

THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE
THE MINOR PROPHETS:
GOD'S ETERNAL WORD TO HIS PEOPLE
PART ONE

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Introduction

The Author of the Book of Hebrews wrote: ^{ESV} **Hebrews 1:1-2:** Long ago, at many times and in many ways, ***God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,*** ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

“God spoke to *our* fathers by the *prophets*.” We should thank God that in Christ, we know the Old Covenant saints as “our fathers” and that they heard from the prophets. In these last days, we have heard from the Son.

The Apostle Peter wrote to the Church so that we would understand the Spirit-given task of the Prophet in making God’s Word known to his people: ^{ESV} **2 Peter 1:20-21:** ...Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as ***they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.***

Peters says that no prophecy of Scripture comes from the prophet himself, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. “Carried along” is the idea of the Spirit moving a person like the mighty wind (φέρω (fut. οἴσω ; aor. ἤνεγκα, inf. ἐνεγκέιν and ἐνέγκαι, ptc. ἐνέγκας ; aor. pass. ἠνέχθην, ptc. ἐνεχθείς) bring, bring along, carry; endure, bear, put up with; yield, produce (fruit); drive (of wind; midd. rush Ac 2.2); move, guide (by the Holy Spirit; cf. John 3:8- “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”)

The study of the prophetic word to our fathers through *The Twelve*, ultimately prepares the Church to understand better the final Prophetic Word of the Son (1). The message is the same for both the prophets and the Son, but the Son is the culmination and eschatological realization of all the words of the prophets; Christ is the Prophet, but he is also the message of the prophets (cf. Luke 24:24ff; 24:44ff). *The Book of the Twelve* prepares us for the final word of the Son, who is heir of all things, and Creator of the world (Heb. 1:2).

Unfortunately, preaching and studying these twelve books has been neglected in the history of the Church (2). One commentator wrote: “Where is the edification for a modern Christian in a dirge celebrating the downfall of an ancient city? How can the

gloomy forecasts of captivity for Israel and Judah lift the heart today? ...How unlike the New Testament they are!" (*The Minor Prophets*, McComiskey, pg. ix).

Martin Luther even wrote about the prophets: "They have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at."

Blaise Pascal (d. 1662) wrote concerning the prophets in his *Pensees* (an apologetic about the Christian life): "The prophecies, the very miracles and proofs of our religion, are not of such a nature that they can be said to be absolutely convincing. But they are also of such a kind that it cannot be said that it is unreasonable to believe them. Thus there is both evidence and obscurity to enlighten some and confuse others. ***We understanding nothing of the works of God, if we do not take as a principle that he has willed to blind some, and enlighten others.***"

Why has the study of the *Twelve* been neglected in the history of the Church? The reason is because most thought their message ***irrelevant*** and that their message was too ***obscure*** for those who live in light of the New Testament Era (2).

But the message of the prophets of old is extremely relevant to us today, and by God's Spirit we can learn more about Christ and more about who we are in Him. For example, we learn through their message about God's love, justice, mercy, salvation, judgment, and covenant promises to his people. We also learn about the people of God's consistently unfaithful response to God's love, justice, mercy, salvation, judgment, and covenant promises!

Who were The Twelve?

The Book of the Twelve has popularly been known as the *Minor Prophets*. These twelve books or prophetic oracles are not minor in the sense of unimportant, but minor in length compared to the "major" or more extensive prophetic oracles found in Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Compare Hosea's 12 chapters with Isaiah's 66 chapters for example, or Nahum's 3 chapters and Jeremiah's 52 chapters).

The Twelve was compiled in the Hebrew Bible as one book. The authors of the prophetic word lived and labored in God's vineyard from the ninth century B. C. (Obadiah) to the fifth century B. C. (Malachi) *The Twelve* covers then over four hundred years of redemptive-historical prophetic word.

The ***chronological order*** of *The Twelve* is as follows (3):

- 1) Obadiah: Jehoram king of Judah (Southern Kingdom), ca. 889-884 B.C.
- 2) Joel: Joash king of Judah, ca. 875-848 B.C.
- 3) Jonah: Jeroboam II king of Israel (Northern Kingdom), ca. 824-783 B.C.
- 4) Amos: Jeroboam II king of Israel and Uzziah king of Judah, ca. 810-783 B.C.
- 5) Hosea: Jeroboam II king of Israel and Uzziah to Hezekiah kings of Judah, ca. 790-725 B.C.

- 6) Micah: Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah kings of Judah, ca. 758-710 B.C.
- 7) Nahum: Hezekiah king of Judah, ca. 710-699 B.C.
- 8) Habakkuk: Manasseh or Josiah kings of Judah, ca. 650-628 B.C.
- 9) Zaphaniah: Josiah king of Judah, ca. 628-623 B.C.

6 prophets to the Southern Kingdom of Judah (captured in 587 B.C. by the Babylonians with destruction of Jewish Temple in Jerusalem).

3 prophets to the Northern Kingdom of Israel (captured in 722 B.C. by Assyria under Sargon II).

After the overthrow of Babylon by the Persian Empire, the great ruler Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to go back to the land of Jerusalem in 537 B.C.

Post-Exilic Prophets

- 10) Haggai: Darius Hystaspes, ca. 519 B.C.
- 11) Zechariah: Darius Hystaspes, ca. 519 B.C.
- 12) Malachi: Artaxerxes Longimanus, ca. 433-424 B.C.

Canonical order of the Twelve Prophets (4) (According to Keil and Delitzsch)- -this would be good to memorize for a simple overview of history:

Prophets of the pre-Assyrian period: Hosea to Nahum
 Prophets of the Chaldean-Babylonian period: Habakkuk and Zephaniah
 Prophets after the Exile-Captivity: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

What was a prophet? (5)

The word “prophet” in Hebrew is *navi*: [נְבִיא] n.m. **spokesman, speaker, prophet -- 1.** genuine *prophet* of י, נְבִיא, anciently called נְבִיאִים | *navi* is from another Semitic language, Akkadian, and the root is found in the verb *nabu* (not the place in *Star Wars*) and this means “to decree, to proclaim, to command, to make known”. It can also mean to be called or appointed by God. The Greek word for prophet is προφήτης, *ou m* and this means generally that a prophet is one who has insight into the divine will and possesses the power of inspired utterance.

Simply put (5): ***A prophet is one who is called and who proclaims the Word of God by the empowerment of the Spirit to the priests, the kings and the people.*** A prophet speaks a message from God about God.

Augustine said: “The prophet of God is nothing else but the enunciator of the words of God to men.”

Geerhardus Vos wrote: “Jehovah’s approach to Israel is eminently the approach of speech; God gives Himself in the word of His mouth” (*Biblical Theology*, pg. 205).

“Thus says YHWH...”

Dr. Vangemeren defines a prophet as: “An Israelite , called by God, and empowered by the Spirit who serves as God’s spokesperson who has received authority and revelation from God, who is a good shepherd over God’s flock, and who demonstrates God’s Word and mission with signs” (pg. 32).

The Prophetic Mouth- Or the Prophet’s Authority (6)

The Bible teaches us that a prophet is one who is called and appointed to be a regular speaker or “mouth” for a divine superior, whose speech carries the authority of that divine superior. We see this in Exodus and the Book of Jeremiah:

ESV Exodus 4:16 [Aaron] shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him.

ESV Exodus 7:1 And the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.

As Aaron would literally serve as Moses’ mouth, so the prophets would serve as God’s mouth. God does not explain to Moses what a prophet was because he knew from his own call and ministry, but in this particular relationship between he and Aaron, Moses would be the “God” with authority (because he represented YHWH) and Aaron would be his prophet or mouthpiece.

*ESV Jeremiah 1:5-9: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." ⁶ Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." ⁷ But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. ⁸ ***Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD.***" ⁹ ***Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.****

God puts his words literally in the mouth of Jeremiah and the words become divinely powerful and authoritative because of God’s work in Jeremiah and His call. Aaron’s words and Jeremiah’s words by virtue of their calling and commission speak God’s very words. ***The prophets’ mouths reveal God.***

Vos wrote: “[The implications of the prophets being the very mouthpiece of YHWH] marks the religion of the Old Testament as a religion of conscious intercourse (or dialogue) between Jehovah and Israel, a religion of revelation, of authority, a religion in which God dominates, and in which man is put into the listening, submissive attitude” (pg. 211-12).

Like the American President’s press secretary or like an ambassador who represents nations, so the prophets only speak God’s Word to the people—never their own, or merely their own opinions. Rather, they speak on behalf of God, God’s very Word.

The Prophet as Seer (7)

A prophet is also a seer: רָאָה ra'ah {raw-aw'} **Meaning:** 1) to see, look at, inspect, perceive, consider 1a) (Qal) 1a1) to see 1a2) to see, perceive 1a3) to see, have vision 1a4) to look at, see, regard, look after, see after, learn about, observe, watch, look upon, look out, find out/ חֹזֵה chozeh {kho-zeh'} **Meaning:** 1) seer 1a) seer 1b) vision

Vos wrote: “The word ‘seer’ refers to an extraordinary influence brought to bear on the seeing faculty of the prophet, by which he was made to see things, instead of hearing them, with the same result that through this seeing a message of divine provenience [origin] was introduced into his consciousness” (pg. 215).

^{ESV} **1 Samuel 9:9** (Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he said, "Come, let us go to the seer," for today's "prophet" was formerly called a seer [רָאָה ra'ah].)

^{ESV} **2 Samuel 24:11** And when David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer [חֹזֵה chozeh], saying...

Simply put (7): ***A prophet is the mouthpiece of God who is called and who proclaims the Word of God by the empowerment of the Spirit to the priests, the kings and the people who also “sees” things not usually perceived by other people.***

What was the message of the prophets (8)

The Prophet’s Message: Retrospective and Prospective

The prophets’ message was back-looking to the past of the periods of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) and Moses or ***retrospective***, as well as forward-looking to the future or ***prospective*** as it foretold of the fulfillment of the Kingdom and Kingdom events. This message that was ***retrospective and prospective*** was addressed to the People of Israel in present-tense circumstances.

Retrospective Revelation

Vangemeren writes: “The prophetic ministry is a direct continuation of the revelation of God through Moses, the fountainhead of Old Testament revelation. Moses desired for God’s people to be a counterculture, a new community transformed by divine revelation and by the Spirit. The prophetic message was consistent with the Mosaic revelation, for it applied more explicitly the blessings and the curses of which Moses had spoken and supplemented the existing canonical writings with a new word from God. All prophetic utterances were to be tested by God’s revelation to Moses” (pg. 38).

In other words, the Old Covenant people were to be good “Bereans” with regard to comparing the Prophet’s message with the message of Moses. The Old Covenant people were to check to see if what the prophet said was true in light of Moses. As Deuteronomy 18:15-22 taught:

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 18:15-22:** "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers- it is to him you shall listen-¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.'¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken.¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.²⁰ ***But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.***²¹ ***And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'***-²² ***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.***

Prospective Revelation

As Dr. Vangemeren writes: "The prophets spoke *in* time as they were human beings empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak God's word in space and time. Yet the prophets spoke *out* of time as their writings reflect more than the historically and culturally conditioned collection of Israel's prophets.

The Lord empowered the prophets by the Spirit to proclaim and write down the revelation he gave them as a witness for future generations" (Interpreting the Prophetic Word, pg. 19).

Vos wrote: "The prophets speak out of the consciousness of being reorganizers, reconstructionists. That something better will come and must come they know, but they are not aware as yet of the extent to which when it comes, it will swallow up the past... The prophet now knows that not repair but regeneration of the present lies in the womb of the future" (pg. 207).

A. B. Mickelsen wrote: "Whether [the prophet] is discussing the past, present, or future, the prophet is seeking to make God the most genuine reality that men can know and experience" (Quoted in Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, pg. 229).

It is important with regard to the message of the prophets to recall Israel's call and mission:

The people of Israel were called to be a visible representation of the Kingdom of God on earth (This Kingdom is rooted in the revelation of God to Moses in the *Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*). As a Holy Priesthood (Ex. 19:5-6) they were to be more than merely religious folks, all people of the ancient Near East were religious (false demonstrations of mere religion included magic, divination, astrology, etc and Israel was not to be like them, cf. Matthew 6:1-8). Moses was told by God to teach Israel:

^{ESV} ***Exodus 19:5-6: Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;⁶ and you shall be***

to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

The Kingdom of God through Israel was to be a display of the Truth of God's ***Revelation***, not merely a demonstration of ***religion***. The pagan nations had religion, albeit false ones, but Israel was to be separate and to reveal God's Revelation-Truth in Word and Deed.

Thus the message of the prophets was to proclaim and preach to Israel the truth of who the True and Living God is, and how they are to live their lives in light of his Revealed-Truth. The prophets spoke revelation, not merely religion.

As Dr. Vangemeren writes: "The Lord favored Israel with his revelation. They received his oracles as well as the promises, covenants, adoption to Sonship, and manifestations of his glory (Rom. 3:2; 9:4-5). His relation to Israel was full of grace and promise as he guided his people to be a royal priesthood (Ex. 19:5-6) in all their activities (personal, liturgical, economic, societal, and political). He led them into his way of wisdom so that they might receive his peace [*shalom*] and the fulfillment of his promises (Isa. 48:17-19)" (*Prophetic Word*, pg. 19).

^{ESV} **Isaiah 48:17-19:** Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. ¹⁸ Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea; ¹⁹ your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me."

In *The Twelve* we have God's judgment revealed because of sin and unbelief, but we have his ongoing faithfulness to his elect and the salvation he has wrought for all of the people of God in Jesus Christ our Lord!

The message of the prophets included specifically (8): God is faithful and the people are idolaters. God is patient and merciful, but he will judge his people in order to restore and preserve them. Prepare for the coming of the Day of the LORD in salvation and judgment.

Israel was taught to expect woes as well as blessings of peace from the prophets (God was concerned to correct, rebuke, admonish and teach his people, cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-4:2). The Prophet Jeremiah said:

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 28:8-9:** The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹ ***As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.***"

The people were to be on the look out for prophets who merely "made the people feel good" and tell them what they wanted to hear:

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 23:16-18:** *Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD."* ¹⁷ They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'" ¹⁸ *For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?*

Interpreting the Prophets

We must be careful that we are not too “modernity-centric” or focused selfishly on merely ourselves (“practical applications”) and our own times when reading the prophets i.e. Amos the Prophet spoke of social change- -“*We need social change today!*”). The prophets have been unfairly misdirected and misfocused in their message by imbalanced modern folk who think that the prophets existed merely to predict or forecast interesting future events that we read about in the Saturday paper. These people (many Premillennial Dispensationalists) think that the prophets existed merely to tell future events about the “end times and locusts that symbolize helicopters!”

It is true that the prophets spoke of the future, and they did indeed speak of the end times or more preferably the “Last Days”. The dawning of the Last Days began during Jesus’ resurrection-ascension and particularly the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost according to Peter’s sermon recorded in Acts 2 (see verses 16ff). The prophets’ main focus on the future was how their message pointed forward to Christ and His people, not merely to fanciful interpretations of current events.

Our primary interest in interpreting the prophetic word is to consider first the present historical context and people of God. Their primary message that indeed has application and implications for all of God’s people (including today, including even social change within the church) must first be understood as a word to the people of God during that prophet’s time.

This is just to say that the prophet and his ministry should be historically considered because he was historically situated at a particular time in redemptive-history. However, the prophet spoke on behalf of the Sovereign God over history who is bringing his will to pass in history for all of his people. Remember the instruction and encouragement the Apostle Paul taught would be for those who study *The Twelve*?

^{ESV} **Romans 15:4** For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

We will interpret in a threefold reading of the prophets (which is how we should interpret the Old Testament as God’s people) (9): 1) **First Reading:** “*How did the people of Israel first hear the words of the prophets within their cultural milieu?*” - Considering the message of the prophet in his historical context and time period in redemptive-history.

2) **Second Reading:** “How do the prophets point to Jesus Christ?” (cf. Luke 24:24ff): Considering the message of the prophet as it becomes clearer throughout redemptive-history, and particularly with the coming of Jesus Christ.

3) **Third Reading:** “How do we read the prophets “in Christ as the Church today”?: Considering the message of the prophet as it applies and has implications for Christ’s Church today.

We should be grateful to God for His Eternal Word. It is ironic that God sent his servants the prophets to turn Israel from their idolatry and many sins against God’s commandments, and rather than repent, the people killed them. In fact, when the One the prophets pointed to consistently in their preaching-proclamation finally did come as the GREAT and FINAL PROPHET of the covenant, none other than Jesus Christ, they killed him too!

Yet it was God’s will to send his Son to die for the sins of his people; this too, was part of his divine sovereignty over history as Acts 2 teaches us:

Acts 2:22-24: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know- ²³ *this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.* ²⁴ *God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.*

We should be grateful that although the prophets were killed, they still speak through God’s Word to us today. In God’s Eternal Word, we can hear and obey the prophets today by His grace! In God’s Eternal Word, we can hear and obey the Great Prophet, our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

An overview or highlight of the prophets in Redemptive-history may be helpful in diagram form(10).

There was Moses the archetypal or model prophet of the Old Covenant; there was Deborah during the time of the Judges; there was Samuel in the monarchical era in Israel; there were the “pre-Classical prophets” such as Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and Micaiah; then there were the “Classical” prophets such as the Twelve, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

A helpful picture from Willem Vangemeren helps us to learn the redemptive-historical way that YHWH revealed himself through prophets:

MOSES THE SERVANT (The Fountainhead of Prophetic Revelation)

→

SAMUEL (The Model of Prophetic Revelation)

→

ELIJAH (Covenant Prosecutor)

→

THE CLASSICAL PROPHETS (Including the Twelve)

→

JOHN THE BAPTIST

→

JESUS THE MESSIAH

→ **[Ministers of the Word]**

Ministers today still have the prophetic task of preaching and proclaiming not merely religion, but the very revelation of God's Word in written form:

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 4:1-2:** I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

Thanks be to God for His Christ and His Word!

CRB

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