

The Prophets

Unlocking the Prophets

Finding one's way through the Old Testament, with its 39 books, can be a challenge at times. When it comes to the Minor Prophets, even the best Bible students might find themselves furtively consulting the table of contents.

What do we know about the prophets? Dr. John Nielson says, "God had always been clear about His expectations for His people. They were to worship Yahweh as He taught them and worship Him only. They were to obey His laws. They were to be distinct from the cultures around them by avoiding mixing with local religions and not intermarrying with them. They were to live lives that were righteous, holy, and just. But God's people repeatedly failed Him on every point, so God sent prophets who challenged them in regard to their disobedience, idolatry, empty worship, and injustice."*

During this unit of study, one of our sessions focuses on the words of Nahum (612 BC), a seldom-read Minor Prophet. Perhaps we can add a few helpful insights about the prophets of our Old Testament.

The Book of the Twelve

There are 17 prophet books in our Old Testament, starting with the most well-known prophet, Isaiah, and concluding with the last book in the Old Testament, Malachi. These 17 books are often broken down into two sections for study purposes; the 5 Major and 12 Minor Prophets. The designations, Major and Minor, have nothing to do with the relative importance of these books, but simply refer to their size. (Although Lamentations is very short, it is often connected with the prophet Jeremiah and thus linked with that Major Prophet.) The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

The 12 Minor Prophets are generally only a few chapters in length; Obadiah has one chapter while the longest books—Hosea and Zechariah—each have 14 chapters.

Before the time of Jesus, there are references in Jewish literature to "The Book of the Twelve" or "The Twelve Prophets," indicating that these books were likely able to be contained on a single scroll and were treated in many ways as a single book, even though the 12 messages they contain cover a wide time and topic range.

The Minor Prophets in Historical Context

The arrangement of the Minor Prophet books is roughly chronological, but not quite. While the Prophets fall at the end of the Old Testament, actually they fit chronologically into the scriptural story during the time of the Divided Monarchy and after. The Israelites

conquered and settled the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, who had taken over as political, military, and spiritual leader at the death of Moses.

After Joshua's death, the land of Israel, divided into sections by the 12 tribes, existed as a loose confederation with local leaders. From time to time, God raised up judges (like Gideon and Samson) to provide leadership, but the authority of the judges was usually temporary. Finally, Israel told their latest leader, Samuel, that they desired a king. God and Samuel relented on this issue and Israel crowned its first king, Saul. Saul was followed by David, who was followed by his son Solomon.

It was at this point that Israel suffered a civil war which pitted north against south. Israel divided into two sections, each with its own king. So, from Solomon's time, we see two kings, one in the north (which took the name Israel and had its headquarters at Samaria) and one in the south (which took the name Judea and had its headquarters at Jerusalem). This is the time we call the Divided Monarchy in Old Testament history.

During the Divided Monarchy, many of the kings turned out to be poor leaders, especially in a spiritual sense. Thus, the real spiritual leaders during the Divided Monarchy became the prophets, who were God's spokespersons, reminding the people of their promises to love and serve God and of the consequences for breaking their promises to God.

However, the people largely ignored the message of the prophets. As a result, first the north was conquered by their enemies (the Assyrians), then, about 100 years later, the south was conquered and exiled by their enemies (the Babylonians). After a period of captivity, these southern exiles were allowed to return to their land by the new world power (the Persians).

With this history in mind, we see more clearly where the prophets fit into the Old Testament story. If we divide this history into three sections, we arrive at these history sections regarding the prophets:

Time Period 1: Prophets warning the people before the north is conquered in 722 BC: Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah.

Time Period 2: Prophets warning the people after the fall of the north but preceding the final fall of the South in 587 BC: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Daniel, Ezekiel, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah.

Time Period 3: Prophets instructing the people who come back to Judea after the end of the Exile in 537 BC: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

The time of the Divided Monarchy is described in the books of 1, 2 Kings, and 2 Chronicles (Time Periods 1 and 2). The time of the return from the exile is described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (Time Period 3).

The Two-Tier Message of the Prophets

The message of the prophets can be viewed in two different ways, which makes them both interesting and sometimes frustrating to read.

The prophets preached forcefully to the people around, hoping and praying that they would hear and obey God's words. This dimension of the prophets' message we can describe as "forthtelling." As preachers do today, these Old Testament preachers "told forth" God's expectations to all who would listen. They preached to the north (Israel), the south (Judea), and even to their foreign neighbors. Micah had messages for both Israel and Judea, while Nahum's message is directed to the capital of the Assyrian nation.

The prophets did more than preach to their own generation. They often pointed beyond the current time and predicted events yet to come. In this sense they were "foretelling." They were seeing "before" their future (and sometimes even our future today) the things God had in store for the world, both good and bad, as the Spirit enabled them.

So, when we read the prophets, we have to read their writings on two levels: that which pertained to the time in which they actually lived, and that which had meaning for their future.

The Prophets Were Never Popular

As we look at the prophets, we see in them both hope and judg-

ment, good news and bad news. The good news they proclaimed said that if the people would return to God, they would be blessed. The bad news they proclaimed stated that if the people continued to fall away from God, their world in turn would fall around them.

The key to their message was change: behaviors and priorities needed to be changed. But, as with all people, change comes hard and those who call for change are often ridiculed or ignored. The life of a prophet was often one of struggle and strife. The message went largely unheeded. They were laughed at and worse—some were even persecuted. Yet they boldly proclaimed God's message of grace.

In the end, the people reaped what they had sown and experienced the judgment of God. But even in God's judgment, the prophets could still see God's love as faithful and persistent. It was the prophets who predicted that God would, at the right time in the future, send a Messiah who would enable people to find their way back to God.

The message to return to God and to experience His love and to be saved from His judgment is the message the prophets still proclaim today. People still resist the call to change. But as we have seen through the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah who did come as predicted some 2,000 years ago, the prophets, including those elusive Minor Prophets, speak the truth.

*John Nielson *The Prophets: Hearing the Timeless Message of God* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2014), 4.

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