

## INTRODUCTION TO THE MINOR PROPHETS

© 2009 [Tony Garland](#)

### **I. What or Who are the Minor Prophets?<sup>1</sup>**

#### A. What are the Minor Prophets?

1. Short answer: the books which 'no one remembers' when trying to list all 39 books of the OT from memory! ☺
2. Categories of books of the OT
  - a) 17 Historical books – Genesis through Esther.
  - b) 5 Poetical books – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon.
  - c) 17 Prophetic books
    - (1) 5 Major prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Daniel, Ezekiel.
    - (2) 12 Minor prophets
      - (a) Positioned in a 'jumble' at the end of our English OT.
      - (b) We can generally find Malachi since it is the last book of the OT and we occasionally see it when we are flipping through pages on our way to the first book of the NT: Matthew.
3. First designated as "Minor Prophets" by the Latin church in the time of Augustine and Jerome on account of their brevity as compared to the so-called Major Prophets. Prior to then, the Hebrew Scriptures referred to them simply as "the twelve." [Freeman, 130].

#### B. Who are the Minor Prophets?

1. Lesser-known prophets from all walks of life.
  - a) Joel is thought to have been a priest.
  - b) Habbakuk appears to have been a Levite [Unger].
  - c) Micah seems to have been a simple villager.
  - d) Amos was a shepherd (Amos 7:15).
  - e) Zephaniah was the great grandson of Hezekiah, the reformer king of Judah.
2. We know very little about some of these men of history. In some cases, all we have is the book which bears their name.
3. Some are quite familiar (e.g., Jonah). Others are quite obscure (e.g., Obadiah).

---

<sup>1</sup>

In the interest of size, sermon illustrations have been omitted.

4. Some had lengthy ministries and others—from what we know from their writings—may have been quite short. For example, the book of Haggai spans a period of some 4 months [Unger].
- C. Why are they called “minor”?
1. Not 'minor' in any sense except for the size of their writings in relation to the writings of other more well-known prophets such as Isaiah or Daniel who are known as the 'major' prophets.
  2. No less inspired: all prophecy is inspired of the Spirit, whether long or short.
  3. Not at all “minor” when the significance of some of their prophecies are considered. This makes sense when you consider that inspiration is what makes the writings of the Bible significant—it matters little whether the result is a few paragraphs or many pages. All that is given through these men is inspired and worthy of our attention.

As Peter explains, “prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke [as they were] moved by the Holy Spirit” (Peter 1:21).

4. So what are some of the important passages residing in these lesser-known pages of the Old Testament?
  - a) Luke 11:29-30 – Jesus referred to the “Sign of the Prophet Jonah.”  
And while the crowds were thickly gathered together, He began to say, "This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation."
    - (1) Here we find our Lord validating the book of Jonah and comparing His ministry to that of Jonah who warned Ninevah. Although the city repented, it didn't last and was later overthrown.
  - b) Habakkuk 2:4 – “The just shall live by his faith.” A truth which sparked the Reformation via Martin Luther.
  - c) When the magi came to Herod inquiring about the whereabouts of the king of the Jews, it was the book of the minor prophet Micah which provided the answer.
    - (1) Matthew 2:4-6 records what transpired:  
And when [Herod] had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, [in] the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"
  - d) The minor prophet Hosea, when writing about the birth of Israel in the Exodus from Egypt, also prefigured the flight and return of the young Jesus from Herod's

persecution—as explained by Matthew: “out of Egypt I called My Son” (Hos. 11:1 cf. Mat. 2:15).

- e) The value of a slave, 30 pieces of silver, for which Judas would betray our Lord, was foretold by the minor prophet Zechariah (Zec. 11:12).
- f) It was also the minor prophet Zechariah who pronounced the manner and sign by which the King of Israel would be presented in Zechariah 9:6:  
"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He [is] just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey."
- g) Zechariah also foresaw the piercing of the Messiah of Israel and the ultimate repentance and grief of Israel regarding the largest blunder of all history: the crucifixion of her own Messiah (Zec. 12:10).
- h) Another minor prophet, Malachi, revealed the ministry of John the Baptist (Mal. 3:1) and the coming of Elijah before the return of Christ (Mal. 4:5-6).
- i) Some of the most fearsome and sobering events associated with the return of Christ at the end of the age are recorded by another minor prophet, Joel, in his writings concerning the “Day of the Lord” (Joel 2 and 3).
  - (1) Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD [is] near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will grow dark, And the stars will diminish their brightness. The LORD also will roar from Zion, And utter His voice from Jerusalem; The heavens and earth will shake; But the LORD will be a shelter for His people, And the strength of the children of Israel. (Joel 3:14-16)
- j) These are but a small sample of the riches to be found in these neglected “minor” prophetic books of the OT.

## II. Why Study the Minor Prophets?

- A. Many of the reasons are the same ones we find for studying the Old Testament in general.
  - 1. It is impossible to make sense of the Bible and to understand much of what Jesus said and did without a reasonable grasp of the Old Testament.
  - 2. In fact, one could go even further and state that the degree to which Christians misunderstand and misrepresent Christ is strongly correlated to their knowledge of the Old Testament.
  - 3. These minor prophets are an important part of the Old Testament and worthy of our attention.
- B. Part of God's Word
  - The most obvious answer is: the Minor Prophets are part of God’s Inspired Word.
    - 1. A portion of Scripture given by God and preserved down through history.

2. As with all of Scripture, God assumes we understand the relevance of these books and are continually working to become more familiar with their contents (Hos. 6:6; Mat. 22:28-29; John 20:8-9).
- C. To gain a more solid foundation which allows us to recognize when Scripture is being twisted or sensationalized to build fear or a following.
1. Many Christians lack a solid foundation in the OT and therefore are “open season” for being led astray about how to interpret the NT, especially in prophetic passages.
  2. One of the results is an undercurrent of fear regarding developments in history because there is no sense of prophetic development or understanding of the flow of the stream of events which God has revealed will eventually lead to Christ’s return.
  3. Lacking the framework of the OT, it becomes next to impossible for the Christian who remains ignorant of the OT to evaluate larger themes which span both OT and NT—especially in relation to their future development.
  4. Without the “big picture” view we are trapped reacting to isolated historical events never knowing really how they may or may not fit into significant historical developments related in Scripture.
- D. Because the Minor Prophets are Unfamiliar
1. Because these passages are less familiar, we are more likely to learn something we haven’t heard or considered before.
  2. Because of their fragmentary nature, the minor prophets force us to develop a better understanding of Biblical history as we seek to make sense of the personalities, foreign geography and political developments which populate these books.
  3. The progression of development in the minor prophets provide important jigsaw pieces in the puzzle of understanding the progression of Bible history involving Israel from the time of Solomon through the divided Kingdom, the subsequent fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria and the Southern Kingdom to Babylon, and ultimately, the restoration of the remnant which returns from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem prior to the time of the NT.
- E. To learn from past fulfillment.
1. In the words of George Santayana, “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”
  2. There are some uncanny, unsettling, even hair-raising parallels between the situations and words found in the prophets and our own situation today. Although the USA is not Israel, many of the same principles apply and we can only blame ourselves when we find ourselves in the same well-worn ditch as cultures and countries who went before and also forsook God.
  3. C. Hassell Bullock observes:  
“The deep satisfaction of studying the words of some of history’s most profound spokesmen is indescribable. But so is the deep anguish of the message they

delivered to their ancient audience with its application for the modern world. Their call to righteousness, their summons to fasten social structures to the character of an ethical God, and their insistent proclamation that the Lord's patience would not endure forever, even though in the end sin could not outdo His grace or undo His love—these were emphatic precepts that the prophets iterated and reiterated to their world, precepts that still have not lost their potent relevance. . . . The value of the Hebrew prophets has been assessed and weighted by three millennia of history, and thankfully they, being dead, yet speak." [Bullock, 9-10]

4. Unbiased – unlike the kingly and priestly lines, individual prophets were not in line for political advantage and sought no permanent institutional power.
- F. Characteristics of cultures in their death throws.
1. Certainty of God's judgment on those who, though previously favored, have abandoned Him and now rest in their pride.
  2. God's use of nations to chastise Israel, but also his opposition of those nations who gleefully participate.
- G. How God has acted in the past is an excellent measure of how He is likely to behave in the future.
1. We learn about the character of God.
  2. We find solace and guidance for our own times of crisis.
  3. Bullock continues,  
"The prophets spoke to Israel **in times of crisis**. In fact, **historical** and **moral** crisis, . . . Had there been no crisis, there would have been little need for the prophets. When the list of literary prophets is posted, it will be noted that they are clustered around critical historical events or eras." [Bullock, 11]

## V. Where do the Minor Prophets Fit into History?

- A. When we read the Minor Prophets, in fact any prophetic passages, we'll often find passages which mix both near-term and far-afield predictions. This is one of a number of difficulties we face in grasping the application of such passages
1. In some instances, the passage strictly concerns the historical setting of the prophet.
  2. In other instances, portions of a passage concern a far future setting—even future to our own day.
  3. Most often, passages contain a mix of both elements.
  4. Therefore, it behooves us to know as much as is practical concerning the historical setting within which the prophet gave his oracle if we are to make a reasonable judgment concerning the topics and events he has in view.

- B. The Minor Prophets span all the way from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Their writings can be grouped into three broad ranges of dates [Freeman, 137]:
1. Assyrian Period – concerns the period from shortly after the division of the kingdom following Solomon up to and shortly following the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 B.C.  
Obadiah (845)<sup>2</sup>, Joel (835), Jonah (782), Hosea (760), Amos (760), Micah (735), Nahum (650).
  2. Neo-Babylonian Period – concerns the period from after the fall of the Northern Kingdom up to shortly following the fall of the Southern Kingdom to Babylonia in 586 B.C.  
Zephaniah (640), Habakkuk (609), Haggai (520).
  3. Persian Period (decree of Cyrus in 538 BC brought return from exile)  
Zechariah (520), Malachi (433).
- C. This takes us to the close of the OT canon.  
“Malachi was regarded by the Hebrews as the last genuine prophet in Israel. According to I Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41, there were no canonical prophets in the Hebrew nation during the intertestamental period. During this period, apocalyptic and religious literature flourished; however; none of it emerged as canonical.” [Freeman, 130]
- D. What Nations were the main concern of the Minor Prophets?
1. Israel (Samaria, Ephraim, Northern Kingdom) = Hosea, Amos
  2. Judah (Southern Kingdom) = Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.
  3. Nineveh = Jonah, Nahum
  4. Edom = Obadiah

## VI. References

Bullock, C. Hassell, *An Introduction To the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988).

Freeman, Hobart E, *An introduction To The Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968).

Unger, M. F., Harrison, R. K., Vos, H. F., Barber, C. J., & Unger, M. F. (1988). *The new Unger's Bible dictionary*. Revision of: Unger's Bible dictionary. 3rd ed. c1966. (Rev. and updated ed.). Chicago: Moody Press.

---

2

There is some uncertainty as to whether Obadiah prophesied in the Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian period. Bullock places his prophecy in the Neo-Babylonian period [Bullock, 12] whereas Freeman places his prophecy in the Assyrian period [Freeman. 139]. “Smith has remarked that Obadiah ‘has been tossed out of one century into another by successive critics, till there exists in their estimates of its data a difference of nearly 600 years’ (899 to soon after 312 B.C.). The main two criteria for dating the book are the devastation of Jerusalem [Oba. 1:10-14] and Obadiah’s relationship to Jeremiah 49. Either of those can be answered more than one way, so neither of them is the kind of criteria that will produce dogmatic results.” [Bullock, 260].