

Introduction: 2/2: The Minor Prophets

Introduction:

So last week we talked about Old Testament prophets and prophecy in general. We just barely touched on how it related to the New Testament, but we did a little. Today we're talking about The Minor Prophets in particular.

It should be interesting, but it's still introduction stuff. My hope for this morning isn't for this morning at all, it's for later on. That as we move forward in the Minor Prophets we think to ourselves, "Oh, yeah. I remember that." Or "Yeah, that makes sense." Because something of today sticks in our minds, and helps the things we're going to talk about make sense.

So today is a down-payment sort of day, a deposit sort of day. Maybe a bet, and I hope it pays off for us down the line.

Let's pray we're not wasting our time here.

Prayer:

Preface:

Remember that the Minor Prophets are what we call those 12 smaller prophetic books in the Old Testament. They have people that stand behind them, of course, and those are the real “prophets.” But in the same way that we talk about John or Matthew, and mean the Gospel, not the guy, that’s what we mean when we say The Minor Prophets.

Most Important:

And the Minor Prophets reveal a lot, or a little about each of their authors. In fact, what I think is most important for us to realize is that there are wildly different things going on in each of these books. We simply cannot interpret them as a bloc, as a group. We can’t, even if we categorize them that way.

The prophets themselves are from different parts of Israel, different classes of Israel. They’re different from each other. In some cases they speak hundreds of years apart from one another; they speak to people who have deeply different ideas about God; to people who have deeply different practices and understandings of what’s normal.

So interpreting one of the Minor Prophets demands that we understand each of them first. This shouldn’t

surprise us. We've got to understand the world each of the Minor Prophets was communicating to before we can figure out the ways what they say is relevant for us today. We've got to interpret them on their own terms. They meant something to Israel when they spoke; they've been a part of an interpreting community long before 2017.

We'll make sure, as we move through these books, to talk about the way they mattered to Jesus, to those who wrote about him, to those who wrote after him, and to the early Church and the Church since as they've read them. But we can't bridge the gap between our situation and theirs without first understanding them.

If we open up a Minor Prophet, read it, and then automatically decide it's only relevant for us, and the best way to interpret it is to read today's newspaper, we've flunked Bible Study 101. We'll have to go back to Remedial Prophecy. And that class is just, lame, you know? So.

The Minor Prophets:

There's Poetry in the Minor Prophets. There's Worship. Hymns, songs, declarations of God's worthiness

appear again and again.

There's prophecy, of course. primarily forth-telling, speaking forth against the ways whoever is being addressed act with faithlessness and evil. There's fore-telling, straight up declarations of the future and what's to come. We talked about these things last week. We see oracles of woe and oracles of salvation, lawsuits, brief bits of biography.

There's lament, there's prayers, there's biographical information. There's apocalyptic material, here and there, coded, symbolic language that we're meant to understand and the prophets' first hearers were meant to understand and see God all around them.

And, again there are 12 prophets? Here they are:

Hosea,

Joel,

Amos

Obadiah

Jonah

Micah

Nahum

Habakkuk

Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

A List:

This list is how we'd read through them in our Bibles. But we're not studying them this way, not walking through them this way as a congregation. And here's why:

It's largely unhelpful to walk through them this way when we're studying them. Because these prophets, many of them were writing hundreds of years apart in radically different contexts. And although this is the way the Bible has settled these in order in our English, non-Orthodox Bibles, the place of these books wasn't always settled, even though they've been gathered together for thousands of years.

See we read them as a unit, which is fine. The Hebrew Bible actually gathers them up this way, treating each one more as a chapter than a separate book. But we're so unaware of what we're unaware of, that to read them as a unit means all sorts of judgments and interpretive stumbling blocks come up.

We forget this: That Obadiah, the earliest prophet, was written around, oh, 840, 830 BC--well, some people think so--but Malachi, the last, was written 400 years later. Early prophets communicated what they communicated while Israel was under the thumb of Assyria; later prophets, after Assyria had been overtaken by Persia, and given relative autonomy.

A lot changes in 400 years, you know? But if we've ever read through the Minor Prophets, we assume it's all the same time, some far distant time that was weird, and God did wild things, and we appreciate it for what it was...but just think of our time: 400 years ago, the treaty of Stolbovo had just ended the Ingrian war between Sweden and Russia, right?

I don't know what that means at all. I found it on Wikipedia and didn't bother looking it up. The point though is that a lot happens in 400 years between the first Minor Prophet and the last, just as a lot happened between the 200 years Malachi wrote and Jesus was born. God never hit pause on his redemption plans with Israel.

So here's how we're going to walk through the Minor

Prophets. We're walking through them chronologically, as best as the best scholars think we can do it.

A Walk Through:

Obadiah (~845 BC...maybe)

Joel (~825 BC...maybe)

Amos (~760-750 BC)

Jonah (~760 BC)

Hosea (~750 BC)

Micah (~740 BC)

Nahum (~660 BC)

Zephaniah (~625 BC)

Habakkuk (~600 BC)

Haggai (~520 BC)

Zechariah (~518 BC)

Malachi (~425 BC)

Look. A lot happened from the first of these, which was *maybe* Obadiah, to the last, which was definitely Malachi. Let me remind us of some history that we have got to get, which, honestly, we'll come to again. I want, at the end of this, for all of us to be able to have a sense of when things happened in Ancient Israel, so that we can simply know how to better make sense of what we read in the Old Testament, you know?

Situation: Two Kingdoms

After David died, Solomon took his throne. But after Solomon died, Ancient Israel divided into two kingdoms. They warred against each other, sought to make alliances, had different ways of worshipping God. It was a mess.

First, the Northern Kingdom:

Situations: Northern Kingdom

The Northern Kingdom didn't accept Solomon's son Rehoboam as king. Ten tribes, more or less, gathered together to reject him. (This gets tricky; Levi was a tribe that didn't have land, Simeon seems to have supported the Northern Kingdom, but they were based in the south and also kind of roving around, all over the place.) The Northern Kingdom was sometimes called "Ephraim" by the Minor Prophets or "Ephraim and Manasseh" or even "Joseph," because Ephraim and Manasseh were two tribes that together made up the mega-tribe, Joseph, which had tribal ties to most of the land up there. Samaria, which was the Northern Kingdom's capital city, was in Ephramite territory.

So: Israel, Ephraim, Joseph, Manasseh, Samaria:

Northern Kingdom markers.

But, the Northern Kingdom didn't last long. In 722, Assyria, which was this huge, expansionist empire, wiped them out. They displaced all sorts of people. Chronicles, an Old Testament Book, says that a few of the tribes ran south to the Kingdom of Judah, and just sort of blended in, I guess. The Levites, which had special priestly cities all through the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, lost all their northern ones.

Into this mix, Hosea, Amos, and Jonah prophecy. Jonah, Amos, and Hosea are our only Northern Kingdom Prophets. They're among our oldest, all before 722 BC.

Situations: The Southern Kingdom:

Assyria made a deal with the Southern Kingdom, which had accepted Rehoboam after Solomon died. The Southern Kingdom was called Judah, after its largest territory-holding tribe, Judah. Only Judah and Benjamin, of Israel's ancient tribes, made up the Kingdom. Levi had a few cities there, Simeon roved around. But it was basically Judah and Benjamin.

Jerusalem was the Southern Kingdom's capital, and once Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was crushed and

sent into exile by Assyria, the Southern Kingdom inherits the responsibility that God hoped for his People. All the rest of the Minor prophets, and all the Major Prophets, are Southern Kingdom prophets. Judah functioned basically as a vassal to Assyria. They could exist more or less on their own, and wouldn't be destroyed, as long as they gave to Assyria whatever Assyria wanted whenever they wanted it. They tried to revolt now and then, but never really did.

Situations: Bopped Around

There was Egypt to the West, Assyria to the North, Babylon, growing slowly, to the East, and Edom, a smaller player but someone who had an ancient history of pestering Israel, to the South.

A little over 100 years after Assyria demolished the Northern Kingdom, after a period of time in which Judah got a fair amount of freedom, Egypt swept in and took out Assyria. In 608, Jehoiakim, who was put into power by Egypt, decided to play the odds, and bet on Babylon, starting to send their king, Nebuchadnezzar, cash instead. It went okay, until Egypt beat the Babylonians, so he switched sides, and started to pay tribute to Egypt again. Nebuchadnezzar didn't like that.

On March 16, 597 BC Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, finally took Jerusalem after a siege, took 10,000 Israelites, plunder, and King Jeconiah, who had just inherited the throne from his dad, to Babylon. The king died along the way.

Nebuchadnezzar set up Zedekiah as Judah's and Jerusalem's king, but Zedekiah tried to align with Egypt to get him off their backs, despite how poorly that worked out the last time, so Nebuchadnezzar came back, and in December of 589, besieged the city again.

In 587, he razed the city, destroyed the Temple, killed Zedekiah's sons in front of him, then blinded the king and took him and whoever wasn't killed back to Babylon.

Judah was sent into Exile. Things fall apart.

Situations: Return From Exile:

But in 539 King Cyrus of Persia overcomes the Babylonian Empire. A year later, he decrees Israel can return to Jerusalem, and establishes an area somewhat smaller than the older Southern Kingdom as

a district with basically autonomous rule. It's now that the Israelites begin to be called Jews, which we see, I hope, comes from Judah. When we read the historical books Ezra, Nehemiah, or even the Minor Prophets, and hear "Israel," what they're talking about now is Judah.

The timeline gets tricky, Ezra, a priest and scholar, is sent back to Jerusalem by the Persian Emperor to help Israel worship God correctly. Nehemiah returns to rebuild a wall around the City. but Zerubbabel, a governor, and Joshua, a priest, return to rebuild the Temple, and they do. Judah is left basically in peace. 200 years later Alexander the Great takes over the Persian Empire, and Greek culture begins to influence Israel. All the culture, the norms, the religious habits that we recognize in the New Testament develop during this long, long time of relative peace and relative self-rule.

So. Consider this with me:

Prophets In History:

NTS: Walk Through Slide:

What we have to realize is that these Minor Prophets

are speaking to radically different situations. In the case of Joel, Obadiah, and Jonah, they are speaking to situations that are so similar to a handful of moments in history, that historians aren't even sure which one they prophet is talking about.

If we just open these books up, without paying attention to what's going on the world, and read them through in a bloc, we will miss something. We might miss the most important things. Or worse that miss what's important, we'll misunderstand what's important.

We'll see how deeply our own situations can mirror the ones the Prophets spoke into. And we should, then, simply realize how unimaginative sin and evil are, and own the fact that we humans, even those of us who are trying to live for God, often just do the same bad, wrong things over and over. We should find out what the prophets said to their first audience, note the similarities and dissimilarities that we are in, and then figure out how to apply their original lesson to our new situation.

If we want to blow it, though, we'll just assume that the prophets are speaking to us, now, and we'll forget

that they are not. They're writing to Samaria in their wealth, Assyria in their evil, Edom in their lack of brotherhood, Judeans about to go into exile, left behind while many did go to exile, or just returning from exile.

We have to do the work to make sense of what they're saying to them, then do the work to make sense of what that means for us. It's not easy. But it's our only option.

The Prophetic Vision of the World:

If we do it well, though, something powerful happens.

We come underneath the prophetic vision of the world. We come underneath the prophetic vision of the world. For all their differences--location, time, place, people--the prophets, each of them, share a vision of the world in which God wants to see faith spread out from His People, and promises, always, a future that is brighter than the present for His People who will live for him.

What we'll discover in these Minor Prophets is that our own vision of the world to come that Jesus has left us with, in which resurrection breaks out all around us, in which we have no fear, no death, no vengeance, and

no want, where all recognize God's worth and the worth of all creation, and there is no sin, and there is no abuse, and there is no devastation or chaos, that's a vision of the world that each of these Minor Prophet's visions fit underneath, promote, build to.

To really listen to the Prophets is to see a vision of the world as God wants it to be, and to live in a way that makes it so. We're given a vision of the world as God wants it to be, and we're called to live in whatever way will make it come to life. For we Christians, far away from the vision of life that the prophets first gave, Jesus will clarify that vision, sometimes highlighting this, sometimes highlighting that, but never does he, I think, abandon it.

So let's read the Minor Prophets recognizing that it is a dangerous thing to do, because what each of them demands of us, even this far from their first moments, is that we allow ourselves to be changed by them. That's what we're getting ourselves into, here. I think it will be really good, as long as we journey together in it.