to seek Him and live, to seek good and not evil, so that He could forgive their sins and bless them (see Amos 5:4, 6, 14-15). It was to no avail, as the Israelites could not discern the connection between the calamities they were beginning to experience and God's desire for them to repent (Amos 4:6-11). Because of their calcified hearts, God must finally decree:

Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam. (Amos 7:8-9).

Unlike most of the other Minor Prophets, the book of Amos contains no overt Messianic prophecy. Amos 9 contains an oblique reference to restoring "the tabernacle of David which has fallen down" (verse 11), and this will ultimately come to pass with the return of Jesus Christ, born into the line of David, as King of kings. In fact, the short passage that follows speaks of the Millennial peace and prosperity that will result from the righteous reign of Christ.

Yet, before that happens, God must punish "the sinful kingdom, and . . . destroy it from the face of the earth, yet . . . not utterly" (Amos 9:8). Amos' prophecy is not a happy one, but one of imminent judgment for sin. It is particularly appropriate for the modern nations of Israel, which mirror their ancestors in the days of Jeroboam II. (For more detailed information on Amos' prophecy, please see our booklet, *Prepare to Meet Your God!*)

Obadiah

Weighing in at twenty-one verses, the tiny prophecy of Obadiah is the shortest of all the Old Testament books. It opens simply with the words, "The vision of Obadiah," and commences its diatribe against the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, cousins of the Israelites. Obadiah may not have been the name of the author of this book, since the name means "servant of the LORD." Tradition, however, uses it as a personal name rather than a title.

No time period is explicitly mentioned in the book, although its content argues for a time late in Judah's history. Such phrases as are found in verse 12—"the day of [your brother's] captivity" and "the day of [the children of Judah's] destruction"—naturally argue for it being written in the years just after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BC. In fact, Edom itself fell to Babylon in 553 BC, so the date of the book lies somewhere between those two years.

Obadiah's theme is God's wrath against Edom for her devious and persistent enmity for Israel and Judah. In very vivid terms, the prophet lays out, first, the certainty of Edom's doom, and second, God's airtight case against the children of Esau. These points can be summarized by two verses:

Behold, I will make you small among the nations; you shall be greatly despised. . . . For violence against your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. (Obadiah 2, 10)

Even so, Obadiah hints that his prophecy will not be wholly fulfilled with Babylon's rampage through Edom. In verse 15, he writes, "For the day of the LORD upon all the nations is near," suggesting that Edom's ultimate comeuppance will not occur until the end-time Day of the Lord. The final five verses of the book refer to the Millennium, when "saviors shall come to Mount Zion to judge the mountains of Esau, and the kingdom shall be the LORD's" (verse 21). This implies that the rivalry between Jacob and Esau will continue to the end of this present age, and it will take the power and judgment of the returning Christ to end the feud.

As with Amos, Obadiah does not contain any specific Messianic prophecy aside from the indirect allusions mentioned above. Also like Amos, the book concentrates on God's judgment, this time on a kindred people, showing that His justice applies to all nations, a point that carries over to the next book of the Minor Prophets, Jonah. (For more on Edom and Obadiah, please see our five-part *Forerunner* series, "All About Edom.")

Jonah

The book of Jonah is unique among the Minor Prophets in that it tells the story of the prophet himself, unlike the other eleven books, which are clearly more typical prophecies. Jonah—it means "dove" in Hebrew—lived in Gath-hepher, a town of Zebulun north of Nazareth in Galilee, and he was the son of Amittai ("truthful"). The only other biblical mention of him appears in II Kings 14:25, which associates Jonah with the period just prior to or within the reign of Jeroboam II. Apparently, he was a contemporary of Amos.

Jonah's story is familiar to most people, even those who do not profess to be Christian or Jewish. God charges the prophet to go to Nineveh, the capital of Israel's hated enemy, Assyria, to prophesy of its imminent destruction. Jonah, though, flees to Joppa and boards a ship bound for Tarshish, attempting to get as far away from God and Assyria as possible. A huge storm rages, and the ship's crew chucks

Jonah into the sea after the prophet admits that the storm is chasing him. God sends a great fish to swallow Jonah, and after three days and nights, it spews him onto a beach, from whence he travels to Nineveh to proclaim God's message to the Assyrians. Amazingly, they repent, and God promises not to destroy them. At this, the prophet pitches a fit of anger, whereupon God teaches him a valuable lesson on His mercy.

The book must be juxtaposed against the other Minor Prophets, perhaps especially Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk, to see how it fits. As shown earlier, Amos and Micah are dire warnings of Israel's looming destruction. Obadiah foretells the same for Edom; Nahum, for Assyria; and Habakkuk, for Judah. Jonah sits in the midst of these, a prophecy in the form of story, in which the doomed nation repents and God relents. God is a merciful God, and the destruction promised in His prophecies can be averted if their targets humble themselves and submit to Him. As Isaiah writes, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

The focus of Jonah, however, is on the prophet and his reactions to these situations. We see his emotions: denial, avoidance, dismay, resignation, fear, despair, humility, boldness, disbelief, anger, hopelessness, and perplexity. He is overwhelmed by what God wants him to do, uncertain about how it will affect him, driven relentlessly by God's will, and at a total loss about what it all means! Through his experiences, Jonah comes to realize, "How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33). The reader leaves him as he sits outside Nineveh, bewildered and contemplating his incomprehensible God.

Jonah provides one of the most significant and recognizable Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. Jesus Himself refers to it in Matthew 12:40: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." It is the only sign Jesus gave to prove that He was the Christ, a sign that was completely out of His ability to control since He would be dead. The Father Himself would have to intervene to raise His Son from the dead. Thus, Jesus puts His stamp of approval on this often-mocked book.

Micah

The prophet Micah is another biblical enigma, as the only facts known about him come from his prophecy's first verse: He lived in "Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." This places him southwest of Jerusalem at the second half of the eighth century BC, a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos, Jonah, and Hosea. Micah may have worked closely with Isaiah, as there are some parallel passages in their prophecies (for instance, Micah 4:1-5 and Isaiah 2:2-4). His name means "Who is like the LORD?" (see Micah 7:18).

Micah prophesied in Jerusalem against both Israel and Judah. His book is divisible into three sections: chapters 1 and 2; chapters 3 through 5; and chapters 6 and 7. Each part begins with the call, "Hear," and starts with a rebuke against the sins of the nation. As the section continues, the prophecy announces a coming judgment against the people and ends with a promise of regathering and blessing. Near the end of Micah's ministry, God sent the Assyrians to punish both Israel (which they conquered and carried many away into captivity) and Judah (which they destroyed except for Jerusalem; many Jews were also carried into captivity).

The book of Micah is thematically a great deal like Amos. Both of them, of course, warn against sin and the certainty of God's imminent judgment upon the people. However, they even use similar

language to expose the kinds of sin that were rampant. In particular, they both condemn "social injustice":

» "They covet fields and take them by violence, also houses, and seize them. So they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance." (Micah 2:2)

» "You who hate good and love evil; who strip the skin from My people, and the flesh from their bones." (Micah 3:2)

» "Shall I count pure those with the wicked scales, and with the bag of deceitful weights?" (Micah 6:11).

Compare these to such passages as Amos 2:6-7; 4:1; 5:11; and 8:4-6.

Micah also pens one of the best known Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, since it is quoted to Herod in Matthew 2:6: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel (Micah 5:2). These words were proof that the Child born in Bethlehem, the One to whom the Magi were directed by His star, was indeed the prophesied anointed King of Israel, the Son of God.