

# **The Minor Prophets**

*Mighty Messengers of God*

A Bible Study Workbook by Matthew Allen

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First written in 2006, this study on the Minor Prophets has gone far and wide. It was my first major attempt at an in-depth and comprehensive Bible study workbook. I found the work to be very rewarding and practical for my spiritual life. Over the years I have heard from many who have found great profit in going through this study. I am truly excited that you have planned to go through the Minor Prophets. This has been a rich and rewarding subject for me and I am confident that you will profit from the time you spend meditating on the concepts presented in the last twelve books of the Old Testament. The collection of twelve authors were indeed mighty messengers of God. Even though they lived centuries before us, their message needs to be heralded throughout our culture today.

As always there are several persons to thank in a project like this. Originally, I taught this material at Brownsburg Church of Christ in the summer of 2006. Many of the brethren who sat in my classes week after week have gone on to their reward. Their preparation, comments, and insight were of extreme value. I taught the material again for a Tuesday class a few years later after moving to work with the Kettering Church of Christ (now known as Cornerstone Church of Christ). And now, in 2023, I am going through the material again, doing a complete revamp and update. Thanks again to the Cornerstone church for their help and support in going through this workbook. I need to also thank my wife, Becky, who always plays a very large role in editing the lesson text. Becky, your support and encouragement keep me going even when it is difficult to write.

A hearty thank you goes out to Randy Baughn from the Brownsburg Church of Christ. Almost 20 years ago, Randy took time out of his busy schedule to help me design the cover for this workbook. Randy is a world-class photographer who worked for the Indianapolis Star for decades and has been a freelance photographer over the last decade or so. When it came time to update the cover for this workbook, there was no way I was going to replace his cover photo. He did a great job.

In this study I have labored hard to ensure that you not only get an idea of the contents of each book, but that you begin to grasp the political, economic, and social conditions of their time. When we begin to better understand their world, our eyes are opened to the urgency and passion of these men. Their message comes alive for us, and the obscurity that is so often associated with these books is lessened. I am sure that what you learn here will reward you with a wonderful treasure-trove of spiritual knowledge and wisdom.

May God bless you in all your spiritual pursuits.

Matthew Allen

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## Lesson 1

# Introduction to the “Book of the Twelve”

F. W. Farrar called the Minor Prophets the “crown and flower of the Old Testament writings.” Their extreme value and great profit can be easily overlooked. While a study on the Minor Prophets may not sound exactly interesting, once one delves into these brief books, written by obscure writers, much knowledge may be discerned. They are referred to as the Minor Prophets because of their brevity — not because of a lack of importance or authority in their content. These books are much shorter than what we refer to as the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). Taken individually, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are longer than all twelve Minor Prophets put together. The twelve books we know today as the Minor Prophets were originally grouped together into a single “booklet” because of their small size. The Jews would have placed them together on one scroll because of their small size and the ease of keeping up with one scroll instead of twelve. The Minor Prophets were called the “Book of the Twelve” by Jews living in the first and second centuries.

## When were these books written?

The Minor Prophets lived between the mid-ninth century B.C. and the late fifth century B.C. They cover four distinct periods in Jewish history.

### *The Pre-Assyrian Period*

The Pre-Assyrian Period includes writings between the mid-ninth century B.C. and the early eighth century B.C. Obadiah, Joel, and Jonah fit here. This would have been before Assyria rose to world domination and presented a major threat to God’s people. These prophets warned the people of impending judgment.

### *The Assyrian Period*

The Assyrian Period covers writings during the mid to late eighth century B.C. when Assyria was asserting its domination over countries to the east and north of Israel. As the century ended, Assyria threatened to move down the coast through Syria into the northern most reaches of the land of Israel. Amos, Micah, and Hosea are the books written during this time. Their message warns of the pending destruction of their country and people.

### *The Babylonian Period*

The Babylonian Period covers the seventh century B.C.<sup>1</sup> The Assyrians destroyed the northern ten tribes during the decade between 732-722. Samaria, the capitol, finally fell in 722. Almost as quickly as it rose to power, Assyria was gobbled up by the Babylonians in 612. Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk give us insight into the events and times of Judah during the rise of the Babylonians. In 587, Judah and Jerusalem were destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Israelites who were not killed were taken into

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<sup>1</sup> Unless further noted, all times refer to B.C.

captivity for seventy years. In these books there is a message of hope to assure the people that God would eventually allow a remnant to return to their homeland.

### ***The Post-Exilic Period***

The Post-Exilic Period gives us a glimpse of Israel during the years after the exile in Babylon. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written during time. These prophets reminded the people that God was still God and all powerful. These prophets also pointed out that the only reason Israel had been defeated was because of their rebellion against God.

## **The Arrangement of the Books**

Our English Bibles order these books the way that the Hebrews arranged them in their ancient text. They are not in chronological order. Why they are presented the way they are has been the subject of a great amount of speculation. One commentator suggests that Hosea was placed at the beginning because “it is the most comprehensive.” Hosea’s message applied mainly to Israel. Next, a prophet to Judah (Joel) was placed in the text. This was followed by a prophet to Israel, then to Judah, and so on and so forth. This method works for the first eight books. The final four books are said to be arranged chronologically.

Others believe that the first six books highlight the great sin of Israel, the next three discuss the punishment for that sin, and the final three books discuss the redemption of the people after the punishment that would take place. Perhaps the real reason for why the Hebrews arranged the books in the way they did will never be known. This workbook takes the chronological perspective.

## **Political and Socioeconomic Concerns**

These writings cover almost five centuries of history. Taken with the historical accounts we have in the Bible; we can develop a much better picture of how things were during the waning years of Israel and Judah. Self-satisfied, enjoying life, and hardened by sin, most of God’s people settled for the sensual pleasures of idolatry and rejected the calls of a loving, compassionate God who wanted a relationship with people He called His own.

Over the one hundred twenty years before Solomon’s death, the nation of Israel stood unified and reached its peak of power. It is no coincidence that during this time the nation was dedicated in its service and worship to God. During the later stages of Solomon’s reign, he began to allow temples to be built to accommodate his many foreign wives in their idol worship. This set up the stage for rampant idolatry that would overtake the nation in the generations following his death.

A few decades after Solomon’s death, the kingdom divided. The ten tribes in the north retained the name Israel and the southern two tribes began to refer to themselves as Judah. The Northern Kingdom instituted calf worship and the southern kingdom intermixed true worship to Jehovah along with worship to idols. The departure from worshipping Jehovah led to rampant corruption in all sectors of society. While enjoying very good economic conditions, the time of the prophets saw political upheaval, social justice ignored, and the poor being exploited by the rich. Soon after Solomon’s death God rose

prophets up like Elijah and Elisha in efforts to “wake up” the people from the idolatry and social ills that were destroying them. After Elijah and Elisha came more prophets. Their message was trifold:

- Remind the children of Israel of the covenant they made with Jehovah upon the entrance to the Promised Land.
- Warn them of the certain, severe consequences to be brought upon them by God if they failed to repent.
- Provide glimpses of hope and restoration of a remnant after God’s punishment and exile of the people.

Of the Minor Prophets, the early ones deal with God’s judgment on Edom, punishment by God for continual rebellion, and repentance of the people of Nineveh, capital of Assyria. The repentance of a godless, barbaric people was a direct slap in the face to God’s people who stubbornly refused to come back to God despite His repeated attempts to persuade them to return. The eighth century B.C. saw economically prosperous times for the people. While living in the luxury of the day, the calls for repentance by the prophets went largely ignored. Obadiah, Joel, and Jonah all prophesied during this time.

Amos, Micah, and Hosea lived during the Assyrian aggression. As the enemy crept in from the north, Israel (the northern ten tribes) found themselves in constant political upheaval. Assassination, corruption, and governmental disarray were common. As we move closer to the end, the northern kings were little more than puppet governments for the Assyrian invaders. The northern ten tribes were finally destroyed in 722. In the years leading up to the destruction of the northern ten tribes, Judah was not exempt from internal and external pressures. Israel, Egypt, and other nations constantly pressured Judah to join up with them to slow down the advances of the Assyrians. The prophets served a purpose. They reminded the people that instead of joining up with godless nations, they had a responsibility to turn back to God, call on Him for deliverance, and trust in Him.

After the rapid decline of the Assyrian Empire, a new, more daunting foe came onto the scene. Babylon rose to world power after defeating the Assyrians in 612. Judah now finds itself in its final days as an independent nation. Political instability rules the day. Assassination, puppet governments, and high tribute to the enemy nation are all common during this time. These were dark days for Judah. Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk lived during the late seventh century build-up to Babylonian aggression. Nahum concentrates on the destruction of Nineveh (612), Zephaniah focuses on Judah’s approaching doom, and Habakkuk speaks of Judah’s punishment and the eventual destruction of the Babylonians.

Finally, the post-exilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi live in the period after the remnant returns to the homeland from seventy years of captivity. Through these prophets God provides spiritual hope and guidance to the exiles. The nation of Israel would never be independent and autonomous again. From this point on they would be ruled by foreign powers who looked at the Jews as little more than a conquered nation.

## **What can we learn from the Minor Prophets?**

Romans 15:4 says, *For whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the Scriptures.*

Later, Paul would write: *These things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our instruction, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So, whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall,* 1 Corinthians 10:11-12. There are several important themes and lessons we can take from these books. Consider these important concepts:

- **The moral, social, and economic conditions of God’s people during a significant period of Israel’s history.** We can gain a perspective in how immoral living, idolatry, and luxurious living caused the people of God to turn a deaf ear to His pleadings for repentance. There are several warnings to be gleaned from these verses – especially for Christians living in luxurious times.
- **God’s interaction with nations other than Israel during Old Testament times.** God often raised up foreign nations to punish Israel for their sin. The sins of these heathen nations would not go unrecognized or unpunished by God.
- **God’s call for repentance.** Although extremely sinful, God still held out for and called His people to repentance. It is in these books where we see a wonderful example of His mercy, love, and concern for His people—despite their repulsive rebellion.
- **God’s certain punishment for rebellion.** God will not allow wickedness and rebellion to go unpunished.
- **Glimpses of the fulfillment of God’s eternal plan through the Messiah and the church.** In these books we see foreshadowing and prophecies concerning the Messiah, the Holy Spirit, and the church. See Hosea 2:23; 11:1; 6:6; Joel 2:28-32; and Micah 5:2.

## Prophetic viewpoints

When studying the prophets, it is important to keep in mind the viewpoints they would use in their writing. Some persons have referred to this as the *near-view/far-view* perspective of the prophets. Imagine standing on the summit of a mountain and looking at the peaks in the distance. Most often the prophets would look at the sins of their own day and warn against them. At other times, the prophet might look further out to the upcoming captivity of the people and God’s restoration of the remnant during the post-exilic years. Some of their writings looked forward into the future—to the coming Messiah. And finally, some of their writing looks far out on the horizon, to the reign of Jesus over the church in His eternal kingdom. Understanding their different viewpoints is fundamental to coming to a better grasp of their writings.

## For discussion

1. Why should we engage in lengthy studies of Old Testament books and concepts?
2. Why are some prophets called “major” and others “minor”?

3. What was the collection of Minor Prophets called by Jews living in the first and second centuries?
  
4. The four main periods the Minor Prophets cover are:
  
5. What was the tri-fold message of the prophets?
  
6. Briefly describe the political and socioeconomic times during the centuries the Minor Prophets lived.
  
7. Why is it important to know of the social and political conditions in this study? What would be some applications for our own generation?
  
8. What can God’s dealings with nations other than Israel teach us today?
  
9. What can we learn about repentance from a study of the Minor Prophets?
  
10. Will God allow evil to go unpunished? How should this give today’s Christian hope?