

INTRODUCTION TO THE MINOR PROPHETS (RICHARD ALAN FUHR)

The so-called “Minor Prophets” are anything but minor—as a collection, they speak with a unified voice the message of God to a wayward people during the most tumultuous times in Israel’s history. To know these prophets and their associated books, one must understand the context into which they speak, their place within the history of Israel and Judah, and their place within the revelation of God’s Word. Their message, while cast within an ancient context, is relevant for today so much as it informs the people of God with a knowledge of the character and ways of God, challenges the church with a call to a higher social ethic, and comforts the people of God with a message of hope and restoration.

Historical Context

The Minor Prophets, also referred to as “The Twelve,” preached during a period spanning more than three centuries, from approximately 780 to 420 BC. Their ministries can generally be divided between the pre-exilic and post-exilic periods, and range between the eras of Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian dominance. Two major judgments occur within that timeframe that provide a backdrop for many of the Minor Prophets: the Assyrian conquest of Samaria and the subsequent deportation of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and exile of the people of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC. Following judgment, the post-exilic prophets also speak to issues concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and restoration in the land while under the rule of the Persian Empire. Within the scope of these events, the mission of the Twelve was to warn the people of impending divine judgment as a consequence of covenant disloyalty, to call the people to repentance as a means to avert judgment, and to provide a message of hope for restoration after judgment and exile.

Arrangement of the Prophecies

The arrangement of the “Book of the Twelve,” or the Minor Prophets as we know them, follows a loosely chronological arrangement, beginning with the pre-exilic books and closing with post-exilic books. Among the twelve books, six (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah) provide historical references in their introductions that aid in determining a historical setting for the prophet and his oracles. Additional historical references and allusions with the books provide adequate clues for chronological setting, with only the books of Joel and Obadiah remaining obscure in historical context. The prophets Hosea (750–715 BC), Amos (760–750 BC), Micah (735–690 BC), and Jonah (785–775 BC) are set within the Assyrian Period while Nahum (650–630 BC) bridges the gap between Assyrian and Babylonian dominance. The prophets Zephaniah (630–620 BC) and Habakkuk (620 BC) proclaim the impending Babylonian exile, while Haggai (520 BC) and Zechariah (520–518 BC) speak to the first generation of returnees out of exile from Babylon. Malachi (450–430 BC) closes the corpus with exhortations to a later generation already established back into the land, with Joel and Obadiah remaining ambiguous in the timeline of the Twelve.

Distinctive Traits and Unity

One of the distinctive traits that characterize the twelve Minor Prophets is their literary and theological unity. The use of catchwords and recurring themes act as threads lacing one book to the next in their respective order. Hosea’s vision of agricultural blessing as a reflection of future restoration (Hos 2:18–23; 14:4–9) is linked to Joel’s observation of present agricultural destruction in a disastrous locust plague (Joel 1:2–12). Joel’s anticipation of the Lord one day “roaring from Zion” against the nations and in defense of his people (Joel 3:16) ironically shifts in the opening of Amos to the Lord “roaring from Zion” in judgment against his people (over guilt more treacherous than that of the nations; Amos 1:2). The concluding vision of Amos has God’s restored people “possessing the remnant of Edom,” inferring God’s adoption of Gentiles into his own (Amos 9:12). Obadiah follows with God’s judgment against historical Edom, culminating in the house of Jacob possessing the possessions of Edom (Obad 17).

Obadiah and Jonah are linked by similar attention given to Gentile nations. Whereas the messenger sent in Obadiah proclaims judgment, Jonah is instead sent to preach repentance. Jonah concludes with the affirmation that God is “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and one who relents from sending disaster” (Jonah 4:2)—applied even to the Gentiles. Micah echoes this same affirmation but applied once again to God’s own people (Mic 7:18–20). Turning from mercy back to judgment and echoing the same language of Jonah 4:2, Nahum opens with the statement that the Lord is “slow to anger but great in power; the Lord will never leave the guilty unpunished” (Nah 1:3).

As the book of Nahum concludes with long awaited justice against the violence of the Assyrian Empire, the book of Habakkuk begins with the prophet’s plea for present justice over the violence observed among God’s own people in Judah (Hab 1:2–4). God responds to his prophet’s plea for justice by raising up the Babylonians as his instrument of judgment against Judah and the city of Jerusalem, the destruction of which is subsequently laid out in descriptive warnings by the book of Zephaniah.

As Zephaniah concludes with the promise of restoration and the return of Judah’s captives (Zeph 3:20), Haggai and Zechariah follow with the first stage of returnees reoccupying the land, yet still in need of further exhortation and repentance. The call to “return to me” echoes throughout the last of the Minor Prophets, drawing the cord that links Malachi to Zechariah (Zech 1:3; Mal 3:7), and thematically, all the way back to Hosea (Hos 6:1; 14:1).

Other key theological concepts in the Minor Prophets include the impending Day of the



Lord and the expectation of a New David that encapsulates the figurehead of a restored covenant. The Minor Prophets place a special emphasis on the coming Day of the Lord, with the theme looming large in books like Joel and Zephaniah. Throughout the Minor Prophets the concept is applied to the immediate acts of God in judgment and exile (fulfilled in the historical context of the prophets) as well as the eschatological realities of judgment and restoration (acts of God yet to be fulfilled in the distant future). The coming Day of the Lord is applied to both Israel as well as the nations, with the exact nature of "that Day" (blessing or judgment, future or contemporaneous) always determined by context. The Day is simply a time of divine intervention and engagement in the affairs of man; it is a time when God acts in response to the acts of Israel and the nations. In the time of Amos, the leadership of Israel expected the Day of the Lord to be a time of light (blessing), but Amos warned that it was coming upon them as a day of darkness (Amos 5:18). The prophet Joel proclaimed that a devastating locust plague was the Day of the Lord but extended that idea to warn of an even more severe judgment unless the people would repent (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11). Furthermore, he foresaw (as only a prophet can) a future Day of the Lord when God would judge the nations in "the winepress of his wrath," leading to the final restoration of Israel "on that Day" (Joel 2:31; 3:1, 14). The theme of the Day of the Lord threads its way through the Minor Prophets, always anticipating God's intervention and the fulfillment of his program in the affairs of man.

While most of the Minor Prophets anticipate a day of restoration voiced through salvation oracles, some references speak more specifically of the Davidic figurehead that rises to fulfill these restoration promises. Early within the collection of the Twelve a new "head" is promised for Israel, "David their king" (Hos 1:11; 3:5). With his ascension, the "tabernacle of David," would be rebuilt, and the fortunes of the people restored (Amos 9:11–15). Like the former David, this future ruler would come from Bethlehem, shepherding the flock of Israel (Mic 5:2–4). The post-exilic Minor Prophets continue these messianic expectations with the people's reestablishment into the land. Haggai clarifies that the appointment of Zerubbabel as governor of Judah was proof of God's commitment to restore the headship of the house of David (Hag 2:20–23). Zechariah furthermore points to the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest as evidence of the Davidic "Branch" anticipated by the prophets (Zech 3:8–10; 6:9–15).

In the tradition of Isaiah, the messianic prophecies in Zechariah present the future Davidic king as a humble servant, riding on a donkey, speaking peace to the nations yet ruling with dominion "to the ends of the earth" (Zech 9:9–10). This would be the one rejected by "piercing," yet received by the house of David in national repentance (Zech 12:10–14). These prophecies anticipate the future Davidic messiah, with the New Testament making clear that these are fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 21:1–5; John 19:37).

Contemporary Relevance

Although the Minor Prophets speak of future events, including those related to the coming Messiah (his first and second coming), the relevance of the Minor Prophets for today can often be seen in their preaching to their contemporaries. The Twelve railed against many of the same issues that we face in the twenty-first century: social injustice, hypocritical ritualism, idolatry, and spiritual apathy. The exact nature of these circumstances changes from their ancient context to our modern one, but the core issues are easily identified between the two.

The prophets Amos and Micah voiced in strong language God's concern for the poor and the responsibility of godly leadership to dispense justice among his people. They spoke out against the abuse of the powerless within society and made clear the Lord's indignation for those who "afflicted the just and tread down the poor" (Amos 5:10–12). They described injustice as a form of cannibalism, "eating the flesh from my people" (Mic 3:3) and called upon the people of God to act justly, love mercy, and walk in humility before their Creator (Mic 6:8). In the face of social injustice, the leadership of Israel and Judah "multiplied transgression" through a warped sense of the merits of ritualism, paying homage to God while "crushing the needy" (Amos 4:1–5). The prophets make clear the Lord's opinion on such matters: "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies" (Amos 5:21).

The prophet Hosea is best known among the Twelve for framing out the sin of idolatry as a form of spiritual adultery, even called by God to marry a "woman of adulteries" as vivid picture of Israel's relationship to God (Hos 1:2). Idolatry was a constant religious scourge during the divided kingdom period (930–586 BC), its effects constantly pulling Israel and Judah away from the Lord their God, resulting in judgment and exile (2Kgs 17:7–23; 24:20). Setting the tone of indictment for the Twelve, Hosea lays out a case against Israel's unfaithfulness, picturing her betrayal in striking metaphors, the most prominent of which pictured in the prophet's own marriage.

After the exile concluded, the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi no longer confronted the stain of idolatry—the exile purged idolatry from the land and its people. In place of idolatry came an insidious temptation to spiritual apathy. The post-exilic prophets called the people to consider their misplaced priorities and renew their commitment to the Lord. Malachi directly confronted the pathetic excuses of the people and their leadership over the sin of spiritual apathy, calling upon them to return to the Lord even as they blamed the Lord for turning away from them (Mal 3:7). The prophet promised that the Lord was discerning between the wicked and the righteous, those who served God and those who did not (Mal 3:13–15), and that they would not be forgotten in the final judgment (Mal 3:16–18).

The enduring message of the Minor Prophets is a call for the people of God to turn from sin and back to the God who desires to pour out his lovingkindness upon them. It is a call to walk in faithfulness to the God who is always faithful, a call to remember God for "in that Day" he will vindicate his people (Mal 4:2). It is a call to love justice and mercy and to walk obediently before God (Mic 6:8). And it is a message of hope and expectation that God will one day remove the shame of judgment and establish a King to rule over his people (Hos 3:5; Zeph 3:14–20). Let us not neglect the very significant message from these so-called "Minor Prophets."