

Introduction to the Minor Prophets

Dr. Steven R. Cook

The word *prophet* translates the Hebrew word נָבִי *nabi* (Grk. προφήτης *prophetes*), which means “speaker, herald, preacher,”¹ and refers to one who was called to be the spokesman for another; for example, it was used of Aaron who was the spokesman for Moses (Ex.7:1-2). The prophets were primarily men, but did include women such as Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Deborah (Jdg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Ki. 22:14), and Anna (Luke 2:36). They were channels of communication who received God’s revelation directly and then communicated it to others (Ex. 4:12; Jer. 1:9; Amos 1:3), and sometimes they served as intercessors to God (Gen. 20:7; Ex. 32:10-14; 1 Sam. 12:17, 19). There were true prophets to be obeyed (Deut. 18:18; 34:10-11; 1 Sam. 3:20; 2 Chron. 25:15; 28:9; Hag. 1:13; Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11) and false prophets to be ignored (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:21-22; Neh. 6:12-13; Jer. 23:25-28; Matt. 7:15; 24:24; Acts 13:6; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 1 John 4:1-3; Rev. 2:20). In the NT, the gift of prophecy was for the edification of others (1 Cor. 14:3).

We know about specific prophets such as Elijah and Elisha because they’re mentioned in the writings of others (1 Ki. 17:1-2; 19:15-21), but there were numerous unnamed prophets mentioned as well (1 Sam. 10:5; 19:20; 1 Ki. 18:4). Of all the prophets mentioned in Scripture, only sixteen wrote books, and these are classified into two groups known as the Major Prophets and Minor Prophets. This distinction is based on the overall size of their writings and not their importance. The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.² The Minor Prophets are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Some of the Minor Prophets were called to preach to the ten northern tribes of Israel and others to the two southern tribes of Judah, and their ministries span a period of roughly four hundred years.

¹ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 661–662.

² English translations of the Bible place Daniel among the prophets, and there is good cause for this, since Daniel received direct revelation from God and was called a prophet by Jesus (Matt. 24:15). Daniel is also listed among the prophets in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament). However, the Hebrew Bible—called the Tanakh, an acronym for the Torah (Law), Nebi’im (Prophets), and Kethuvim (Writings)—places Daniel among the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, etc.). It’s possible that the book of Daniel was listed under the Writings in the Hebrew Bible because his words and life modeled the wisdom one needed to live successfully in a pagan culture. Also, unlike the other prophets, Daniel was not called to deliver a message to others which demanded behavioral and social reform.

In Jewish tradition the Minor Prophets are referred to as *the Book of the Twelve* because they were all written on a single scroll. The English Bible follows the order set forth in the Hebrew Bible, but this order is not chronological. The following charts provide an overview of prophet, audience, approximate date of ministry, his contemporaries, and the world power that was often the prevailing threat upon God's people.

Overview of the Twelve Minor Prophets ³
--

Prophet	Audience	Date B.C.	Contemporaries	World Power
Hosea	Israel	756-725	Isaiah, Amos, Micah	Assyria
Joel	Judah Pre-exilic	830-810	Elisha	Assyria
Amos	Israel	760-757	Hosea	Assyria
Obadiah	Judah (Edom)	848	Elijah	Assyria
Jonah	Nineveh	ca. 800	None	Assyria
Micah	Judah Pre-exilic	735-690	Isaiah, Hosea	Assyria
Nahum	Judah Pre-exilic	ca. 640	Zephaniah	Assyria
Habakkuk	Judah Pre-exilic	608-597	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel	Babylonia
Zephaniah	Judah Pre-exilic	640-630	Nahum, Jeremiah	Assyria
Haggai	Judah Post-exilic	520	Zechariah	Medo-Persia
Zechariah	Judah Post-exilic	520-475	Haggai, Esther	Medo-Persia
Malachi	Judah Post-exilic	ca. 435	Nehemiah	Medo-Persia

Chronological Order of the Twelve Minor Prophets
--

Prophet	Audience	Date B.C.	Contemporaries	World Power
Obadiah	Judah (Edom)	848	Elijah	Assyria
Joel	Judah Pre-exilic	830-810	Elisha	Assyria
Jonah	Nineveh	ca. 800	None	Assyria
Amos	Israel	760-757	Hosea	Assyria
Hosea	Israel	756-725	Isaiah, Amos, Micah	Assyria
Micah	Judah Pre-exilic	735-690	Isaiah, Hosea	Assyria
Nahum	Judah Pre-exilic	ca. 640	Zephaniah	Assyria
Zephaniah	Judah Pre-exilic	640-630	Nahum, Jeremiah	Assyria
Habakkuk	Judah Pre-exilic	608-597	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel	Babylonia
Haggai	Judah Post-exilic	520	Zechariah	Medo-Persia
Zechariah	Judah Post-exilic	520-475	Haggai, Esther	Medo-Persia
Malachi	Judah Post-exilic	ca. 435	Nehemiah	Medo-Persia

³ Some this material, including dates and audience, is derived from Gleason Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 3rd. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 346.

A Brief History of Israel

Israel—as the special people of God—began with a unilateral covenant which God made with Abraham, promising “I will make you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). Though Abraham had children by different women (Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah), the Abrahamic promises were restated only through Isaac (Gen. 17:19-21) and Jacob (Gen. 28:10-15). Because of a crippling encounter with God, Jacob’s name was changed to *Israel*, which means “he who wrestles with God” (Gen. 32:24-30). The sons of Israel (i.e. Jacob) went into captivity in Egypt for four hundred years as God had foretold (Gen. 15:13), and remained there until He called them out through His servants Moses and Aaron (Ex. 3:1-10). God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage through a series of ten plagues that destroyed Pharaoh and the nation (Exodus chapters 5-14). Then God entered into a bilateral covenant relationship with Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1-8), and gave them 613 commands—which comprise the Mosaic Law—and these commands are commonly divided into moral, civil, and ceremonial codes. Israel would know blessing if they obeyed God’s commands (Deut. 28:1-15), and cursing if they did not (Deut. 28:16-68). The nation of Israel remained in the wilderness for forty years while God tested and humbled them (Deut. 8:2-5). After Moses died, God brought the Israelites into the land of Canaan (i.e. the land promised to Abraham) under the leadership of Joshua (Deut. 31:23; Josh. 1:1-9), and there the land was divided, giving a portion to each of the descendants of Jacob. After Joshua died (Josh. 24:29-31), Israel repeatedly fell into idolatry and suffered divine discipline for their rebellion (read Judges). This went on for nearly three hundred years as Israel fell into a pattern of idolatry, after which God would send punishment, then the people would cry out to God, Who would relent of His judgment and send a judge to deliver them, then the people would serve God for a time, and then fall back into idolatry. The period of the Judges is marked by people who did not obey the Lord, but “did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). Samuel was the last of Israel’s judges, and then the people cried for a king because they wanted to be like the other nations (1 Sam. 8:4-5). God gave them their request (1 Sam. 8:22), and Saul became the first king in Israel (1 Sam. 10:1). Though Saul started well, he quickly turned away from the Lord and would not obey God’s commands. Saul reigned for approximately 40 years and his leadership was basically a failure (1 Sam. 13:1; cf. Acts 13:21). Later, God raised up David to be king in Israel (1 Sam. 16:1-13), and David reigned for 40 years and was an ideal king who followed God and encouraged others to do the same (1 Ki. 2:10-11). God decreed David’s throne would be established forever through one of his descendants (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:3-4), and this is Jesus (Luke 1:31-33). Solomon reigned for 40 years after David (1 Ki. 2:12; 11:42-43), and though He was wise

and did many good things (ruled well, built the temple, wrote Scripture, etc.), he eventually turned away from God and worshiped idols (1 Ki. 11:1-10). The nation was united under Saul, David, and Solomon.

Because of Solomon's idolatry (1 Ki. 11:1-10), God divided the kingdom into two parts (1 Ki. 11:11-41; 12:1-33). Solomon's son, Rehoboam, ruled over the two southern tribes (Judah) and Jeroboam ruled over the ten northern tribes (Israel). Israel—the northern kingdom—had 19 kings throughout its history and all were bad, as they led God's people into idolatry (i.e. the "sins of Jeroboam" 1 Ki. 16:31; 2 Ki. 3:3; 10:31; 13:2). The ten northern tribes came under divine discipline because of their idolatry and were destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Judah—the southern kingdom—had 20 kings throughout its history and 8 were good (some more than others), as they obeyed God and led others to do the same (they were committed to the Lord like David, 1 Ki. 15:11). However, Judah repeatedly fell into idolatry—as the 10 northern tribes had done—and were eventually destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The dispersion of Israel was promised by God if they turned away from Him and served other gods (Deut. 28:63-68).

The Purpose and Function of the Prophets

The OT prophets often served as guides and counselors to Israel's monarchical leaders, always directing them to live in conformity to God's law. When God's leaders and people turned away from Him, the prophet functioned as a prosecuting attorney, pointing out their violation of the law and the pending consequences if they did not turn back to the Lord (i.e. repent). If Israel persisted in sin, God would execute His judgments in ever increasing severity, until they were eventually destroyed and removed from the land. However, if God's people, while in captivity, would humble themselves and turn back to Him, He would forgive their sin and restore their blessings (Deut. 30:1-5; cf. Isa. 1:9).

It can be said of God's prophets: 1) they were individually called from all walks of life (unlike kings and priests who were to follow a strict lineage), 2) they were God's voice of revelation to His covenant people, 3) they were forthtellers and foretellers, 4) they served as God's prosecuting attorneys against those who violated His laws, 5) and they were reformers, calling God's people back to orthodoxy and obedience from the heart.

The voice of the prophet was heard in Israel only in times of national apostasy. God normally communicated with His people through kings and priests, but when these channels failed, He spoke through prophets. When a

prophet was chosen and anointed, he took precedence over both king and priest. There was no prophetic succession like that of Israel's kings and priests, but in time a prophetic order did emerge. The prophets were God's "ministers without portfolio." Drawn from all ranks and from all regions of the country, they owed allegiance to no one but God. They spoke with a divine authority and occasionally their words were reinforced by miracles. Speaking for God, the prophets addressed the moral depravities, social injustices, and spiritual apostasies of their times. Many of them were political statesmen of the highest order who understood the world of their day and had a wide view of the future.⁴

The twelve minor prophets of Israel and Judah are concerned with the behavior of God's people, who had turned away from a life of obedience to the Lord and continually slipped into moral decline. Though there are some future prophecies given in their writings, they are primarily prophesying direct revelation from God, who is concerned with their departure from His commands set forth in the Mosaic Law. Much of what the prophets preached to their audience is summarized in the words of Micah, who said, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what the LORD requires of you: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

Much of the language of the prophets is judgmental and assumes their hearers know they are in a covenant relationship with God which clearly pronounced promises of blessing and cursing dependent on whether they obey or disobey His Word (read Deut. 28:1-68; 30:15-20). The word *blessing* translates the Hebrew noun בְּרָכָה *berakah*, which occurs sixty seven times in the OT. In Deuteronomy 28, the word refers to the tangible goodness that makes life enjoyable and rich, which is promised to His covenant people, Israel, if they would simply obey His commands. Areas of blessing include:

1. All locations at all times (Deut. 28:3, 6).
2. Healthy offspring, crops, and livestock (Deut. 28:4-5, 8, 11).
3. Military success (Deut. 28:7).
4. Fruitful labor (Deut. 28:8, 12a).
5. International recognition and respect (Deut. 28:9-10).
6. Financial prosperity (Deut. 28:12b).
7. Serving as an international leader to other nations (Deut. 28:13).

⁴ John Phillips, *Exploring the Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009).

God also promised to bring curses, which would undo all the blessings and bring Israel down, if they disobeyed (Deut. 28:15-68). The Hebrew noun קִלְלָה *qelalah* is translated *curse* in Deuteronomy 28:15 & 45. “The basic meaning of this root sets forth the quality of ‘slightness’ as to provision, speed, or circumstance...this root is used of intending a lowered position, technically, to curse.”⁵ In Deuteronomy 28:16-19, Moses uses the Hebrew verb אָרַר *arar* six times, which means, “to bind with a curse.”⁶ The form of the verb is passive, which means a curse is received by the nation of Israel if they turn away from God. The cursing could be avoided if God’s people would simply obey the Lord (Deut. 28:15, 20, 45-47, 58-59, 62; 29:25-28; 30:17-18).

Israel repeatedly pursued idols and human alliances to satisfy their desires and solve their problems, and thus they entered into a prolonged period of rebellion. God eventually brought destruction, as He’d promised, and He used the Assyrians and Babylonians as His disciplinary agents. The Assyrians were aggressive in their efforts to conquer surrounding kingdoms, and God used them to destroy the 10 northern tribes known as Israel. This destruction occurred in 722 B.C. Later, God used the Babylonians to destroy the 2 southern tribes known as Judah, and this happened in 586 B.C. Eventually, God released His people from Babylonian captivity and many returned to repatriate the land from which they’d come, and God called several prophets to help them adjust, and to remind them about their obligation to keep the Mosaic Law and remain faithful.

In summary, the study of the Minor Prophets considers the lives and ministries of men who were called from all walks of life to serve as God’s messengers to His disobedient people. The prophets were forthtellers and foretellers, addressing issues such as monarchical pride, national idolatry, and socio-economic injustice on the poor; pronouncing judgment if God’s people would not turn back to Him. In addition to the promise of judgment, God also spoke positively of future blessings that He would bring upon His people; and this is based upon His merciful character, and His integrity to be faithful to His unconditional covenant promises through Abraham and David.

⁵ Leonard J. Coppes, “קִלְלָה 2028,” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 800.

⁶ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 91.