

Profit from

# The Minor Prophets

## 1: Who, What, Why, Where, When?

### Who Were The Minor Prophets?

The Minor Prophets were the authors of the last twelve books in our Old Testament: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Although each of their books is worthy of study on its own you will see, as we go on, it is helpful to think about them as a unit, not as twelve unconnected documents.

### Why Minor Prophets?

It was Augustine of Hippo who first called them Minor Prophets around 425AD. He was not suggesting that theirs were less important than the other fifty-four books — far from it. It was because, although they are not the shortest books in the Old Testament, they are the shortest of the Old Testament's prophetic books.

To get an idea of their importance think of the way the Minor Prophets are referred to in the New Testament. When Jesus said, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice' (Matthew 12:7) he was quoting Hosea; when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (see Matthew 21:1- 5) he was fulfilling the words of Zechariah; when Paul wrote, 'The righteous shall live by faith' (Romans 1:17) he was quoting Habakkuk; and when on the Day of Pentecost Peter told the crowds that these were 'the last days' (Acts 2:17) he was quoting Joel. There are lots of other examples, but these should be enough to convince you — these little books have some very big things to say.

### What Is A Prophet?

The Old Testament prophets were all ordinary people — they were certainly not picked for their exceptional abilities. James says Elijah was a man 'with a nature like ours' (James 5:17). He was prone to the same failures and weaknesses, exposed to the same temptations and trials and liable to the same mood swings and inconsistencies.

The important thing about prophets is that God chose to reveal to them how He saw their world and what He intended to do about it. In that sense they were "seers" — they were privileged to see the mind of God. But they were also "sayers" — they not only saw the mind of God, they were charged with proclaiming what they had seen.

The prediction of future events is a major element in every prophetic book in the Old Testament but no true prophet foretold the future to satisfy men's curiosity about what was about to happen. When a prophet spoke in the name of the Lord it was always to bring people to repentance, faith and obedience. In declaring his message the prophet's emphasis was on the fact that he was God's spokesman. The Old Testament prophets spoke in God's name and used the very words God wanted them to use. Old Testament prophecy was an infallible God using fallible men to bring an infallible word to fallible people. God guaranteed the integrity of every word He gave them to speak.

For that reason, the prophets were subject to a very stringent test.

"If you say in your heart, "How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken" when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him."

Deuteronomy 18:21- 22

God does not say that if someone claims to be a prophet and his prophecy comes to pass, this proves it to have been genuine. What He says is that if the prophecy is not fulfilled the so-called prophet is not genuine. Notice how strict that test is.

## Where And When Did They Prophecy?

Around 1,400 – 1,500BC God miraculously delivered His people, the children of Israel, from captivity in Egypt and, after forty years wandering in the desert, brought them to the Promised Land of Canaan. The nation of Israel was born.

For the next 300 years Israel's national government was in the hands of judges. It passed to Eli (a priest and a judge) and eventually to Samuel (a judge and a prophet), who both served as judicial and religious leaders. When, in the days of Samuel, Israel was threatened by invasion, the people demanded a king — like the kings of the other nations around them — someone to unify the nation and set it on a firm footing.

Saul was anointed as the first king of Israel. He proved a failure and the kingship fell next to David. It was David who established Jerusalem as the capital city. He was succeeded by Solomon, who strengthened the nation's unity by building an impressive temple in Jerusalem as a focal point of his people's worship. Things were looking good — that was Israel's high point — but they were soon to change.

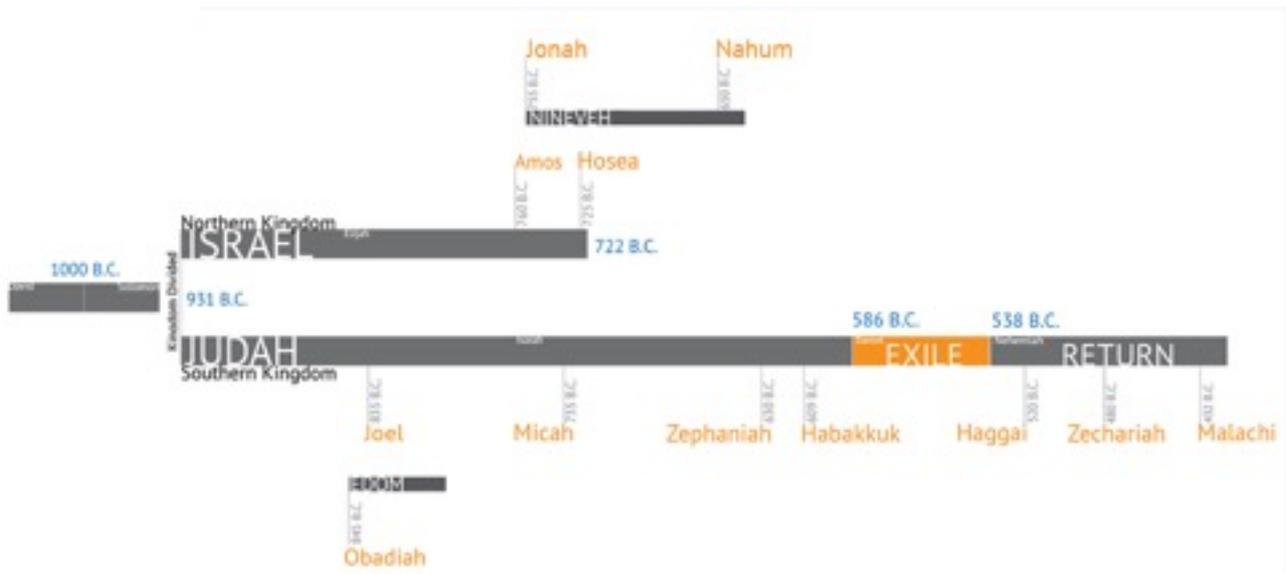
Around 930BC Solomon died and his place was taken by his son, Rehoboam, whose economic policy and other follies caused ten of the nation's twelve tribes to revolt and form a breakaway northern kingdom which adopted the name of Israel (it is sometimes called Jacob or Ephraim), leaving the two tribes of Benjamin and Judah (together they are called Judah) in as a separate southern kingdom.

The northern kingdom started out steeped in idolatry and with a succession of nineteen wicked kings — the likes of Ahab — it just went downhill from there. God warned them. He sent Elijah and Elisha and Amos and Hosea. He endured their idolatry for 200 years but in the end, judgement came. Israel was over-run by the Assyrians, the dominant world power of the day. That was the end of the northern kingdom. The majority of its people were deported, foreigners were shipped in to replace them, the races mixed and their religions mixed. Those were the forefathers of the Samaritans we read about in the New Testament. They came to be despised by the Jews who belonged to the southern kingdom.

The southern kingdom of Judah fared somewhat better. It also had a succession of kings, but they were more of a mixed bag. Some, like Hezekiah, 'did what was right in the eyes of the Lord' (2 Kings 18:3) while others, like his son Manasseh, 'did what was evil in the sight of the Lord' (2 Kings 21:2). As the result of these radical changes of leadership Judah went on a spiritual roller-coaster ride of revival and recession but eventually in 586BC it too experienced the judgement of God for its unfaithfulness. In that year Babylon, which had conquered and replaced Assyria as the dominant power, under its king Nebuchadnezzar flattened Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and deported the cream of the population — events we read about at the beginning of the book of Daniel.

Unlike that of Israel, the exile of Judah was temporary. It lasted for about seventy years. By then the Babylonians had been overthrown by Cyrus, King of Persia, who issued an edict allowing any exiles living in his newly acquired territory to return home and reinstate their national gods. Many of the exiles from Judah took advantage of the programme and Zerubbabel was appointed to lead the first swathe of 50,000 deportees back to Jerusalem in 538BC. Others followed in 458BC and 444BC and Zerubbabel supervised the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, a project that took twenty-two years and was completed in 515BC. Seventy years later the walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt and in the years that followed the religious and social structure of the nation was gradually reconstituted.





The Minor Prophets' place in history falls between 800BC and 400BC, that is to say between a point some time after the kingdom divided and after Judah's return to Jerusalem. Placing the individual prophets within those four centuries is difficult, but here is what we do know:

- Hosea and Amos prophesied to Israel some time before 722Bc.
- Micah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah prophesied to Judah before the Babylonians ransacked it in 586Bc.
- Nahum also seems to have prophesied during this time.
- Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi prophesied to Judah after its return from Babylon.
- That leaves Joel, Obadiah and Jonah whose place within that time frame we cannot know for sure.

## What Was Their Message?

There are five themes that dominate their Minor Prophets' writings.

- The sovereignty of God.
- God's inevitable judgement against sin.
- God's amazing love.
- The call to get right with God.
- The promise of the Messiah.

Watch out for these themes as we study the twelve books over the coming weeks.

## In Preparation For Next Week

Next week we will look at the book of Obadiah. In preparation for that, read the whole book — it's only 21 verses! Also, beginning with Genesis 27:41 try to trace the relationship between Israel (Jacob) and Edom (Esau) through the Old Testament.