

5 The Twelve (Minor Prophets)

So far, we've surveyed three major prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Any questions before we turn to the Minor Prophets?

The twelve Minor Prophets lived at different times, with messages from God for different groups. They're called *The Book of the Twelve* in the Hebrew Scriptures, since they were short enough to all fit on one scroll.

In our Bible, the Twelve appear in this order:

<i>Book</i>	<i>Addressing</i>	<i>Historic setting</i>	<i>Chaps</i>
Hosea	Israel (North)	Divided kingdom, just before the fall of Israel	14
Joel	Judah	Uncertain	3
Amos	Israel (North)	Divided kingdom, before the fall of Israel	9
Obadiah	Edom	Shortly after Jerusalem fell to Babylon	1
Jonah	Assyria (Nineveh)	Divided kingdom, well before the fall of Israel	4
Micah	Judah	Overlaps with Isaiah	7
Nahum	Assyria (Nineveh)	Divided kingdom, before the fall of Israel	3
Habakkuk	Judah	Shortly before the exile	3
Zephaniah	Judah	King Josiah's time (before the exile)	3
Haggai	Jews	After the return from exile	2
Zechariah	Jews	After the return from exile	14
Malachi	Jews	After the return from exile	4

In this session we'll cover the prophets chronologically in three groups, so you can connect each with its setting:

- The first group is from the time of the **divided kingdom**. After Solomon's death (around 920 BC), Israel and Judah were separate nations until Assyria destroyed Israel (722 BC). In this period, Hosea and Amos addressed Israel (not Judah), while Nahum and Jonah addressed Assyria's capital (Nineveh).
- The prophets to **Judah** were Micah (in the time of the divided kingdom), followed by Zephaniah and Habakkuk after Israel fell (so Judah was all that remained). It's not clear when Joel delivered his message to Judah.
- The final group is from **after the exile** (586 BC). Obadiah addressed Edom. Then Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi addressed the returning exiles after Persia conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to return.

In summary:

- **To Israel and Assyria:** Hosea, Amos, Nahum, Jonah
- **To Judah:** Micah, Zephaniah, Joel, Habakkuk
- **To the returning exiles:** Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Does that put them in perspective? Any questions?

5.1 To Israel and Assyria (Hosea, Amos, Nahum, Jonah)

The *divided kingdom* is the period after Solomon died (c. 920 BC) until Assyria captured Israel (722 BC). During this time, the word *Israel* refers to the northern kingdom based in Samaria. It doesn't include Judah (the nation based in Jerusalem).

Hosea and Amos delivered God's message to Israel. Since Israel was worshipping golden calves in Bethel and Dan, much of their prophetic message confronted idolatry.

In the same period, Jonah and Nahum delivered God's message regarding Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Israel's archenemy in 8th century BC.



The Assyrian Empire. Map 9, *Standard Bible Atlas* (2016)

Hosea

Most churches would not employ Hosea. His wife often ran off with other men (Hosea 1:2). His children felt unloved (1:6), and some of them weren't his (1:8).

Those very problems were the reason God chose him. More than most, Hosea understood how God felt. God's covenant partner (Israel) was often running off with other powers instead of staying faithful to the LORD. It wasn't clear which Israelites were God's children (Hosea 2).

Can such a deeply torn relationship be reconciled? Hosea delivers God's message that everything will fall apart. Yet God will still work to restore them into his care:

Hosea 3:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or household gods.

⁵ Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king.

David their king? When Jeroboam declared himself king of Israel and set up golden calves in Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:16-20), he was rejecting the LORD and his anointed (David's dynasty). Israel persisted in *the sins of Jeroboam* (2 Kings 3:3; 10:19, 31; 13:2, 11 etc). To be saved from their oppression, they need to turn back to the one true God (the LORD) and to his Anointed (David's kingship).

How would this work? After Assyria invaded, foreigners took over Israel (2 Kings 17:24). That's why the later Jews despised these "Samaritans." Some of these tribes had almost no one left after the exile (1 Chronicles 4-8). It would take a miracle of resurrection to raise up both Israel and Judah as a nation under David (Ezekiel 37:15-28).

Hosea calls them to trust God to resurrect their fallen nation:

Hosea 6:2 (NIV)

After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will restore us,
 that we may live in his presence.

It's not clear what *on the third day* refers to in this context of God resurrecting the nation of Israel from its grave. But God's Anointed literally entered into the death of his people, and was raised up on the third day, with his people restored in him.

The New Testament constantly pictures God's Anointed as entering the sufferings of his people in order to save them. For example, Matthew 2:15 quotes this:

Hosea 11:1 (NIV)

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

Hosea was referring back to the exodus. God's son (Israel) had become enslaved again because they were unfaithful (Hosea 11:2). They were still under rulers who kill babies to keep power (Exodus 1:22; Matthew 2:16). Matthew's point is that when God's Anointed fled to Egypt, he was entering into the sufferings of his people in order to save them, to lead the new exodus—out of the reign of evil, into the kingdom of God.

Hosea's final message is God's promise to forgive, heal, and restore his recalcitrant people (Hosea 14).

Amos

Amos knew how to care for sheep. He was a shepherd (Amos 1:1). God sent him as the voice of the Shepherd calling his flock to follow him.

But how do you get the flock to follow? Amos begins by announcing God's judgement on surrounding nations: north-east, south-west, north-west, and south-east (Amos 1). They love the idea of God dealing with their neighbours. Then they realize they're the target—right at the centre of the big X Amos drew on the map (Amos 2).

Amos declares both judgement and rescue for Israel (Amos 3). They don't listen (Amos 4), so the plea becomes more desperate for them to return to the LORD and live under his reign—*the day of the LORD* (Amos 5).

Israel is complacent and self-contained (Amos 6), instead of being true to the LORD (Amos 7). They're a beautiful basket of summer fruit, gradually going rotten (Amos 8).

Amos concludes with the tragic news that Israel will fall. But there's a coda, a footnote promising that God will yet restore them to his reign:

Amos 9:8, 11 (NIV)

⁸ "Surely the eyes of the Sovereign LORD are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth. Yet I will not totally destroy the descendants of Jacob," declares the LORD. ...

¹¹ "In that day I will restore **David's fallen shelter**—I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins—and will rebuild it as it used to be ..."

David's fallen shelter? Israel had not been under David's reign since Solomon's death. How and when would Israel be restored to God's anointed ruler, a son of David?

What a promise! (Compare Acts 15:15-19.)

Nahum

Just as Hosea and Amos said, the kingdom of Israel fell. Assyria invaded, capturing Samaria in 722 BC.

But what about Assyria? It was the biggest “baddest” empire of the whole Middle East, swallowing nation after nation to expand its kingdom. Should God let this unrestrained violence continue?

No, says Nahum. God will get them too. Nineveh (capital of Assyria) would fall. The city that showed no mercy would receive no mercy. The city that pillaged, plundered and stripped others would herself be pillaged, plundered and stripped, eaten like lions devouring their prey (Nahum 2).

Nahum's final condemnation of Assyria reads like this:

Nahum 3 (NIV)

¹ Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder,
never without victims! ...

⁵ “I am against you,” declares the LORD Almighty. ...

¹⁹ Nothing can heal you; your wound is fatal.

All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall,
for who has not felt your endless cruelty?

That's what happened in 612 BC. Nineveh lost its battle against Babylon.

Jonah

The Book of Jonah is also set in the Assyrian Empire, though there's some linguistic evidence that the book may have been written down later (words from a later time).

Jonah is unique. While others denounced foreign kingdoms, Jonah was the only prophet to be sent to another kingdom. He didn't want to go. The book implies that other nations might be more responsive to God than his own people were.

In the first chapter, the pagan sailors seem more responsive than Jonah is. They pray to the LORD (Israel's God) while Jonah is asleep (Jonah 1:7-14).

In the final chapter, Nineveh discovers what Jonah should have known from the Torah: the LORD is *a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love* (Jonah 4:2; Exodus 34:6). But God's patience angers Jonah! (4:3-4) Many of us are more judgmental than God is (4:10-11).

All this happens when Jonah was literally dying for his disobedience (*sinking to the realm of the dead*, 2:2) until the LORD rescued him (2:7-10). Despite receiving God's mercy, he declared only judgement: *Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown* (3:4). Jonah really did not want God to save their enemy.

More than any other book of the Old Testament, Jonah proclaims the LORD's salvation for the nations. It was the very thing God's people did not want!

That's why Jesus related to Jonah. Jonah embodied the demise of God's people, and the divine rescue of the nations, effectively at the cost of the prophet's own life (compare Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4).

5.2 To Judah (Micah, Zephaniah, Joel, Habakkuk)

We move to the prophets who delivered God's message to Judah.

Micah

Micah lived in Jerusalem during the time of the divided kingdom. He was a contemporary of Isaiah (Micah 1:1, compare Isaiah 1:1). He spoke against injustice in both Israel and Judah (Micah 1), especially their leaders (Micah 3).

Just as Isaiah promised a Branch from David's family who would save God's people (Isaiah 11), Micah also spoke of this king from David's clan, David's town:

Micah 5:2 (NIV)

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.

God's reign in his anointed reconstitutes the world. When the driving force in my life is what's *good for me*, I am cruel and belligerent towards others. But the self is a *mortal*, not a god. The *good* is God (Mark 10:18; Genesis 2:17). Trust God as the *good*, and we *walk humbly before our God*, with *justice and mercy* for each other:

Micah 6:8 (NIV)

⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah concludes with a plea for God to shepherd his people (7:14), so power-hungry people are shamed like the serpent (7:16-17), so the earth is living faithfully under our heavenly sovereign (7:18-20).

Zephaniah

Zephaniah delivered his message to Judah during the reign of King Josiah (1:1).

Josiah was one of the best kings they ever had, yet he died in a battle with Pharaoh Necho in 609 BC. The kings who followed were appointed by Egypt and then Babylon. Josiah was the last God-anointed king before everything fell apart.

Zephaniah focuses on what it's like when God is king. *The day of the LORD* means when the LORD is reigning. For anyone who was cheating their neighbour that was a scary prospect, but for anyone who had suffered injustice it was a wonderful hope.

The day of the LORD meant that God would sweep from the earth everything that was wrong (Zephaniah 1), both in Jerusalem and among the nations (Zephaniah 2).

While that's bad news for those who were doing evil (3:1-8), it's good news for those who wanted God to reign over them:

Zephaniah 3:14-15 (NIV)

¹⁴ Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ ... The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;

never again will you fear any harm.

So, when do you think the reign of God was restored to his people? When did God send his Anointed? And how did he restore the kingdom of God?

Joel

Unlike Micah and Zephaniah, Joel's prophecy is undated. All we know is that a locust plague had destroyed all the crops (Joel 1:4). That happens regularly in any agricultural community.

The locusts are described as an army:

Joel 2:7 (NIV)

They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers.
They all march in line, not swerving from their course.

That may be merely a poetic comparison. Or Joel may be introducing a literal army attacking Jerusalem. If so, the army of locusts might represent Babylon. Either way, Joel was calling Judah to turn back to God (2:12-17), promising that God would ultimately save them, restore them, and rule over them (2:18-27).

God's reign (*the day of the LORD*) would be a new era with every person is empowered with God's Spirit (compare Acts 2:16-21):

Joel 2:28-32 (NIV)

²⁸ "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days. ...

³² And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved ..."

Once again, this *day of the LORD* means that God will both sort out everything that's wrong and restore everything that's right (Joel 3).

Habakkuk

Habakkuk complains that God needs to deal with the injustice his people perpetrated on each other (Habakkuk 1:1-4). "I will," says God. "I will bring Babylon, that destructive empire, against them" (1:5-11).

"How does that solve anything?" Habakkuk asks. "Babylon is even worse!" (1:12-17).

God answers, "Tell them, so that those who believe it can run" (paraphrasing 2:2-3). In this way, *the righteous person will live by their faith[fulness]* (2:4). The New Testament has quite a bit on what this means (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). Habakkuk says God will deal with the evil empire (Babylon) also (2:4-19).

In his final chapter, Habakkuk stops complaining against God. He takes a posture of submission and prayer, convinced the LORD will sort everything out in the end (Hab. 3).

Do you have questions or thoughts regarding the prophets to Judah?

5.3 After the exile (Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

After Jerusalem fell to Babylon (586 BC), **Obadiah** addressed Edom. Then when Persia conquered Babylon (539 BC), **Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi** addressed the Jews who were now permitted to return to rebuild Jerusalem.

Obadiah

Obadiah's brief message is a warning for Edom, the country southeast of the Dead Sea. He warned them not to try to take the land of Israel now its people had gone into exile.

The Edomites were descendants of Esau. Remember how Jacob cheated Esau out of his birthright? (Genesis 27–28) Perhaps Esau's descendants saw an opportunity to finally get the blessing. Their attitude serves as a warning for *all nations* (verses 15-21).

Haggai

Under Darius (king of Persia), the Jews in exile were allowed to return and rebuild. But with everything in ruins, reconstruction felt overwhelming. Haggai and Zechariah worked together (Ezra 6:14), encouraging them to build another temple:

Haggai 1:1, 4 (NIV)

¹ In the second year of King Darius ... the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to **Zerubbabel** son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to **Joshua** son of Jozadak, the high priest ...

⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

In 515 BC, they completed the second temple, anointing **Joshua** as high priest. **Zerubbabel** was a descendant of David, but he could not be anointed as king since Persia was ruling them.

That means the second temple was only partly functional. It was a palace for their heavenly king. God's private chamber held his throne—the ark where God sat *enthroned between the cherubim* (Isaiah 37:16; Psalm 80:1; 99:1 etc). But the ark was gone (Jeremiah 3:16).

God's reign had not been restored. God needed to dislodge the nations and take his place as ruler of his people so the world would be at peace:

Haggai 2:6-9 (NIV)

⁶ "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.

⁷ I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. ...

⁹ 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

Haggai closes with God's anointed still waiting to receive the throne, still waiting to represent God's reign on earth (Haggai 2:21-23). At the end of the Old Testament, they were still waiting for the LORD to come and take his throne (Malachi 3:1).

Zechariah

Zechariah is also about the restoration of God's reign. He told the exiles if they would return to live as God's people, their heavenly sovereign would return to them:

Zechariah 1:3 (NIV)

"Return to me," declares the LORD Almighty, "and I will return to you."

Zechariah sees two olive trees (anointed leaders) supporting the lamp of God's reign (4:2-3). One is restored: **Joshua** the high priest. The other is not: **Zerubbabel** (descendant of King David) is told to wait, not to fight for the kingship:

Zechariah 4:6 (NIV)

This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty.

In the short term, the high priest must carry both roles—as king and priest:

Zechariah 6:11–13 (NIV)

¹¹ Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest, Joshua son of Jozadak. ¹² Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. ¹³ It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.'

Isaiah had promised the *Branch* from David's dead stump (Isaiah 11:1), Jeremiah did too (23:5; 33:15). That can't happen yet, so the high priest must fulfil the royal role too. The *crown* and *throne* added to this priestly role. These two roles—often in conflict—were now *harmonized* in one person.

But that was not a permanent arrangement. One day, the kingship would be restored, as God had promised Zerubbabel. One day, the king would come riding into Jerusalem:

Zechariah 9:9 (NIV)

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Tragically, this coming shepherd would still face threats to his authority. Just as King Josiah had been struck down, resulting in the exile, the sword would again *strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered* (13:7, compare Matthew 26:31).

But in the end, God's kingship will be restored to earth. Just as God split the waters of the Red Sea to save Israel from Pharaoh, God will split the earth so his people are saved from every form of oppression (14:4). So, this is how the story ends:

Zechariah 14:9 (NIV)

⁹ The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name.

Your thoughts?

Malachi

Jerusalem had been rebuilt, but God's people were still not honouring their heavenly sovereign, so God sent Malachi (around 460 BC):

Malachi 1:6–8 (NIV)

⁶ “You priests show contempt for my name ... ⁷ saying that the LORD's table is contemptible. ⁸ When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty.

Malachi reframed worship. Sacrifices were gifts that the nation offered to their heavenly sovereign, identifying themselves as God's people. But were they honouring God with their gifts? Worship isn't a ritual; it's a lifestyle that honours God. To worship is to lift up God's name among the nations (1:11).

Malachi 3:10 is often used in offering talks. I'll leave you to ponder how valid it is to equate Israel's *tithing* laws with giving to a church, and equating the *storehouse* with your church's bank account. In the new covenant where we have the Holy Spirit, should we be telling people to *put God to the test*?

Malachi 3:1 is more important. It promises the LORD would return to the house they provided for their heavenly sovereign. When did God do that? Were they ready for him? Would the city *endure the day of his coming*? (3:2)

The Old Testament concludes with more of a choice than an outcome:

Malachi 4:5–6 (NIV)

⁵ “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

I wish all Christian theologians could grasp that God does not force his sovereignty on his people. Prophecy is conditional on how they respond (compare Jeremiah 18:7-10).

Would they respond to the prophets God sent them in the Elijah tradition, ultimately John the Baptist and then Jesus? Or would it end in desolation, the *total destruction* of the city that refused its king? Their choice.

5.4 Conclusion

When God's anointed arrived, nothing had changed. Like their ancestors, Jerusalem's rulers would kill to keep their power (Matthew 16:21 etc.).

“What about Elijah? Won't he come and set everything right?” the disciples asked. Jesus reminded them how the nation treated the most recent Elijah-prophet. That left Jesus as vulnerable as John the Baptist. He would die at the hands of those who kill the prophets. In rejecting God's anointed, Jerusalem chose *total destruction*. That's how Jesus saw it (Matthew 23:30–24:21).

Was the death of God's anointed king the end of all hope for the world? “No,” said Jesus. Heaven would intervene, overturn the existing powers, raising up the son of man to receive the kingship as God intended in the beginning (Matthew 24:29-31).

That is the gospel—the good-news for the whole world. More on that next week.

5.5 Resources

For one **book** covering the 12 Minor Prophets (as well as the rest of the Bible):

- Gordon Fee, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*. (Zondervan, 2014).

For **videos** on the Minor Prophets from Bible Project:

- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/book-overviews/?type=old>

For **posts** on the minor prophets, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/scriptureindex/>

- [Commentary on Zechariah](#)
- [God's message for Israel](#) (Hosea, Amos)

For **commentaries**, try the "Understanding the Bible Commentary Series":

- Elizabeth Achtemeier. *Minor Prophets I*. (Baker Books, 2012).
- John Goldingay and Pamela Scalise. *Minor Prophets II*. (Baker Books, 2012).

New Testament quotations from the Minor Prophets:

Prophet	Quotation
Hosea 1:10	Romans 9:26
Hosea 2:23	Romans 9:25
Hosea 6:6	Matthew 9:13
Hosea 6:6	Matthew 12:7
Hosea 10:8	Luke 23:30
Hosea 11:1	Matthew 2:15
Hosea 13:14	1 Corinthians 15:55
Joel 2:28-32	Acts 2:21
Joel 2:32	Romans 10:13
Amos 5:25-27	Acts 7:43
Amos 9:11-12	Acts 15:17
Micah 5:2	Matthew 2:6
Micah 7:6	Matthew 10:36
Habakkuk 1:5	Acts 13:41
Habakkuk 2:3-4	Hebrews 10:38
Habakkuk 2:4	Romans 1:17
Habakkuk 2:4	Galatians 3:11
Haggai 2:6	Hebrews 12:26
Zechariah 9:9	Matthew 21:5 John 12:15
Zechariah 11:12-13	Matthew 27:10
Zechariah 12:10	John 19:37
Zechariah 13:7	Matthew 26:31 Mark 14:27
Malachi 1:2-3	Romans 9:13
Malachi 3:1	Matthew 11:10 Luke 7:27
Malachi 3:1	Mark 1:2