



WHO ARE THE MINOR PROPHETS?

The Minor Prophets are found in that section of your Bible where the pages are likely still crisp and clean and new. No corners have been dog-eared; no sentences underlined; no margins filled with notes.

The "Minor Prophets" is the collective term for the twelve books that conclude the Old Testament: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These books are called *minor* because they are short in comparison to the *major* prophetic writings. For example, the book of Isaiah contains 66 chapters; the book of Obadiah, only one. In the history of God's people, prophets like Moses and Elijah and Daniel loom large because of the dramatic stories associated with their ministry. By contrast, Amos and Habakkuk and Zephaniah tend to recede into the background. But make no mistake: the minor prophets pack a major punch.

WHEN DID THE MINOR PROPHETS WRITE AND PREACH?

The twelve minor prophets ministered during a 300-year period that spans three key phases of Israel's history: the Divided Kingdom, the Exile, and the Restoration.

Place a mental peg in your memory to mark the year 1000 BC. This was the time of King David, the most famous of the Israelite kings. Under David (and Solomon after him) God's people experienced a "golden age" of peace and prosperity. But after Solomon's death in 931 BC, civil war erupted, and the people of Israel were **divided** into two nations: Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south). The period of biblical history between 931 BC and 722 BC is therefore referred to as the *Divided Kingdom*.

During this time, the people of Israel and Judah were sometimes allies and sometimes enemies. Spiritual renewal was followed by spiritual decline; seasons of prosperity gave way to seasons



of adversity. Finally, in 722 BC, the northern kingdom (Israel) was conquered by Assyria, and its people were taken into exile. Judah lasted for another 130 years, but it too succumbed to exile in 586 BC when Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians. This ushers in the period of biblical history called the *Exile*.

Then, in 539 BC, the Persian king Cyrus directed the Jewish people to return to their homeland and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. (The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah focus on this rebuilding effort.) This short-lived period of biblical history is called the *Restoration*. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah, ministering around 520 BC, challenged God's people to be faithful to the work of restoration and rebuilding. The prophet Malachi - the last prophetic voice of the Old Testament, writing around 420 BC - confronted the people's unfaithfulness and disobedience at this time in history.

Bottom: *The Plumb Line and the City*, by Clark Fitzgerald (Inspired by Amos 7:1-15)



HOW DO THE MINOR PROPHETS FIT INTO THE NARRATIVE ARC OF SCRIPTURE?

The Minor Prophets stand in the middle of the Bible - and in the middle of redemptive history. From this vantage point, they point back and they point forward.

The Minor Prophets point back... to God's *covenant*. Covenant is the most important theme in the prophets - and in fact, in all of Scripture. All of God's dealings with his people are rooted in his covenant promises.

Remember Abraham? Early in the biblical narrative, God made a promise to him:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing (Genesis 12:2).

This covenant is later expanded and reiterated to Abraham's descendants at Mount Sinai:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel (Exodus 19:5-6).

God has pledged his faithfulness to Abraham and to his descendants. He is *their* God. They are *his* people. His promise is unconditional: God *will* make of them a great nation. And yet it's also conditional: "*if* you will obey my voice and keep my covenant." God has committed himself to his people, but he expects his people to be faithful to him.

As the Old Testament unfolds, this dynamic of *covenant* grounds all of God's dealings with his people. When the people are faithful, they experience the blessings of covenant loyalty. But when they are unfaithful, they experience the curses of disobedience. (See Deuteronomy 30:15-20 for the simplest statement of the covenant



blessings and curses). The Minor Prophets continually point back to these covenant themes, urging the people to return to the Lord and warning them of the consequences of disloyalty.

The Minor Prophets point forward... to the Lord Jesus Christ.

At various moments during the Old Testament, it looks as though God's people will finally be faithful covenant-keepers! Perhaps when Joshua leads them into the promised land... perhaps when David establishes peace and stability... perhaps when Josiah institutes political and religious reform? But even after the curse of Exile... even after the Restoration... even after rebuilding Jerusalem... the people continue to display idolatry, apathy, and disobedience. By the time we turn the last page of Malachi, we're left wondering: is there ANY hope for God's people? Is there ANYONE who can faithfully fulfill the demands of the covenant?

The prophets hint that there is a coming deliverer, a coming ruler, a coming messenger, who will restore hope and reconstitute the people of God. The Minor Prophets are full of Messianic promises and expectations.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son (Hosea 11:1).



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, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

"In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name," declares the Lord who does this (Amos 9:11-12).

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days (Micah 5:2).

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts (Malachi 3:1).

To read the Minor Prophets rightly, then, is to read them in light of the whole biblical storyline. From our vantage point in redemptive history, we can see clearly what the original hearers of these prophecies could only dimly perceive. Jesus is the covenant keeper. Jesus is the faithful remnant. Jesus is the true Israel. Jesus is the one who fulfills all the demands of the covenant, receives its blessings, and shares them with his people.

Left: Bethlehem, The Flight to Egypt, by Joseph Mallord William Turner



WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF THE MINOR PROPHETS?

Modern people often envision a prophet as a **foreteller** - one who predicts the future. But in fact, a prophet's main task was **forthtelling.** The prophets were preachers. Like preachers today, they proclaimed the word of God and called people to respond in faith and obedience.

One way to understand the role of the prophet is to think of him as a **covenant prosecutor.** Imagine a prosecuting attorney building a case against an accused defendant, seeking to establish a clear verdict. Many of the passages in the Minor Prophets follow exactly this sort of "courtroom" script:

Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the Lord... for the Lord has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel. (Micah 6:1-2)

Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. (Hosea 4:1-4)

I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations... (Joel 3:2)

God has an indictment against his people. They are guilty of idolatry, false worship, injustice, and oppression. So he sends his prophets to build his case against them, laying out the charges and the evidence.



In light of this, a prophet's declarations always have a strong element of **conditionality.** The possibility of repentance could change the verdict entirely! Jonah's strong words to Nineveh seemed to contain no hint of conditionality: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). Yet when the people turned from their sin, "God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10).

Some readers - and even some scholars - see this as evidence that God changes his mind, that God doesn't know the future, or that God's words are not reliable. But in fact, this conditionality is built into the stipulations of the covenant: "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children... then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you" (Deuteronomy 30:1-3). God sends prophets to remind his people of their covenant obligations, with the goal of spurring them to repentance. Because God is just, he is willing to bring judgment. But because he is merciful, he pleads with his people to repent and return to him.

To say it another way: the prophets did not always state *what would be*; they often spoke only of *what might be*, in hopes of provoking a different outcome. According to scholars Richard Fuhr and Gary Yates, "the specific mission of the Minor Prophets was threefold: to call the people to repentance so that they might avert divine judgment, to warn them of the judgment of exile when there was no repentance, and then to offer hope for the future" (*The Message of the Twelve*, 1).



IMPORTANT THEMES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

The Sovereignty of God over the Nations

Like we are now, God's people back then were troubled by the unrest and upheaval around them: political instability, threats to economic prosperity, uncertainty about the future. So the prophets consistently proclaimed the truth of God's dominion and authority. In some of the Minor Prophets - for instance, the books of Obadiah and Nahum - this is the central and dominant theme, while in others it is one theme among many. But it's impossible to read the Minor Prophets without gaining the clear sense that God is sovereign over all nations and over all of history.

Divine Judgment

Reading the prophets isn't always pleasant. The prophets don't offer us docile and pleasant platitudes; they speak often of divine judgment. These announcements of judgment often take the form of oracles or speeches proclaiming "woe" upon a nation or people. Though proclamations of divine judgment can sound harsh to modern ears, we must remember that they are a crucial part of the message of salvation. God's salvation is salvation *from* judgment! And if God is holy and good and righteous, his judgment is necessary in order for evil to be eliminated from the world. When reading the prophets, we must remember the "time signature" of their words; though the *immediate* message for God's people is judgment, the hope of salvation lies in the background. As Fuhr and Yates observe, "the prophets typically proclaim... a blessed future to come *after* the ashes of judgment have been cleared."

Covenant Blessing & Cursing

The language of blessing and cursing may sound strange to modern ears, but it's foundational to covenant relationship. Through Moses, God promised to bless his people if they were faithful to him. On the other hand, if they rebelled against him, he promised they would experience painful consequences (see Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28).



The Minor Prophets consistently apply the logic of blessing and cursing. Why are God's people experiencing exile and oppression? Because God is cursing them, in faithfulness to his covenant promises. Why should they return to the Lord? Because he promises blessing if they do.

Blessing and cursing help us understand the faithfulness of God more fully. God is faithful **to his word.** He does what he says he will do. When he blesses his people in response to their obedience to him, he is being faithful. And when he curses his people in response to their disobedience, he is being faithful. God's *judgment* is an expression of his faithfulness.

Similarly, if a modern parent threatens to discipline a child for disobedience but never actually *does*, that parent is not faithful to his or her word. Faithful parents do what they say they will do - which includes discipline. "The prophets announced that if the people did not turn from their sinful ways, the Lord would judge them by bringing against them the covenant curses that Moses had warned them about" (Fuhr & Yates, *The Message of the Twelve*, 52).

The Day of the Lord

The prophets consistently announce a coming "day of the Lord" using strong de-creation imagery:

the day of the Lord is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! ...the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. (Joel 2:1-2, 10)

References to this "day" are liberal throughout the Minor Prophets (see, for example, Amos 5:18; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7; Micah 7:12; Zechariah 9:16). Tracing this theme through the rest of Scripture, we find that the Day of the Lord has a short-term, a medium-term, and a long-term fulfillment. In the short term, events like the fall of Jerusalem were clearly understood as a



manifestation of the Day of the Lord (see Zephaniah 1:4-18). In the medium term, the Apostle Peter identifies the Day of Pentecost as a manifestation of "the Day of the Lord" as promised by the prophet Joel (see Acts 2:17-21). And 1 Thessalonians 5:2 speaks of a final day of judgment yet to come in the future. "The Day of the Lord is both near and far and refers to any time Yahweh dramatically intervenes in human history" (Fuhr & Yates, *The Book of the Twelve*, 51).

The Remnant

Because they are preaching to God's people as a whole, the prophets speak in broad and sweeping terms: "the Lord has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel" (Micah 6:2). But they also hold out the hope that for the sake of his covenant, God will not destroy his people completely. He will preserve a faithful remnant:

Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:15)

I will gather the remnant of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture... (Micah 2:12)

But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, declares the Lord of hosts... as you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing. Fear not, but let your hands be strong. (Zechariah 8:11-13)

During the Restoration period, God calls the returning exiles his *remnant*: "...the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet: 'Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel... and to all the *remnant* of the people...'" (Haggai 2:1-2). When this remnant fails to be faithful to the Lord, the question arises: who *are* the faithful Israelites who will inherit God's promises to Abraham,



Moses, and David? The stage is set for the coming of Jesus. He is a "remnant of one." He is the faithful descendant of David, the one who stands in the line of Abraham, who will succeed where all Israel has failed. (This also helps to explain why Matthew and Luke focus on the genealogy of Jesus, showing him to be a descendant of David and of Abraham - see Matthew 1:1 and Luke 3:23-38).

The Promised Messiah

"Some of the most important Messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Bible are found in the Book of the Twelve" (Fuhr & Yates, *The Message of the Twelve*, 57). As you read the Minor Prophets, you'll encounter passages that sound strangely familiar. That's because the Minor Prophets are quoted frequently by the New Testament authors. For instance, in Matthew's account of the magi's visit to King Herod, he quotes Micah 5:2:

And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" (Matthew 2:4-6)

Because the Minor Prophets fall at the end of the Old Testament canon - and because by that time, the failures of Israel's kings, rulers, and judges are quite clear - the Minor Prophets are laced with Messianic hope.



WHAT IS OUR HOPE IN PREACHING THROUGH THE MINOR PROPHETS?

For You to Love the Bible More

The Minor Prophets are a literary masterpiece. In studying them, we hope you fall in love with the Scriptures all over again. We want you to be captivated by the artistry, creativity, and literary brilliance of the Bible.

For You to Hear "The Word of the Lord"

In preaching through the Minor Prophets, we want to attend to God's voice. We want to sit up and pay attention as the prophets say "Thus says the Lord!" In this section of Scripture, God speaks to us about issues like social injustice, wealth and poverty, political engagement, tithing, and marriage. We need to hear and heed the word of the Lord on these matters.

For You to Be Comforted & Convicted

If all you receive from the Minor Prophets is comfort, you're probably not listening very well. And if all you hear is conviction, you're probably not listening well either! Every reader of the Minor Prophets should be comforted by God's covenant promises, and also convicted about his or her own unfaithfulness.

For You to Return to the Lord

"Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you" (Zechariah 1:3). This call to return echoes throughout the Minor Prophets (see Hosea 11:5; Joel 2:12; Amos 4:8-9; Malachi 3:7). And God's word to his people *then* is still his word to his people *now*. Like the Israelites, WE have strayed. WE have departed from the Lord. Our great hope and longing as we preach the Minor Prophets is to see a massive turning to the Lord. We want to see God's people return to him with renewed joy, renewed love, renewed loyalty. We want YOU to return to the Lord.







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