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Lesson 1

Background of the Minor Prophets of Judah

Six of the twelve minor prophets ministered to the Southern Kingdom prior to the Babylonian captivity. Before we study each of their books, it will help to learn something of the setting in which Old Testament prophets served God as His spokesmen to His people.

The prophets did not preach in a vacuum. Each spoke to definite needs of the people as these were disclosed by God through revelation. It should not surprise us as we study their books that the spiritual needs of the people living almost three millennia ago were the same kinds of needs as today. For human nature is changeless. In a sense Obadiah and Joel and all the other prophets are speaking now *to us*.

I. THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY

The offices of judge, prophet, priest, and king were all important positions in the commonwealth of Israel.¹ Let us inquire into some of the distinctive functions of one of these—the prophet.

The word “prophet” is an important word in the Bible, for it is one of the few official titles given to men of God who spoke His Word to His people. In its various forms the word appears more than 660 times in the Bible, two-thirds of which are in the Old Testament.

A. The Term “Prophesy”

The primary task of the Old Testament prophets was not to *foretell* future events but to *forthtell* the will of God that He had revealed

1. When the name “Israel” is used in this manual, it refers to the chosen nation as a whole, unless otherwise specified.

to His prophets. Concerning the verb “prophesy,” Gleason Archer writes:

the Hebrew word is **nibba'** . . . a word whose etymology is much disputed. The best rounded explanation, however, seems to relate this root to the Akkadian verb **nabu**, which means “to summon, announce, call. . . .” Thus the verb **nibba'** would doubtless signify one who has been called or appointed to proclaim as a herald the message of God Himself. From this verb comes the characteristic word for prophet, **nabi'**, one who has been called. On this interpretation the prophet was . . . one called by God to proclaim as a herald from the court of heaven the message to be transmitted from God to man.²

B. Qualifications of the Prophet

Listed below are some of the qualifications for the high office of the prophet. Considering the nature of the prophet’s work, we can appreciate why the qualifications were so strict:

1. *Sovereign calling.* God’s sovereign will determined who were His prophets (cf. Isa. 6; Jer. 1).

2. *Special abilities.* These were given by God’s Spirit, enabling the prophet to perceive the truth (as “seer”), and equipping him with the gift of communicating to people the revelation of God.

3. *Spiritual qualities.* These were not a few. Included were unselfishness, obedience to the voice of God, love, faith, courage, and long-suffering.

C. Message of the Prophet

Whether the prophet was called to preach, or to write, or to do both, his message was the same. All the prophetic words of the Old Testament could probably be compiled under the following four large areas of truth about which the prophet engaged himself:

1. *Instruction of the great truths about God and man.* The prophets devoted much time telling the people about God—His character, His domain, His purposes, and His law. They also gave a true diagnosis of the spiritual health of the nation as a whole and of the individual souls.

2. *Warning and appeal to those living in sin.* It cannot be said that God brings judgment upon men without forewarning. Over

2. Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 284.

and over again the prophets warned of judgment to come for sin, and exhorted the people to repent and turn to God.

3. *Comfort and exhortation to those trusting and obeying God.* These are the warm and bright portions of the prophets' messages.

4. *Prediction of events to come.* Prophetic predictions were of two major subjects: (1) national and international events, of both near and far-distant future; and (2) the coming of Jesus the Messiah—His first and second comings.

D. The Writing Prophets

There are seventeen books of prophecy in our English Old Testament. These were written by sixteen different prophets, if Jeremiah wrote Lamentations as well as the book bearing his name. The books are classified as either “Major” or “Minor,” the classification assigned primarily for their relative length. These prophecies were written over a period of more than four centuries, from about 840 B.C. (Obadiah) to 420 B.C. (Malachi).

Writers of the Major Prophetical Books	Writers of the Minor Prophetical Books		
Isaiah	Hosea	Jonah	Zephaniah
Jeremiah	Joel	Micah	Haggai
Ezekiel	Amos	Nahum	Zechariah
Daniel	Obadiah	Habakkuk	Malachi

II. UNDERSTANDING THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

An Old Testament prophet’s twofold ministry was that of *forthtelling* and *foretelling*. In order to understand both of these as they appear in the books of the minor prophets, you should be acquainted with the historical setting (where forthtelling is prominent) and with the times beyond the horizons (where foretelling is prominent).

A. The Historical Setting

Because history involves geography, it is important to know the

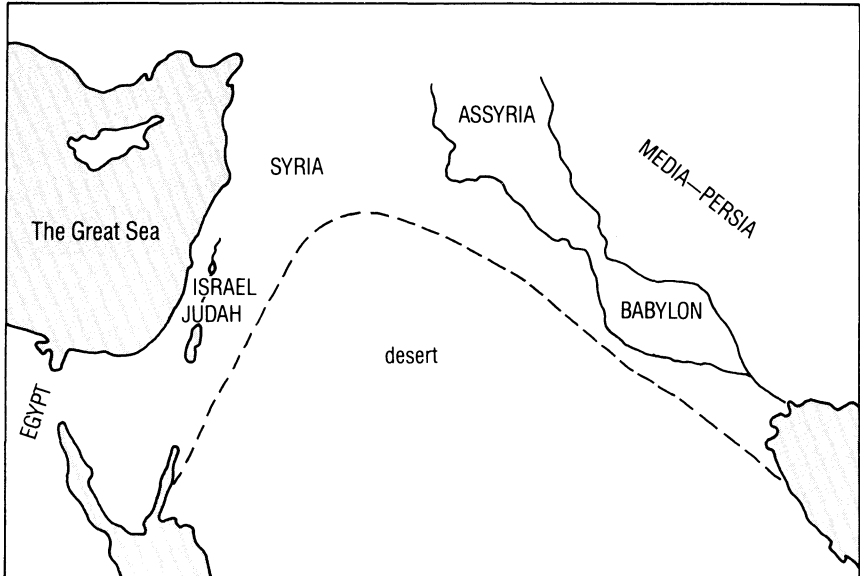
locations of the major nations during the times of the prophets. Always have a mental picture of these as you study.

For each prophetic book there is both a large overall historical setting and the immediate setting.

1. *Overall setting.* Israel was God's elect nation, called into being by His sovereign decree and preserved through the ages (sometimes in a small remnant) in fulfillment of His covenant originally made with Abraham (Gen. 12).

MAJOR NATIONS DURING THE TIMES OF THE PROPHETS

Map 2



Refer to Chart A and note that all the writing prophets ministered subsequent to the split of the united kingdom into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah (931 B.C.).³ At the close of Samuel's judgeship (c. 1000 B.C.), Israel willfully insisted upon having human kings rule over them in spite of God's solemn protest and warning of the consequences of such a step. God gave them what they demanded, and over the years the kings exerted great power and influence. Many of them were wicked men, leading multitudes into idolatry and all forms of disobedience to God. At such a time as this, God must speak. Although Israel had rejected God, He had not rejected Israel; and while their human kings were leading the

3. This is an example of the smaller designation of the name *Israel*.

people away from Him, God, through the voice of the prophets, was seeking to woo them back to Himself. This was the occasion for the introduction of the prophets. The prophet was God's mouthpiece, speaking His warnings and predictions and exhortations.

2. *Immediate setting.* One must also understand something of the political and religious conditions that prevailed at the time any given prophet was speaking. For most of the prophetic books, this can be ascertained by reading in the books of Kings and Chronicles the history of the kings who were ruling at any particular period. For example, the first verse of Micah gives the names of the three kings who were reigning while Micah prophesied. By turning back to the historical books and reading the accounts of these reigns, one can learn about the evils that existed and against which Micah was thundering.

The setting of foreign powers also throws light on the prophetic books. For each book you will want to know something of the surrounding nations, especially those vying for world suzerainty. Chart A shows that the three reigning world powers during the years of the prophets were:

Assyrian—up to 612 B.C. (fall of Nineveh)

Neo-Babylonian—up to 539 B.C. (fall of Babylon)

Persian—up to Malachi (and beyond)

You will appreciate and understand more of the times of the prophets if you keep in mind that human history is in the sovereign hands of an omniscient, omnipotent God. Everything transpires either by His permission or directive will. He foreknows every event before it becomes history, and on many occasions He gave such prophetic revelation to His prophets to share with the nations.

B. Beyond the Horizons

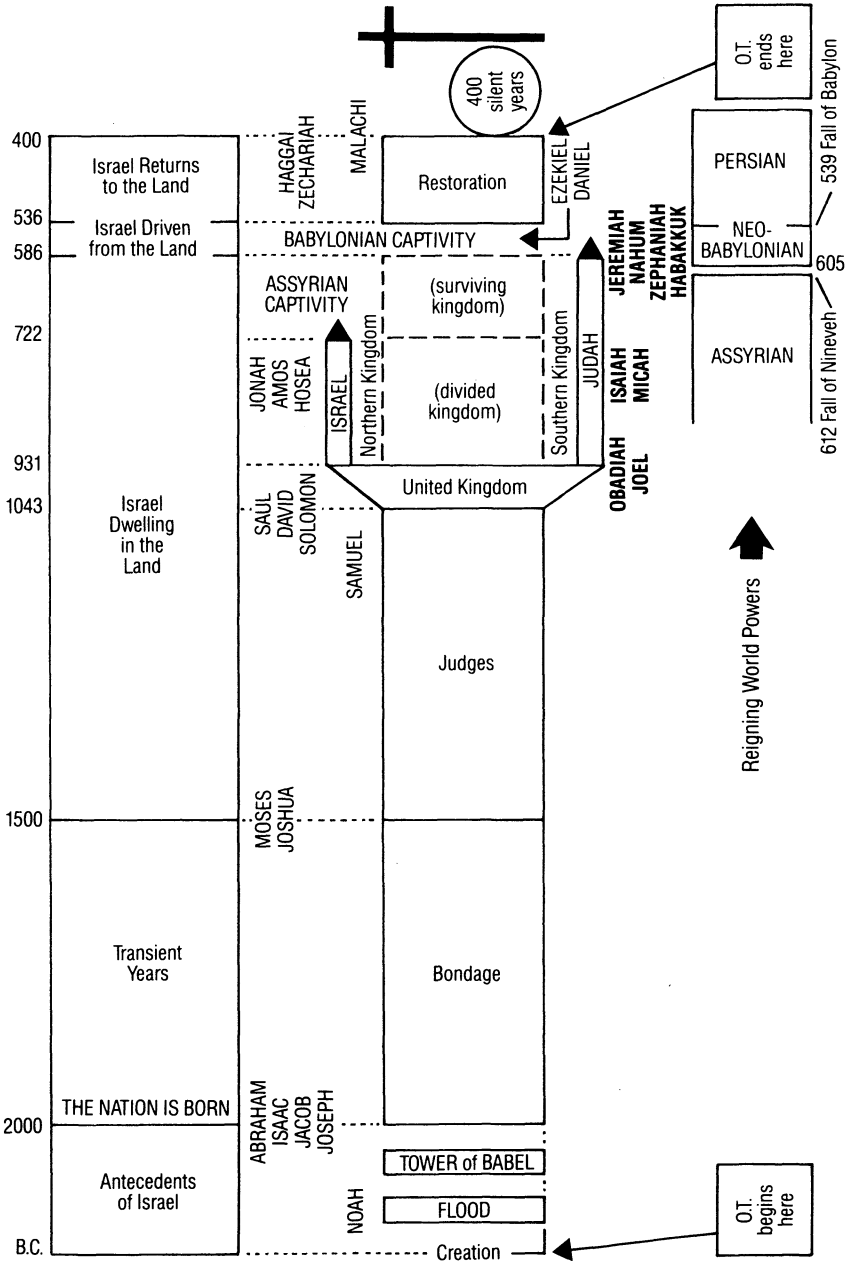
A vital and unique mission of the prophets was to foretell the future as God revealed it to them.

1. *The four prophetic points.* The utterances of the prophets, for the most part, centered on four points in history: (1) their own time; (2) the threatening captivities (Assyrian and Babylonian) and subsequent restoration; (3) the coming of their Messiah; and (4) the messianic kingdom (sometimes called the Millennium) of the end times. This is illustrated by Chart B.

It was as though the prophet were on some eminence (see "A" on Chart B) looking off into the distance and speaking of what he saw. Most often he saw the sins that prevailed in his own day, and spoke of them (see Point 1 on Chart B). Then he would look

Chart A

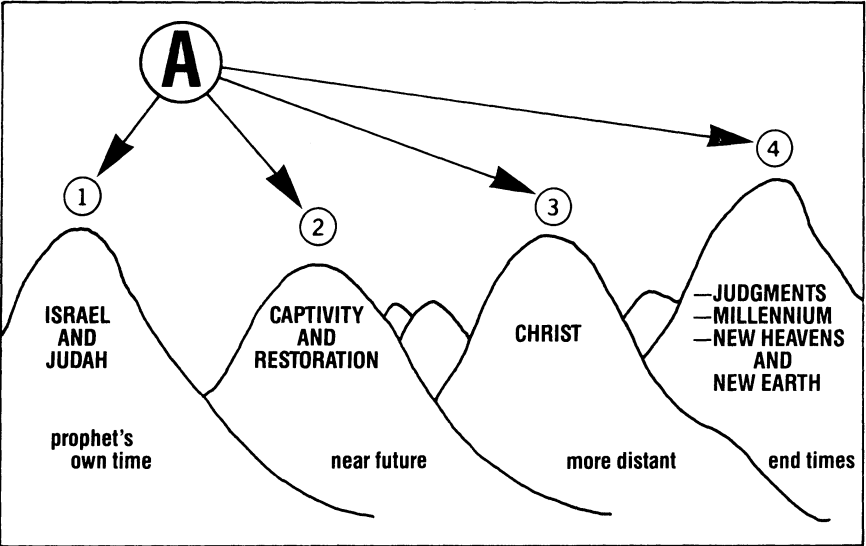
THE WRITING PROPHETS IN OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY



off to the day when the nation would be taken out of their land into captivity. He also saw an eventual regathering of the Jews from the captivities (see Point 2). At times the Spirit enabled him to look further into the future and foretell of the coming Messiah (see Point 3). Often he saw still further and spoke of such things as restoration and peace coming to God's people in a glorious kingdom (see Point 4). As an example, read Micah 4 and determine to which of these four times in history Micah is referring.

FOUR PROPHETIC POINTS

Chart B

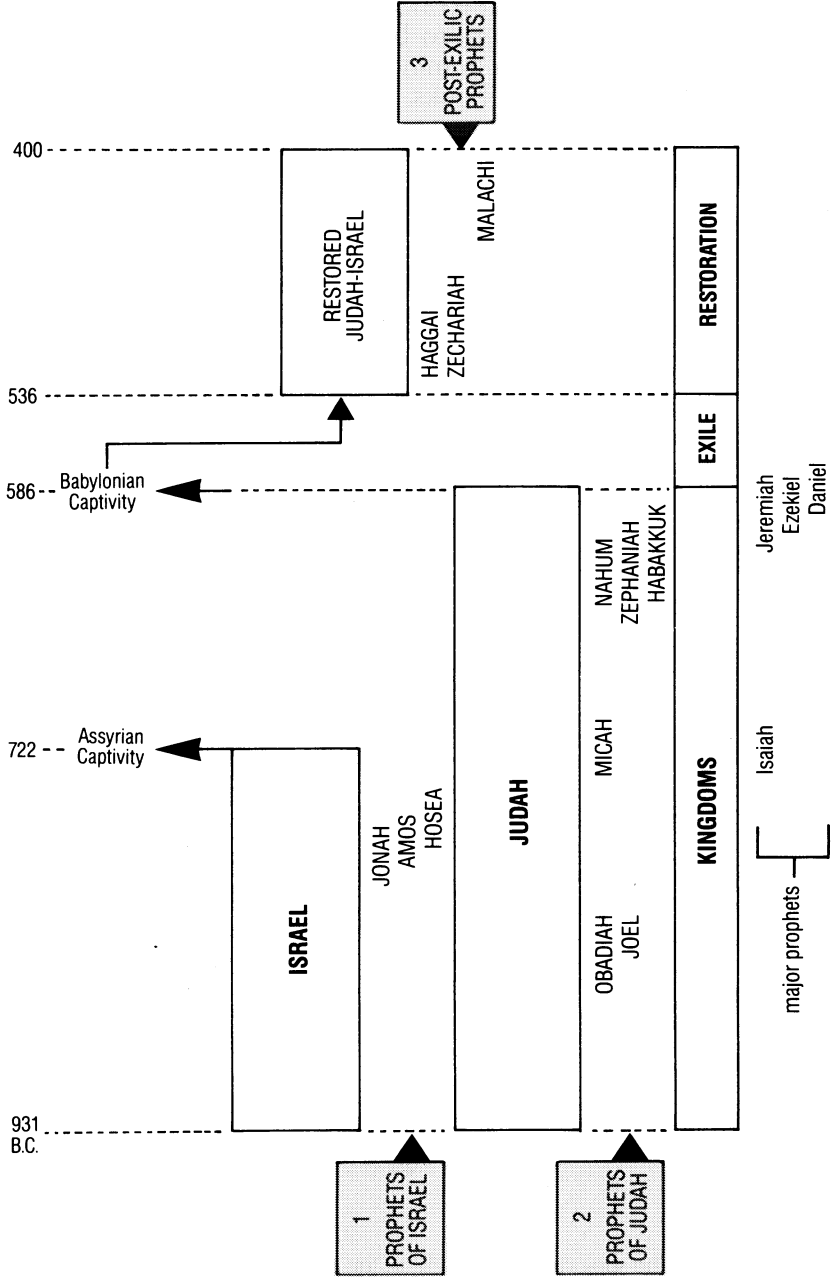


Whenever a prophet foretells an event, you will want to determine which future category it is in (Pts. 2, 3, or 4 on Chart B). In making your interpretation, keep in mind that often a prophecy has a multiple intention of fulfillment. For example, a prophecy of restoration of the Jews may concern (1) return from Babylonian captivity *and also* (2) regathering of Israel from all parts of the world in the end times. Actually the restoration after the Babylonian captivity was so temporary and partial that all promises of a glorious restoration looked ultimately to the future messianic reign of the end times.

2. *The two messianic themes.* An Old Testament prophecy about Christ's ministry on earth concerns either His first coming (e.g., Mic. 5:2) or His second coming (e.g., Mic. 2:12-13). The prophets were not aware that a long interval of time would transpire between Christ's manifestation in suffering (first advent) and

Chart C

THREE GROUPS OF MINOR PROPHETS



His revelation in glory (second advent). His suffering and His reigning appeared to them to be close in time. The student of prophecy must keep this in mind when he studies the predictive sections of the prophetic books.

III. THREE GROUPS OF MINOR PROPHETS

Chart C shows the three groups of minor prophets in relation to the historical setting. There were prophets of Israel (Northern Kingdom); prophets of Judah (Southern Kingdom); and prophets of the restored nation (after returning from exile).⁴

According to the chart, what is the chronological order of the minor prophets of Judah? This is the order in which we will be studying the books in this manual. Try to fix this in your mind:

BOOK	NO. OF CHAPTERS	NOTE
Obadiah	1	
Joel	3	
Micah	7	
Nahum	3	
Zephaniah	3	
Habakkuk	3	

IV. KINGS CONTEMPORARY WITH THE MINOR PROPHETS OF JUDAH

Chart D shows which kings were reigning over Judah during the ministries of Judah’s six minor prophets.⁵ The shaded areas indicate the evil reigns; the unshaded areas, the righteous reigns. What seems to have brought on the appearance of prophets: good or evil reigns? Or is such a pattern not clear?

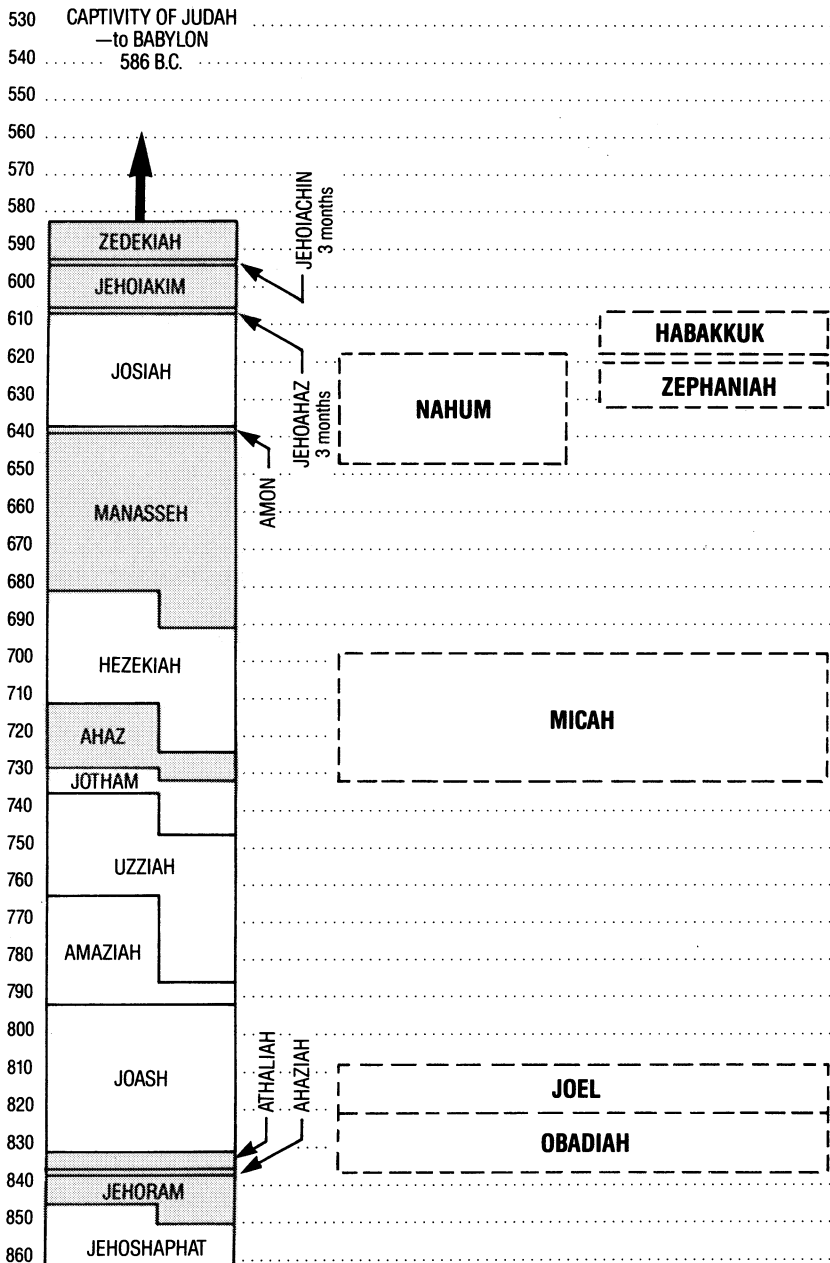
When you begin to study each book, refer to this chart to help you visualize the setting. (Note: For more background on the minor prophets, see the self-study guide on *Jonah, Amos, and Hosea*, Lesson 1.)

* * *

4. These are the subjects, respectively, of the three books of this self-study series devoted to the minor prophets.
5. Most of the dates are from John C. Whitcomb’s *Chart of Kings and Prophets* (Moody Press).

Chart D

KINGS CONTEMPORARY WITH THE MINOR PROPHETS OF JUDAH (shaded areas indicate evil reigns)



REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many minor prophets ministered to Judah? Can you name them, in the order of their appearance?

2. How many prophets ministered primarily to the Northern Kingdom of Israel?

3. What prophets are associated with the postexilic times?

4. In your own words, what was the main function of an Old Testament prophet?

5. What were the two different kinds of messages that the prophets delivered?

6. What is the intention of the word *minor* in the designation “Minor Prophets”?

7. Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk preached to the Southern Kingdom after the Northern Kingdom had gone into captivity in 722 B.C.—true or false?

8. Captivity, restoration, the first coming of Christ, and the return of Christ were all future events predicted by the prophets—true or false?

9. Which is the longest book of the six minor prophets of Judah?

10. Were evil kings on the throne during the ministries of *all* the minor prophets of Judah?
