The Book of the Twelve (Minor Prophets)

Now we come to the minor prophets, as they are called in our English Bible. They are called the book of the twelve in Hebrew because it is a gathering of 12 books. These are not called minor prophets because they are minor in their important, but it is simply because they are shorter than the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In addition, they are addressed to more narrowly defined audiences. Only Micah of the 12 addresses both Israel and Judah. They mostly cover brief periods of time. They are minor because they are shorter, more narrowly defined in their addressees, and they tend to cover a briefer period of time as individual prophets.

The book of the twelve covers three really important periods in the context of the history of Israel and Judah. The Assyrian period recognized the ascendancy of Assyrian power in Mesopotamia. Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BC. This is an important date to remember. We have four prophets that date to that period: Amos, Jonah, Hosea, and Micah. There is some uncertainty about Jonah, but we will talk about that in a minute. Amos addresses the northern kingdom of Israel, and Jonah addresses the northern kingdom along with the city of Nineveh in Assyria. As we will speak about later, Jonah speaks to Israel in the attitudes that they have about the nations. Hosea also speaks to the northern kingdom, and Micah is the only one of the 12 who addresses both Israel and Judah.

We come to the Babylonian period when Babylon was under Nabopolassar. He conquered Assyria in 612 BC, and they also defeated the Egyptians at Carcamesh. Babylon became the ascendancy power. It was under Nebuchadnezzar that they conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC. There are four more prophets associated with the Babylonian period: Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Obadiah. Nahum addressed Assyria about 100 years after Jonah. Zephaniah and Habakkuk address the southern kingdom of Judah. Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, and it addresses the kingdom of Edom.

Finally, there are four more prophets that speak into the Persian period. This is the period of the exile and the return from exile. Under King Cyrus, Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BC. It was through the Cyrus edict in 538 BC that people began to return from the Babylonian exile to rebuild Jerusalem. Haggai and Zechariah together had an important role in that mission of motivating God’s people to rebuild the temple. They spoke to the people of Judah, primarily the city of Jerusalem. There are two other prophets, Malachi and Joel, who also spoke during this period. There is some question about Joel, which we will also talk about later, but there is no question that Joel is also primarily focused on Jerusalem and the hopes that are involved with Jerusalem.

There are three different periods of time and 12 different prophets who spoke to God’s people. They spoke first to the northern kingdom, then to the southern, and finally to the exilic community as they returned. We will first begin with the Assyrian period and talk about the prophet Amos. He is probably the first of the writing prophets, and he ministered before the time of Isaiah. He was around the same time as Hosea during the reigns of King Uzziah in Judah and King Jeroboam II in Israel. We are told that he was a farmer and shepherder from Judah in Amos 7. He was called to prophesy in the northern kingdom. Amos 7:12-15 says, “Then Amaziah said to Amos, ‘Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Do not prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.’ Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”’ Now then, hear the word of the Lord.” You can see some of the tensions there as a southerner comes north to carry about his ministry.
The prophecy of Amos begins with eight judgment speeches. In an earlier lesson we talked about the role of the prophet and different forms of literature. A prophet prosecutes or represents the covenant to God’s people. Oftentimes that takes the form of a legal case against them. Amos filled that role in these judgment speeches that begin in Amos 1:3 and go through chapter 2. It is interesting that they all have a very similar format. “The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem…” Then the judgment speeches begin. Amos 1:3 says, “The LORD says, ‘For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.’” The same form is taken in chapter 1, verse 6, “For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because you took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom…” The kingdoms of Tyre and Edom are mentioned in the same format, “For three sins, even for four…” This continues on, and the last two of these come to the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The time for God’s patience is over. This is what the Lord says in Amos 2:6, “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground, and they deny justice to the oppressed.” Amos starts with the Lord’s judgment against these other nations, and in many ways the people of Israel listen to that. They would join in with God’s judgments of other nations. Then there is a surprise that in the same way the Lord will judge His own people because they have violated the covenant. We read how they violate the social order of the people of God. There are social sins of oppressing the poor, but there are also cultic sins that Amos prosecutes against the northern kingdom. We see that in Amos 4:4-5, “Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. Burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings—boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do.” The cultic sites of Bethel and Gilgal are inappropriate. They violate the Davidic covenant and the fact that they are supposed to worship in Jerusalem. They also worship other gods at these sites.

Amos is most famous for his prosecution of social sins against Israel. We see in Amos 5:23-24 the most famous example of that, “Away with the noise of your songs! I will not come to listen to the music of your harps. Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! Did you bring me sacrifice and offering? You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god […] Therefore I will send you into exile.” They come to worship God, but they do so while oppressing the poor. We see a combination of Amos’ prosecution of God’s case against Israel for both her cultic sins and her social sins. This is carried out with various visions in the final chapters of Amos. Amos 7 through 9 is made of visions of Israel’s judgment coming at the hands of Assyria, including locusts, fire, and the plumb line. We also have a vision of summer fruit, and Israel is ripe for judgment.

All is not hopeless, though, because we see that Amos closes in Amos 9 with the vision that Luke picks up in Acts 15. It is the vision of the repair of David’s tent. David’s tent will be restored, and Amos 9:11 says, “In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be so that they may possess the remnant of Edom, all the nations that bear my name.” declares the LORD, who will do all these things.”

We see very common threads through the book of the twelve, or the minor prophets. First and foremost, we hear about the day of judgment and the day of the Lord that is coming. It is a reckoning for God’s people who have violated the covenant. God will use other nations to prosecute that. But the Lord is sovereign over these nations, and they do not do this on their own because of their own power. The Lord raises them up for this, and that is indicated by the fact that He will also punish them. He will punish their pride and arrogance. The final theme is the notion of the days that are coming, days of hope. There is hope beyond the exile that the Lord has not completely forsaken His covenant. He will restore His people in the end.
In the Assyrian period we also come to the prophet Hosea. He also lived and prophesied in the north. He could see Assyria’s growing strength, and he warns Israel not to trust in Assyria or form alliances with them. We see that in Hosea 5:13, “When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his sores, then Ephraim turned to Assyria, and sent to the great king for help. But he is not able to cure you, not able to heal your sores. For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah.” Ephraim was the northern kingdom of Israel. Hosea’s ministry, like so many of the prophets, was symbolic at points. We saw this with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in ways that God called them to carry out in their own lives symbolic actions that represented the way in which God deals with His people. That was certainly true of Hosea in his marriage to Gomer. In his own life and ministry, Hosea incarnated the Lord’s relationship with Israel, as Gomer represented Israel’s prostitution and adultery of going after other gods. Hosea, like the Lord, pursued her even though she pursued other lovers.

We have a word of hope as Hosea redeems Gomer. We see this in Hosea 2:14-15, “Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.” There is a vision that she will be led out into the wilderness. This is all very painful because of the broken relationship between the Lord and Israel, along with the broken relationship between Hosea and Gomer. There is a word of hope that the Lord will redeem Israel even as Hosea will go after and redeem Gomer.

The pain is very severe and great, because Israel will not answer the call to repentance. Hosea 6:1-6 says,

Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the early dew that disappears. Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you. For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

We see the pursuit in keeping with the covenant and the words of Deuteronomy. The Lord looks for complete loyalty and fidelity on the part of His people to His covenant. The days of punishment are near, because the northern kingdom will refuse this call to repentance. We see in Hosea 11 that Assyria will be her king, but this will not be the last word about the northern kingdom. Hosea 11:5 says, “Assyria will rule over them because they refuse to repent.” But the Lord is conflicted about this as it shows in verse 8, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.” We see that the Lord prosecutes this judgment, but it is not the final word about His people Israel.

In the Assyrian period we also have the story of Jonah, the son of Amittai, as 2 Kings 14 tells us. Jonah was a real person who ministered during the reign of Jeroboam II. We also see that in 2 Kings 14. As Jonah himself shows, he and his countrymen had forgotten God’s intention to bless the nations through His people. The ways that they reacted and the attitudes toward other nations actually reduced God to a tribal deity. They treated the Lord as though He were only their God and not the God over the entire earth. We see the compassion of the Lord for this great city of Nineveh, as he says in Jonah 1 and 4. He
begins and ends the prophecy that way. He has compassion on the people of Nineveh, and in Jonah’s ministry of preaching repentance to them Jonah says, “I knew that you would do this.” Jonah’s conflict within represents the conflict of Israel in their relationship with the nations. The prophet Jonah shows Israel’s God as the God over all the earth. He is the sovereign and merciful creator of all.

We also see the longest prophecy in this period, which belongs to the prophet Micah. He was a contemporary of Isaiah and ministered to both kingdoms, though he was focused more on Judah. His book opens by predicting the fall of Samaria. We see that in Micah 1:6. Samaria is the capital of the northern kingdom, established under Omri. This vision of the fall of the northern kingdom is very distressing to Micah, but it also means distress for Judah. The prophecy of Micah is arranged in three cycles. There are 19 prophecies, and he, too, like Amos, sees the people’s cultic sin. He sees the fact that they worship other gods and are not loyal to Yahweh, the One who brought them out of Egypt and gave them a land of their own.

Also like Amos, Micah focuses on social injustice. Micah 2:1-2 says, “Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning’s light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellowman of his inheritance.” This is a direct violation of the inheritance laws. They seize houses and property because of their economic power, and Micah prosecutes them for that on the basis of the covenant. We see also in Micah 3:1-3 that he rebukes the leaders of Israel. “Listen, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel. Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil; who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people’s flesh.” He uses very vivid imagery to talk about the way in which the rich, wealthy, and influential treat their own brothers among the tribes. Micah 6:8 says, “He has showed you, O man, 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.” He looks at the cultic sin but also focuses, like Amos did, on the social sins of the ways in which brothers among these tribes treat one another.

He points to the judgment of the north, the heap of ruins that Samaria will be as a warning to Judah. He poses the question, “Who will save Judah? Who will come to him?” We see in Micah 5:2 that there is a notion that a ruler will come who was born in Bethlehem. That is where the Messiah will be born. There is still a hope beyond the judgment. This is a common theme among the prophets that though judgment is the primary word, there is the day coming when the Lord will make good on His promises to David and will renew the hope of His people. He will pardon His people. Micah 7:18-19 shows us that the Lord will pardon the sins of His people, “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” Even though God’s own people are being unfaithful to the covenant, the Lord is faithful to the covenant, both in His prosecution of its curses but also in His own character and mercy in loving kindness that will restore His people.

From the Assyrian period we come to the rise of Babylon. We begin to look at the four prophets in the Babylonian period: Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Obadiah. Nahum ministered about 100 years after Jonah. Jonah brought a word of repentance to the city of Nineveh, and Nahum spoke a word of judgment. He spoke of the coming fall of Nineveh when the Sovereign Lord of all the nations would bring another nation against Assyria. Nahum ministered in about 650 BC, which was just a few years before the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC. This was probably around the time of the fall of Thebes, which may be alluded to in Nahum 3:8. “Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile with water around her? The river was her defense, the waters her wall.” There was the rise of Babylon and its success.
against Egypt in some initial battles with Egypt, which would be completed later in 605 BC at Carcamesh. With this we see the beginnings of the ascendancy of Babylon. Nahum predicts the future fall of Nineveh in Nahum 2:1, “An attacker advances against you, Nineveh. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, marshal all your strength!” It will not be enough, though. At the hands of Assurbanipal came the beginning of the end of Nineveh’s power and Assyrian power at the hands of the Babylonians.

Nahum was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk. His book alternates in three cycles between the judgment of Nineveh and comfort for Jerusalem. In Nahum 2 we see that the attacker, Babylon, will advance against Nineveh. We see right next to it in verse 2 this comfort for Judah, “The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel though destroyers have laid them waste and have ruined their vines.” The fall of the bloodthirsty city of Nineveh will be met with thunderous applause. The vicious, brutal reputation of the Assyrians will catch up with them, and the Lord of the nations will bring another attacker against them—Babylon.

Zephaniah describes the Lord’s judgment against Judah. The theme of the day of the Lord will become quite explicit in Zephaniah. Just before the fall of Nineveh, Zephaniah ministered during the early days of King Josiah in Judah. This was probably before the reforms of 621 BC, and it is also in the seventh century. He could have been instrumental in these reforms under Josiah, and we have it mentioned in 2 Kings 23 and 2 Chronicles 34. In Zephaniah we see the prominence of the word of judgment against Judah because of her idolatry. Zephaniah 1:4-6 gives an announcement of judgment against Judah, “I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests—those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech, those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.” Zephaniah, like the other prophets, points out the cultic sins, or worshiping, and idolatrous sins of Judah.

There is a way of escape, though, and Zephaniah announces that they should seek the Lord. They should turn away from their idolatrous practices to escape the day of the Lord’s anger. Zephaniah 2:3 says, “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’s anger.” These are common themes that we see. The prophets prosecute and represent the covenant of God’s people and call them back to covenant faithfulness and repentance. They are called away from their idolatry and their social sins against one another. The Lord’s day of judgment is near, because even mighty Assyria will fall. Like Nahum, who announced the fall of Assyria, we see it in Zephaniah as well. This does not bode well for Judah that even a mighty, powerful country and nation like Assyria will fall. Zephaniah 2:13 says, “He will stretch out his hand against the north and he will destroy Assyria, leaving Nineveh utterly desolate and dry as a desert.”

What about Jerusalem? Will she listen to correction? Zephaniah answers this in chapter 3. “Woe to the city of repressors, rebellious and defiled. She obeys no one; she accepts no correction. She does not trust in Yahweh. She does not draw near to her God. Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers evening wolves who leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are arrogant, and they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law. The LORD within her is righteous. He does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice.” The call to repentance again will not be answered, and the Lord will purify even idolatrous speech on His day among His people.
Again there is a word of hope beyond this word of judgment. We see that at the end of Zephaniah 3, “Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.” Zephaniah not only envisions judgment against Assyria and Jerusalem, but he also envisions that the Lord will be faithful to restore His own people to Himself. He envisions this day when the daughter of Jerusalem can rejoice because he sees that the Lord Himself will rejoice again over His people. He will take delight in them and rejoice over them with song, according to Zephaniah 3:17.

Also in this period where Assyria and Nineveh fall at the hands of the Babylonians we have the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk is different, and it is interesting in terms of how he differs from the other minor prophets. Habakkuk was written after the fall of Samaria but near the rise of the Babylonians. We see that the Lord will use the Babylonians to rectify the thing that Habakkuk sees that troubles him so much. Instead of complaining to the people and prosecuting a legal case against them, Habakkuk is arranged very differently. He speaks to the Lord. He complains to the Lord about the sins of the people, and then he complains to the Lord about the way in which the Lord will deal with that in bringing judgment against Jerusalem but using the Babylonians or Chaldeans to do it. Habakkuk, instead of speaking to the people, speaks to the Lord in prayer.

In Habakkuk 3 we see that he uses the same sort of format that we have in the psalms of David. It is a psalm that has even a superscription on it. “A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet.” There is a notation that is perhaps a musical or literary term, “shigionoth.” Then we hear a lament, which is the way in which Habakkuk reaches a sense of peace before the Lord. He ends in descriptive praise. He fears this vision of judgment, but he remembers the Lord’s mercy to the people in the past. This allows him to entrust himself again to the Lord. In verse 16 he says, “I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.” There will be a time when the Lord will also judge the Babylonians. He ends the psalm, writing, “The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.”

Habakkuk is quite unique. He sees the rise of Babylon, but it will come against Jerusalem. Instead of speaking to the people, he prays to the Lord about their sins, and he also complains about the way in which the Lord will judge His people. He is comforted by the fact that the Lord will judge Babylon in the end. He will comfort His own people as well. We see the common themes throughout even though Habakkuk is different in the way in which the book goes about things. The same themes are there that are common to all the minor prophets.

The book of Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, and it is just one chapter. It describes the Lord’s judgment against Edom for her violence against Judah. Jerusalem falls, and in verses 10-14 we see that the prophet presents Edom’s violence against Judah when Jerusalem falls as the evidence that the Lord counts against Edom. Edom is a neighbor who begins to kill many of those who try to flee Jerusalem during the siege under the Babylonians. This is the evidence that Obadiah presents about the Lord’s punishment against Edom. The punishment against Edom, like we see in these other prophets as they announce judgment against the nations, represents the overarching sovereignty of the Lord. He is not just the God of Israel and Judah, but He is the Lord over all the earth.

We have discussed two periods: the Assyrian period and the Babylonian period. Finally, we now come to the Persian period. God’s people had been taken off into exile. The judgments that the prophets during the Assyrian and Babylonian periods had spoken about came true. Nineveh fell to the Babylonians, and then the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took away God’s people into exile.
That is exactly the period in which the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel wrote. We have here two prophets: Haggai and Zechariah. They are mentioned also in Ezra and Nehemiah. Their ministry was vital to encouraging those who began to return from exile under the Cyrus Edict. Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BC, and in the next year, as part of their governing of their new territory, Cyrus allowed for leaders to return to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Haggai and Zechariah ministered during the time in which that rebuilding was challenged. We learned about that story in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Haggai ministered in the second year of King Darius’ reign. He began to prophesy to the returnees who returned under Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel, as we talked about in an earlier lesson, was the David figure and governor. Joshua the high priest was also present during this time. Haggai wanted to encourage the rebuilding and the rededication of the temple. That project was threatened because of the objects that were raised by Israel’s neighbors, particularly those to the north who had repopulated the northern area around Samaria. This is the beginnings of the problem that we see in the New Testament and the feelings there of animosity. They sent word to Darius, stopping construction, but Darius took the time to research the royal annuls. He located the decree under Cyrus, so he wrote back and authorized the rebuilding project to get started again.

Here is the word of the Lord through the prophet Haggai, “Is it is time for you yourselves to be living in paneled houses while the house of the LORD remains a ruin? This is what the LORD Almighty says, ‘Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much; you have harvested little. You eat but never have enough. You drink but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but you are not warm.’ In other words, Haggai says, “You do not experience the blessings of covenant relationships.” This is because the Lord’s house remains a ruin while you are busy with your own houses. The people listen to Haggai, the Lord’s messenger, and the Lord stirs them up. We see the rebuilding of the temple. In Haggai 2 we see it is not like the glory of the former days. Haggai motivates this rebuilding project, and he also speaks to motivate loyalty to Zerubbabel, the David leader, and to Joshua, the Zedekite priest. This rebuilding must have proper leadership, and Haggai wants to support and cultivate it among the returnees to Jerusalem.

Haggai did not minister alone, but he ministered with Zechariah. Zechariah’s visions and oracles encouraged these returnees to reestablish the temple priesthood under Joshua’s leadership and to follow the David leadership provided by the governor Zerubbabel.

There are two different parts to Zechariah’s prophecy, chapters 1 through 8 and 9 through 14. They seem quite different, and they probably reflect two different periods in Zechariah’s ministry. Chapters 1 through 8 focus on the rebuilding project of the temple that we have already talked about in Haggai’s ministry. They ministered together. We have eight night visions that all follow a similar pattern. They are meant to display the importance of Zerubbabel and Joshua for God’s plan to reestablish His people. We see the centrality of things like the lamp stands and the olive trees. Joshua’s day of cleansing is in Zechariah 3. There is a vision of a man measuring Jerusalem like God, marking it out as his own. The lamp stand symbolizes the Lord’s presence, and God’s Spirit is sent to help with the completion of the temple in Zechariah 4:6. The standard of worship in the temple and of life again is the flying scroll that we read about in chapter 5. It reminds them of the importance of Torah and of God’s Word as the standard against sin. It is the standard for covenant faithfulness and their worship in the rebuilt temple.

We read the good and wonderful news in Zechariah 8 that the fasts are over. The exile is over. In Zechariah 9 through 14 we see that Jerusalem’s enemies will ultimately be removed. Her king will come riding on a donkey. Zechariah 9:9 is a passage that is reflected in the Gospels that we see applied to Jesus in Matthew 21 and Luke 19. Israel’s worthless leaders will be removed, and a true leader, a
Messiah, will come. As these worthless leaders are judged, Israel will look on the One whose hands they have pierced. They will mourn, but He will be their shepherd and their redemption. Chapters 9 through 14 are probably a reflection of the fact that the hopes that had been invested in Zerubbabel’s leadership were unrealized. Yet there is a hope pressed out into the future. It is a Messianic hope of this final age of fulfillment where God will bring these hopes to pass. They will be realized in the person of the Messiah.

Haggai and Zechariah served the returnees, and then we have the prophet Malachi. This comes a little bit later during the time of reforms. Perhaps just after the period of Ezra’s reforms we see that there were continuing struggles with keeping proper worship in the temple. Malachi addresses predominately the priesthood and their allowing for improper and injured animals to be used in violation of the Levitical rules to bring about worship in the temple. The priests allowed animals that would be of no value to God’s people. They could not sell them, so they tried to give the leftovers to God. Malachi brings a word of judgment against them that they profane the name of the Lord in Malachi 2:4-10. They despise the name of Yahweh. He even talks about how they would not even offer such a thing to the Persian governor. They would offer more respect to their Persian governor than they offer to the Lord. Malachi brings about a period of reform that we see with ongoing struggles. Even though worship has been reestablished in the temple, there is a need for ongoing attention to the law. There is a looking forward to a time of renewal and a messenger that the Lord will send. Malachi’s very name means “messenger,” so we see in chapter 3 that the Lord will bring about a messenger who will call the hearts of the fathers back to the hearts of the children. There will be a renewal of covenant faithfulness, and that messenger will announce the coming One and precede the Messiah.

The prophets in the Persian period were initially focused on the reestablishment of temple worship. Then there was a period of disappointment. The hopes that had been invested in Zerubbabel and Joshua were unrealized, and there was a pushing of hope out into a future day. In that day the Lord will renew the hopes of His people. He will restore them.

The book that is left is the prophet Joel. Joel is a bit of a mystery to us as to exactly when it should be placed. The book came about probably sometime between 500 and 450 BC. We see in Joel 3:1-3 that there is seemingly a reference back to the time of the Babylonian exile. There is also a mention of priests and elders but no king in Joel 1. Joel 3:1-3 says, “In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land.” There seems to be a reference there back to the Babylonian exile, yet it speaks of a future judgment that will take place. Joel 1:13-15 says, “Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. Declare a holy fast [...] Alas! The day of the LORD is near. It will come like destruction from the Almighty.” These references probably fit this Persian period and a period of needed reforms that we saw with Malachi around the same time. We see that the Babylonian exile is in the past, and the priests and the elders minister in the temple. There is no king, and there is still this call to repentance. There is a call to reform.

Joel 2:12 and following says, “‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” There is a day of judgment coming, this day of the locusts. Yet the Lord will restore the years that the locusts eat. The vision of the day of the Lord is a day of judgment, but it is also a day in which those who are of the remnant who are faithful to the covenant and answer Joel’s call to repentance will experience
deliverance. They will experience salvation and the outpouring of the Spirit of God, who is yet to return to God’s people. Joel 2:28 says, “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. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour my Spirit in those days, and I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth.”

In the minor prophets we see the theme that judgment is coming. Judgment is against the nations, those who have been powerful in the ascendency, those who even the Lord has used to punish His own people. The Lord’s people are called to repent. This word of judgment and about the day of the Lord is not the last word. There is a hope in the promise God made to David, a hope for the One whom the Lord would raise up to restore His people. There is also a hope in the day when the Lord Himself would return to His people, when the Spirit of the Lord would return into the midst of His people and bring them to Himself and make them His holy people again. These visions of the return of the Lord’s Spirit and of the raising up of the Messiah are realized in the next chapter that comes, the chapter of the New Testament in its fulfillment of the story that looks for an ending to the story of the Old Testament.