

MEANDERING THROUGH THE MINOR PROPHETS

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MESSAGE OF THE PROPHETS AND
ITS RELEVANCE TO THE CHURCH TODAY**

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I. Introduction to the Minor Prophets

A. Why Study the Old Testament?

1.) The Old Testament still applies. *e.g., Mat. 5:17-19.*

Note: The audience that Jesus addressed would have known what we call ‘the Old Testament’ as ‘the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings’. Although somewhat oversimplified, we can thematically think of these divisions as follows.

Law: God establishes His covenant with His people.

Prophets: God calls His people to return to covenant faithfulness.

Writings: How to live wisely as God’s covenant people.

2.) Events in the Old Testament happened and were recorded for our benefit. *e.g., 1 Cor. 10:1-12.*

3.) The Old Testament is useful for the personal spiritual growth of Christians. *e.g., 2 Tim. 3:13-17.*

B. Who Were the Minor Prophets?

The division of the prophets into major and minor is based on length and not on importance. You can think of the prophets of ancient Israel as social commentators and apologists. The prophets with Old Testament books named after them were prophets who had a special commission from God. These prophets were called by God to deliver a specific message to His people. Typically, the message contained an indictment of the people for being unfaithful to God’s covenant and therefore to God Himself. The indictment was followed by a call to repentance. There was often a twofold motivation presented; God blesses those who are faithful but punishes those who are unfaithful.

In approximate¹ chronological order, the 12 Minor Prophets from most ancient to most recent are;

1. Joel
2. Obadiah
3. Amos
4. Hosea
5. Jonah
6. Micah
7. Nahum
8. Habakkuk
9. Zephaniah
10. Haggai
11. Zechariah
12. Malachi

C. Why Study the Minor Prophets?

Probably the biggest misconception concerning the prophets of the Bible is that their main purpose was to foretell future events and therefore we should study them to understand end-times events. It is true that at times there is a futuristic aspect to the message of the prophets, but their primary mission was calling God's people back to Him. This call to repentance applies to us today as much as it did to the original audience and hearing this call is one benefit to studying the prophets. The main benefit however is that we probably learn more about who God is and what He is like, within the context of His relationship with man, through reading the prophets than any other books of the Bible, Old or New Testament.

Interestingly, while the prophets call the people to covenant faithfulness by appealing to God's Law, they almost universally cite the Law as found in Deuteronomy rather than Exodus-Numbers. It therefore follows that before one begins a study of the prophets, they should first review Deuteronomy.

For next day: Read Deut. 4:1-8; 6:1-9; 7:7-11; 10:12-21; 26:16-19; 28-30. These passages reveal the true nature of the Law within the context of God's covenant with His people. The actual content of the Law is found mainly in the remainder of Deuteronomy.

¹ There is considerable disagreement concerning the dating of some of these books. This order is based upon what seems to be the most likely dates of composition based on the available evidence. This matter will be addressed later on a book by book basis.

II. Introduction to the Law

A. The Law was not given as a means of salvation.

1.) The recipients already were God's people. e.g., Deut.7:6-11; 26:16-19.

2.) Salvation has always been by grace through faith (e.g., Gal.3:5-7; Eph.2:8-10) on the basis of Christ (e.g., Rom.3:21-26; see also Rom. 4). At the cross an exchange took place, Christ took the penalty for our disobedience and sin and we received the credit for His obedience and righteousness (e.g., Rom.5:9, 19; 4:22-25). The sacrifice of Christ did away with the ceremonies and sacrifices of the Law (e.g., Heb.10:1-18). Christ did not, however, do away with the commandments contained within the Law (e.g., Mat.5:17-19), nor with the necessity of our obedience to God (e.g., John 14:21, 23-24). In Christ we have freedom from the curses for disobedience contained within the Law since He bore those curses on our behalf. Similarly, His obedience on our behalf is credited to us as righteousness. This frees us to obey the Law of God, not out of fear, but out of love and gratitude.

B. The Law was given for the following reasons.

1.) The Law provides revelation of the wisdom and righteousness of God (e.g., Deut.4:1-8). By following God's Law, His people themselves become a revelation of His wisdom and righteousness to the unsaved world around them.

2.) The Law instructs us as to how we can receive God's blessings (e.g., Deut. 6:1-9) and avoid His chastisement (e.g., Deut.6:10-25). God intends good for us, and He clearly spells out in the Law how we can receive that good.

3.) The Law provides revelation of God's requirements (e.g., Deut. 10:12-22). It stands to reason that as the Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of the universe, God has certain requirements of His creatures. These are found unambiguously in the Law.

A proper understanding of the Law is the foundation for reading the prophets.

III. Joel

A. Background

The only concrete information about the author is that he was the son of Pethuel (1:1). It is reasonable to suppose that since this is the only information about the author, he must have been fairly well known to his original audience, otherwise their reaction to 1:1 would have been 'so what?' There are another dozen Joels mentioned in the OT, but there is nothing to suggest that any of them are, or are not, the author of this book.

The internal evidence does not allow a date of writing to be established with any confidence. This is reflected by the fact that scholars have dated Joel as early as the 9th century in the time of Joash, as late as the 2nd century, and everywhere in between.

At first glance, the argument for the early date seems compelling. Several nations are condemned for their treatment of Israel (3:2-8) and Assyria is not one of them. Assyria first began oppressing Israel around 790, suggesting a prior date for Joel. The book mentions no king, instead it keys on the priests. When the queen Athaliah was in charge, the priests ran the nation, and continued to do so after her removal because the new king was a child (2 Ki.11-12). This would suggest a date of around 830. It is this same line of reasoning however that leads others to the late post-exilic dates. The problem is that this is an argument from silence and so establishes nothing.

A good argument has been made for a late seventh century date. There are strong similarities between the message of Joel and those of Zephaniah and Jeremiah which themselves are late seventh century writings. This also accounts for the evidence used for either an early or a late date. For example, Joel's literary style closely resembles the earlier prophets, and yet contains words or phrases common in later Hebrew. In other words, it seems likely that Joel was written at a later date, but influenced by the work of earlier prophets.

Fortunately, the message of Joel is ultimately eschatological and so it is not essential to establish an immediate historical context and thus the problem of dating does not affect the interpretation of the book.

The most controversial interpretive issue is the locust plague of chapter 1. These locusts have frequently been interpreted symbolically, often as waves of invading armies. Deciding which particular armies they represent however is completely subjective. More recently, an apocalyptic interpretation has become popular. This approach compares the description of the locust plague in chapter 1 with the description of the invading army of 2:4-11 and the locusts of Rev.9:3-11. The view is that the locusts of chapter 1 are no ordinary insects, but rather supernatural beasts that will be used by God when He pours His wrath out on the world. This is certainly creative, but it bases the entire interpretation upon Rev.9:3-11, to which neither Joel nor his audience would have had access. Joel does contain apocalyptic features (e.g., 2:30-32), but this does not provide a satisfactory interpretation of chapter 1.

The most sensible interpretation of chapter 1 is literal. It presents an eyewitness account of a real locust plague, the resultant agricultural devastation and the broader consequences. In addition, 2:21-27 describes restitution, made to the people by God, for the damage done by the locusts. Finally, the literal locust plague of chapter 1 serves as

an object lesson to illustrate the destruction that God will bring upon the people, with a real army, for their unfaithfulness (2:1-17). This is the same principal as the use of Hosea's marriage to Gomer as an illustration of the relationship between God and Israel.

B. Literary Structure

Superscription 1:1

- I. The Immediate Disaster: The Locust Plague 1:2-20
 - A. Effect and Extent of the Disaster 1:2-12
 - 1. 1:2-4 Elders and Citizens
 - 2. 1:5-7 Drunkards
 - 3. 1:8-12 Priests and Farmers
 - B. Summons to Fasting and Prayer at Temple 1:13-14
 - C. The Complaint and Prayer 1:15-20
- II. The Immanent Disaster: The Day of the Lord 2:1-17
 - A. The Warning Call 2:1-2
 - B. The Divine Army 2:3-11
 - C. The Call to Repentance 2:12-14
 - D. Summons to Fasting and Prayer at Temple 2:15-17
- III. God's Response 2:18-3:21
 - A. To the Immediate Disaster 2:18-27
 - 1. 2:18-20 Removal of the Threat
 - 2. 2:21-24 Healing of the Land
 - 3. 2:25-27 Restoration of Prosperity
 - B. To the Immanent Disaster 2:28-3:21
 - 1. 2:28-32 Salvation for Israel
 - 2. 3:1-16 Judgement of the Nations
 - 3. 3:17-21 God's Kingdom Realized

C. Theology

An important theme of Joel is the day of the Lord, reflecting the eschatological nature of the message of this book. Joel presents God as absolutely sovereign, for example, over creation (2:23-25) and over the nations (3:2, 19).

The complimentary themes of the compassion of God (2:13) and the justice of God (3:21) run throughout the book. The holiness of God is another major theological theme, as is the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of God. Joel also presents a picture of the realized kingdom (3:17-21), which is an important aspect of the message of several of the prophets. The call to repentance now is sweetened by a taste of the world to come.

Some key verses in Joel are 2:13; and 2:28-32 (cp. Acts 2:17-21).

IV. Obadiah

A. Background

Obadiah is the shortest book in the OT. It is nearly impossible to reliably establish any background information about the origin of the book. There are at least a dozen Obadiah's mentioned in the OT but none can be convincingly connected with the one whose vision is reported in this book. Beyond his name we do not know anything about the author. Suggested dates for this book range from 889 to 312 B.C., but there is simply not enough information within the book to be certain.

The dating of the book depends upon which invasion of Jerusalem by Edom is in view in verses 11-14. Edom was also called Seir (Gen.32:3; Num.24:18). It was a narrow strip of land southeast of the Dead Sea, from the Wadi Zered to the Gulf of Aqabah. There are four possible Edomite invasions of Jerusalem; during in the reign of Jehoram (2 Chr.21:8), of Amaziah (2 Chr.25:11), of Ahaz (2 Chr.28:16) and of Zedekiah (2 Chr.36). One author suggests that all four are viewed collectively. Most scholars believe that this passage refers specifically to the Edomite participation in the 586 Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem (Ps. 137:7; Lam.4:21-22; Ez.25:12; 35:10) although the evidence is not conclusive.

It is interesting to note the strong parallels between Obadiah and Joel, and between Obadiah and Jeremiah chapter 49. Although this does not shed light on the date because there is no way of knowing which of these was written first, it does aid in the interpretation of the message. It is important to realize that although the message is against Edom, the actual audience would not have been the Edomites but rather their victims, the people of Judah because God sent His prophets to His own people. In fact, the message was probably never been heard in Edom.

B. Literary Structure

- I. Vision Concerning Edom 1-14
 - A. Edom's Fall Pronounced 1-4
 - B. Completeness of the Destruction 5-9
 - C. Reason: Cruelty against Judah 10-14
- II. Day of the Lord 15-21
 - A. Judgement on the Nations 15-16
 - B. Conversion of the Nations 17
 - C. Deliverance of Judah 18-20
 - D. God's Kingdom Realized 21

C. Theology

Obadiah is small, and at first glance may not look very important. A closer examination however reveals that it is deceptively dense with theology. This small book shows that the sovereignty of God covers all nations.

The judgement of Edom for their treatment of Judah, combined with the rest of the book portrays the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of God.

The remnant theme is present (v.20) and there is a picture of the realized kingdom (v.21). In light of 15-16, v.17 depicts the end time conversion of the nations. This is an important idea found in other prophets in conjunction with the realized kingdom and which finds the beginning of its fulfilment in the New Testament in Christ.

Some key verses in Obadiah are 15, 17 and 21.

V. Amos

A. Background

Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa (1:1), a small town about 6 miles south of Bethlehem. While he was commissioned by God to prophesy to the northern kingdom (7:15), he was not a prophet by trade (7:14).

Some have tried unconvincingly to use imaginative linguistic arguments to support the claim that Amos was a wealthy rancher. This view is not convincing for two reasons. First, this imposes word use from a foreign culture onto the book. Second, he was not only a herdsman but also a dresser of sycamore figs (7:14). This fruit must have the skin broken before it will ripen. These figs are found in western Judah (1 Ki.10:27) but not Tekoa, so as a fig dresser Amos would have to travel every fig season. Thus he was either a wealthy rancher with a quirky fig-nicking habit, or a lower income herdsman who needed to supplement his income by doing seasonal crop work.

When Amos denied being a prophet, or a son of a prophet, he means by profession, not by function. He obviously functioned as a prophet (7:15). He was just denying the charge that he had come to Israel to prophesy for a living (cf.7:12). Not only was he not now prophesying for a living, he never had any such intention. He was also not a son of a prophet. The sons of prophets were students of prophets in training to become professional prophets. Thus he had never formally trained to be a prophet. He was simply obeying God's call.

The historical context was during the reign of Uzziah (2 Chr.26:1-23) in Judah and Jeroboam (2 Ki.14:16-29) in Israel (1:1) which puts his ministry somewhere between 767 and 753. The superscription also places the message two years before what must have been a well known earthquake (cp. Zech.14:5).

With no immanent external threats, this was a time of expansion and prosperity resulting in pride. Also, the rich grew richer and the poor were oppressed. The time was marked by greed and injustice, and even the prophets, priests and judges were controlled by the rich. Considering his social status, it is only fitting that Amos was sent by God to deliver a message. God used a poor man to condemn the rich who profited from oppressing the poor. It also comes as no surprise that Amos was eager to distance himself from the professional prophets, most of whom would see for a fee.

B. Literary Structure

Superscription 1:1

I. The Judgement upon the Transgressors 1:2-2:16

A. Damascus 1:1-5

B. Gaza 1:6-8

C. Tyre 1:9-19

D. Edom 1:11-12

E. Ammon 1:13-15

F. Moab 2:1-3

- G. Judah 2:4-5
- H. Israel 2:6-16
- II. The Sins of the Transgressors 3:1-6:14
 - A. Misused Privileges 3:1-15
 - B. Misguided Worship 4:1-5
 - C. Misinterpreted Warnings 4:6-13
 - D. Lamentation for Israel 5:1-27
 - E. Woe for Israel 6:1-14
- III. The Warnings to Transgressors 7:1-9:10
 - A. Locusts 7:1-3
 - B. Fire 7:4-6
 - C. Plumbline 7:7-9
 - D. Amaziah 7:10-17
 - E. Summer Fruit 8:1-19
 - F. Israel 9:1-10
- IV. God's Kingdom Realized 9:11-15

C. Theology

The day of the Lord is an important theme in Amos. Some suggest that the message does not envision end times events, but comparing 9:11-15, for example, to the end times messages of other prophets makes the eschatological element of Amos obvious.

God is pictured as absolutely sovereign. There is an excellent proclamation of His sovereignty in 3:1-8. He is presented as sovereign over creation (4:8, 9; 8:8), and over the nations (ch.1-2).

The remnant theme appears in 9:11-15. This is an important theological component of the OT, namely that God always preserves for Himself a faithful remnant within the larger, visible community.

The balanced messages of blessing and judgement present the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of God, and the ultimate result of this will be the final realization of His kingdom.

Some key verses in Amos include 3:1-8 and 9:11-15.

VI. Hosea

A. Background

Nothing is known about Hosea except that he is the 'son of Beeri' (1:1). There is no information about him outside this book. Everything about the prophet must be deduced from the content. The first three chapters provide some insight into his personality however any attempt to deduce his background is purely speculation.

Hosea is depicted as obedient to God without question or compromise. For example, God commands him to "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry, and have children of harlotry" (1:2, 3), which he obediently did.

1:1 places Hosea's ministry in the eighth century, during "the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah, and during the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, King of Israel". Information on the reigns of these kings can be found in 2 Kings 14:23 - 20:21. He obviously could not have been a prophet for the entirety of all of these reigns which was about 100 years in total (Uzziah's reign began in 791 B.C., Jeroboam II's in about 793, and Hezekiah died about 687/6). At minimum, his ministry must have been about 40 years because the end of Jeroboam's reign was somewhere in 753-746 B.C. while Hezekiah's began in 715. Thus Hosea's ministry at minimum included the period from 750 - 715.

This period overlaps the reigns of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria (745-727) and his successor, Shalmaneser V who ultimately defeated the northern kingdom in 722. This time also saw conflict between the northern and southern kingdoms (735-733), during which Ahaz asked for the help of Tiglath-pileser III.

This also followed a period of internal prosperity which had resulted in a faithless people, who were rebellious against God thus God had good reason to call the people adulterous. The marriage of Hosea to Gomer served both as the perfect object lesson for the people, and as the perfect training ground to prepare the prophet for the message he would be called to deliver.

Many people have had trouble with God's command for Hosea to take a wife of harlotry and so have tried to explain it away in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most unique is the approach championed by H.W. Wolff. His suggestion was that Gomer had participated in a Canaanite ritual of sexual initiation with a stranger prior to her marriage in order to assure the fertility of the marriage. There is no evidence however that this ritual was practised by Israelites. It is best to take the command at face value, recognizing that God means precisely what He commands even if we do not understand it. This approach is most consistent with the parallel of Hosea's marriage to the relationship between God and adulterous Israel. This also recognizes the sovereignty of God who is free to do as He pleases (Psa.115:3).

Most commentators believe the woman referred to in chapter 3 is Gomer. Where they split is whether chapter 3 is a sequel to chapter 1, or parallel to chapter 1. Some do suggest that a different woman is in view in chapter 3 based on the wording of 3:1. Since polygamy is not a problem in the Old Testament, provided that the wives came from within the covenant community, this interpretation does not pose a problem as some object. The interpretive problem here however is that no purpose would be served by

Hosea taking a second such wife which was not accomplished by his marriage to Gomer in chapter 1. It seems best to understand chapter 3 as referring to Gomer, and thus as a sequel to chapter 1. This provides a fitting conclusion to the object lesson. Just as Hosea restored his adulterous wife, so too will God restore adulterous Israel.

B. Literary Structure

The structure of the book can be outlined as follows.

Superscription 1:1

I. The Adulterous Wife 1:2-3:5

A. Hosea's Marriage to Gomer 1:2-2:1

1. 1:2-9 Prophetic Sign-Act of Judgement

2. 1:10-2:1 The Relationship Restored

B. God's Marriage to Israel 2:2-23

1. 2:2-13 The Relationship Broken

2. 2:14-23 The Relationship Restored

C. The Adulteress Brought Back 3:1-5

II. The Adulterous Nation 4:1-14:8

A. First Prophetic Cycle 4:1-11:11

1. 4:1-19 God Accuses Israel of Unfaithfulness

2. 5:1-15 God Punishes Israel

3. 6:1-7:16 Hosea's Call to Repentance Ignored

4. 8:1-10:15 God Punishes Israel

5. 11:1-11 God's Love for Israel Overcomes His Anger

B. Second Prophetic Cycle 11:12-14:8

1. 11:12-12:14 Israel Sins against God

2. 13:1-16 God is Angry with His People

3. 14:1-8 Israel Repents and Is Blessed

Wisdom Colophon 14:9

There is a balanced movement between judgement and salvation, and so the book can be viewed as five such cycles.

<i>Cycle</i>	<i>Judgement</i>	<i>Salvation</i>
1	1:2-9	1:10-2:1
2	2:2-13	2:14-3:5
3	4:1-5:14	5:15-6:3
4	6:4-11:7	11:8-11
5	11:12-13:16	14:1-9

C. Theology

The message of Hosea presents a balanced view of God. There is a balance between His holiness (4:6) and His mercy (3:1), and between His judgement (5:10) and forgiveness (6:3). This balance between judgement and forgiveness is well illustrated in 6:1.

With the movement between judgement and salvation, Hosea presents an ongoing picture of the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of God.

The sovereignty of God is implicit throughout. It is seen in the language (e.g. 13:10, 11), and by virtue of the fact that He demands obedience from the people. Hosea also contains a hint of the eschatological kingdom (3:5).

Some key passages in Hosea are 4:6 and 6:1-3.

VII. Jonah

A. Background

There is no evidence to indicate who wrote Jonah, or when. The book is called Jonah because it is about, not necessarily because it is by, Jonah. The literary style of this book is unique among the prophets in that it is a narrative rather than a speech or compilation of speeches. Jonah was a prophet who lived during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746), and was from Gath-Hepher in the southern end of Galilee (2 Ki.14:23-27). This book may have been written any time after his ministry.

While the majority of conservative scholars maintain an historical interpretation of this book, there is a growing trend to treat the book as a parable. The main reasons often put forth in support of a parabolic interpretation are; the apparent problems of Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish (1:17), the description of the size of Nineveh (3:3-5), and the account of the repentance of Nineveh. The typical conservative response is that Jesus viewed the story of Jonah in the belly of the fish as historical (Mat.12:39-40; Lk.11:29-30). Certainly if Jesus did view the story as historical, then without a doubt it is historical however it is not certain that this is how Jesus viewed it. Jesus may have simply referred to Jonah because the story was so well known to his audience that it provided an excellent illustration in much the same way that we might refer to a famous character in a fictional novel or movie to illustrate a point.

The crux of this issue is belief in the existence of an all powerful God who can and does intervene supernaturally in creation. If a person believes in such a God, there is no need to use goofy zoological arguments to defend the historicity of the fish story. This completely misses the point. Could a person survive three days in the belly of a fish? No, they could not. Could God preserve and sustain a person for three days in the belly of a fish? Yes, and that is a significant part of the theological purpose of the fish story. If a person believes in such a God, the fish story can be an historical account. If they don't believe in such a God, the fish story cannot be historical. The irony here is that in an effort to defend the historicity of the book of Jonah, many evangelicals, by appealing to Christian urban legends of whalers swallowed by sperm whales, end up denying the miracle of the sovereign God who delivered Jonah..

Some object that no one could compose such a finely crafted psalm (2:1-9) from the belly of a fish. They are probably right. It is likely that Jonah prayed in his distress from the belly of the fish and then at a later date, securely on dry land, he stylized his prayer into this psalm. No doubt most of the prayers in the Psalter are stylized re-writes of earlier prayers.

The bigger problems of historicity lie with the story of Nineveh. Nineveh is described as "an exceedingly great city, a three days walk" (3:3). A day's journey was roughly 20-30 miles and archaeological evidence shows that there is no way Nineveh was 60-90 miles across. One scholar has a novel suggestion that this refers to the circumference of the district of greater Nineveh. Unfortunately, there is not a shred of evidence to support this and it imposes concepts of modern urban planning onto a culture that knew nothing of metropolitan areas and urban sprawl.

Applying a little common sense shows that the three days walk is not a problem in light of 3:4 which says that Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk while proclaiming judgement. If Jonah was to preach repentance to all of the inhabitants of the city, he would need to walk up and down nearly every street so that everyone would hear his call. Even in a medium sized city this would take several days, and is therefore most likely what is meant by 3:3.

The description of the repentance raises the following objections which are quite easily and rationally refuted: i) There is no historical evidence for such a conversion of Nineveh - this is an argument from silence and as such is no argument. Constructing history from silence is empty speculation. ii) The King of Assyria was never recorded anywhere as the 'King of Nineveh' (3:6) - that this title has not been found anywhere does not mean the title was never used. We do not possess every document written in and about ancient Assyria. This is another empty argument from silence. The use of this title may also be a case of literary license. Jonah always refers to Nineveh, not Assyria, and so this title for the king from a literary perspective is more aesthetic. iii) The king's decree to fast and put on sackcloth included the animals - either this is hyperbole, used to emphasize the totality of the decree, or the king truly responded with absolute submission and this was how he symbolically demonstrated that submission. iv) Did Jonah suddenly learn Assyrian to preach to the people of Nineveh? There are two plausible answers to this objection. It is possible that the people supernaturally heard the message in their own language, much like the miracle of tongues in Acts 2:3-12. There is also a less spectacular explanation. Jonah was obviously multilingual, he had to tell the sailors on the ship that he was Hebrew (1:8, 9) so we know he must have been fluent in at least one other language, the one spoken by the sailors.

All objections to the historical approach can be reasonably rebutted. This does not prove that Jonah is historical, but it does demonstrate that it may be. On the other hand, the book is a very stylized and finely crafted piece of literature. Either way, the importance lies in the theological message and whether or not the book is historical or a parable, the theology is the same. The issue of central importance is that we believe Jonah provides an accurate portrayal of God.

B. Literary Structure

- I. Jonah Fleeing ch.1
- II. Jonah Praying ch.2
- III. Jonah Preaching ch.3
- IV. Jonah Pouting ch.4

C. Theology

The key theme of Jonah is the absolute sovereignty of God. He is sovereign over creation (1:4, 5; 2:10), over the lives of individuals (1:7) and over the nations.

God's concern over Nineveh gives a hint of the inclusion of gentiles in the final form of His kingdom.

Considering that part of the reason for the judgement of Nineveh is probably their prior treatment of Israel, the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of God is implied in 1:2. This judgment is rooted in the Abrahamic covenant (cp. Gen. 12:2-3).

In addition, the holiness, mercy, grace and justice of God are important themes of the book.

VIII. Micah

A. Background

Micah is only mentioned elsewhere in the Bible once (Jer.26:17-19). Nothing is known about his background except that he came from Moresheth (1:1), a village about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. His ministry is set during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (2 Ki.15:32-20:21). The reigns of these three kings spanned the time from 750-686 and so Micah's ministry fell somewhere within that range. His ministry must have begun sometime before 722, the year Assyria conquered Samaria as evidenced by the reference to a coming judgement of Samaria (1:6).

The different oracles in this book come from different times in Micah's ministry. For example, 1:6 predates 722, while Jer.26:18 cites Mic.3:12 as being delivered during the reign of Hezekiah. In total, the evidence supports the tradition that Micah prophesied just before and after the fall of the northern kingdom, as did Isaiah.

Not only is there somewhat of a parallel between the ministries of Isaiah and Micah, there is a parallel between their messages. For example, Mic.4:1-4 is almost identical to Isa.2:2-4. This suggests that they had some form of contact with each other. Possibly they knew each other personally, or perhaps one wrote his book with the other's sitting in front of him. Either way, there is a close connection between these two books.

Micah's ministry took place at a time when the people faced outside danger. Samaria fell to Assyria, led by Shalmanesar V in 722. Under Hezekiah, Judah rebelled against Assyria and so the independence of Jerusalem was threatened by Sennacherib (701). The message is set against the backdrop of perilous times.

B. Literary Structure

- I. The Incomparable God of Judgement ch.1-3
 - A. Announcement of Judgement 1:1-7
 - B. Cities and Judgement 1:8-16
 - C. Indictment for Judgement 2:1-11
 - D. Administration of Judgement 2:12-13
 - E. Denouncement of Judgement 3:1-12

- II. The Incomparable God of Deliverance ch.4-5
 - A. Blessing in Deliverance 4:1-8
 - B. Need for Deliverance 4:9-5:1
 - C. Person of Deliverance 5:2-9
 - D. Execution of Deliverance 5:10-15

- III. The Incomparable God of Righteousness ch.6-7
 - A. Repentance Based on God's Righteousness 6:1-8
 - B. Judgement According to God's Righteousness 6:9-16
 - C. Antithesis to God's Righteousness 7:1-6
 - D. The God of Righteousness 7:7-20

As with Hosea, Micah consists of a movement of cycles of judgement and salvation.

Cycle	Judgement	Salvation
1	1:2-2:11	2:12-13
2	3:1-23	ch.4-5
3	6:1-7:7	7:8-20

C. Theology

Micah emphasizes both the uniqueness and the righteousness of God. Again judgement and salvation appear repeatedly in juxtaposition, emphasizing the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of God. In close connection to this are the holiness and the mercy of God.

God is presented as sovereign. There is a picture of the realized kingdom (4:1-8), and the remnant theme occurs as well (4:7; 5:7-9).

Some key passages in Micah are 4:1-4 and 7:7-9.

IX. Nahum

A. Background

Not much is known about the man Nahum. We are told that he comes from Elkosh (1:1), but that doesn't help because no one knows where that is. Locations suggested have included Assyria, the northern kingdom, and Judah, but there is no real evidence for any of these.

From the content of the book it is possible to narrow down the date of Nahum's ministry. In 3:8-10, he alludes to the fall of Thebes to Assyria under Ashurbanipal (664). He also refers to the coming destruction of Nineveh (612) as being immanent (2:8; 3:7). Combined, these references suggest a date between 664 and 612.

Assyria had been the superpower of the Ancient Near East from the time of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727) up until Nahum's time. Babylon began to rebel against Assyria in 652, and this grew into a war between Assyria and Babylon under Nabopolassar. During this war, Nineveh was destroyed (612). Evidence suggests that the Medes, allies of Babylon, were the ones responsible for the destruction of Nineveh.

The Assyrians were certainly one of, if not the most brutal, nations in the history of civilization. They were guilty of indescribable atrocities against humanity, including against Israel. Their wicked character, combined with their quest for world domination was an affront to God Himself. This sets the context for Nahum's message.

B. Literary Structure

- Superscription 1:1
- I. God, the Divine Warrior 1:2-8
- II. The Judgement of God 1:9-14
- III. Salvation Proclaimed for Judah 1:15
- IV. Destruction for Nineveh 2:1-10
- V. The Lion Taunt 2:11-13
- VI. Woe Oracle against Nineveh 3:1-3
- VII. The Sorceress-Harlot Taunt 3:4-7
- VIII. Thebes and Nineveh Compared 3:8-10
- IX. Insults against Nineveh 3:11-15c
- X. Locust Taunt 3:15d-17
- XI. Concluding Dirge 3:18-19

C. Theology

The charges against Nineveh and the corresponding judgement show that the dominion of God is worldwide. He is not just the God and King of Israel, but of all people. Nahum shows us that the justice of God is not silent. People often appear to get away with all sorts of atrocities, but they will ultimately pay for their crimes, and the punishment will fit the crime.

This book provides a message of consolation to the people of God. A message of judgment against the nations is really a message of salvation for God's people. God is with His people and He will in due course vindicate them, although they may go through tough times for a season. The blessing of Judah (1:15; 2:2) in the context of the judgement of Nineveh indicates an aspect of the perfect covenant keeping faithfulness of God.

Some key verses in Nahum are 1:7 and 1:15.

X. Habakkuk

A. Background

There is no information provided about the life and background of the man Habakkuk. One manuscript of the apocryphal book *Bel and the Dragon* identifies Habakkuk as a Levite. This reference however is isolated and probably unreliable and so there is no reason to accept it as being true.

The lack of background information has led to a wide range of suggested dates for the writing of Habakkuk ranging from roughly 700 B.C. to 300 B.C., most of which are built upon nothing more than creative speculation. The majority of scholars place Habakkuk in the last quarter of the seventh century. This would make Habakkuk a contemporary of Zephaniah, Nahum and Jeremiah. The best evidence for this date is the reference to the Chaldeans in 1:6. The rise of the Chaldeans to power began in 625, when Nabopolassar seized the throne of Babylon, resulting in the growth of the Babylonian kingdom. Based on this, many advocate 625 as the earliest possible date however the language of 1:5-10 suggests 625 and the associated events was still somewhat in the future. The latest possible date would be just prior to Nebuchadnezzar's attack on Judah in 598. Habakkuk's ministry then probably transpired, at least in part, during the reign of Jehoiakim (2 Ki.23:21-24:7). During this period, the people of Judah were in all probability more unfaithful to God than any time prior.

B. Literary Structure

Superscription 1:1

I. The Dialogue 1:1-2:20

A. The First Round 1:2-11

1. 1:2-4 The Prophet's Complaint

2. 1:4-11 God's Response

B. The Second Round 1:12-2:5

1. 1:12-17 The Prophet's Complaint

2. 2:1-5 God's Response

C. Woe Oracles against the Oppressor 2:6-20

1. 2:6-8 The Plunderer Plundered

2. 2:9-11 The Conqueror Shamed

3. 2:12-14 The Builder Undone

4. 2:15-18 The Shameless Shamed

5. 2:19-20 The Idolater Silenced

II. Habakkuk's Psalm of Submission 3:1-19

A. Introduction 3:1

B. Habakkuk's Prayer 3:2-4

C. The Divine Warrior 3:5-15

D. Living by Faith 3:16-19

C. Theology

Habakkuk presents a theodicy. By definition a theodicy is a solution to the problem of evil. From a theological perspective, the problem of evil arises from the fact that the Bible presents God as being good, as being all powerful and yet the world is full of sin and suffering. Habakkuk's theodicy starts with the question about why God has not judged Judah's sin (1:1-4). The response is that He will do so using Babylon (1:5-11). This leads to the question as to how God can use an even more sinful people to punish His own (1:12-2:1). The answer is that they too will be punished, and that we must not question God's methods but rather have faith in His goodness.

This impacts our understanding of the holiness of God. He is holy by nature, and nothing He does can tarnish that. Even when we can not understand how, everything God does is good and ultimately brings Him glory.

The covenant keeping faithfulness of God is an important theme of this book. He will judge His people in light of covenant, and He will vindicate the righteous.

God's use of Babylon as a tool to accomplish His purposes demonstrates His sovereignty over the nations.

Some key verses in Habakkuk are 2:4 and 3:18, 19.

XI. Zephaniah

A. Background

Zephaniah is the only prophet to trace his genealogy back four generations. The Hezekiah listed in his genealogy is probably the king. Zephaniah's ministry was during the reign of Josiah (2 Ki.22:1-23:30). The majority of commentators date Zephaniah prior to Josiah's reform which was precipitated by the rediscovery of the Torah in 621. This opinion is based on a combination of the absence of any mention of the reform in Zephaniah, and the description of the unfaithfulness of the people (1:4-6, 8-9; 3:1-3).

In fact the textual evidence points much more strongly to a post reform date. A comparison of Zephaniah to Deuteronomy in the following table shows that nearly every section of Zephaniah contains material taken from Deuteronomy. The only logical explanation is that Zephaniah had the freshly rediscovered Torah in front of him when he wrote. The most likely date of writing therefore is after 621 but before 598.

Zephaniah	Deuteronomy	Zephaniah	Deuteronomy
1:2	32:22	2:5,13	33:27
1:3	28:21	2:8-10	30:7
1:4-6	28:45	3:5	32:4
1:8-13	28:45	3:15	30:7
1:13	28:30,39	3:17	28:63; 30:9
1:15	28:53,55,57	3:18-20	26:19; 30:3,4
1:17	28:29	3:20	28:10
1:18	32:21,22		

The evidence used for a pre-reform date is consistent with this post-reform date. An examination of Josiah's reign, coupled by the rapid decline of the kingdom after his death indicates that the reform was not very successful. Wickedness was still widespread, and so Zephaniah did not mention the reform because not many people were changed by it. Those who were changed are addressed in Zephaniah with the promise of the preservation and blessing of a faithful remnant (3:11-13, 14-20).

Another controversial interpretive issue with Zephaniah is the identity of the invaders. An imminent invasion leading to the destruction of Jerusalem is described (1:4, 10-13; 2:1; 3:1-4). Some suggest the Assyrians were in view, but by the time of Josiah they were not much of a threat to anyone, and besides, they too were slated for destruction (2:13-15). Some suggest Scythian invaders, but this is less likely than the Assyrians. There is no historical evidence to suggest even a potential invasion by the Scythians. Process of elimination leads scholars to suggest Babylon, but they were not a major power until after Josiah's death (609) and so this is not likely either. A careful reading of Zephaniah shows that God Himself will be the invader (e.g., 1:2-4, 8, 9, 12), and that although the invasion is imminent, it is also eschatological (1:2, 3, 14-18; 2:2, etc.). In other words, it can come at any time but when it comes it will usher in the end of the age. Zephaniah is calling a rebellious people to repentance under the threat of imminent Divine intervention.

B. Literary Structure

Zephaniah is one continuous speech constructed in a chiasm. This literary form is used both for emphasis and as a tool to facilitate remembrance and understanding.

- | |
|--|
| <p>A Word of God (1:1a)
 B Universal Gathering For Judgement (1:2,3)
 C Judgement of Unfaithful Judah (1:4-6)
 D Be Silent For Judgement! (1:7)
 E Punishment of Unfaithful Judah (1:8-13)
 F Judgement of the World (1:14-18)
 G Judah Called to Repentance (2:1-3)
 H Oracles Against the Nations (2:4-10)
 I God's Kingdom Fully Realized (2:11)
 H' Oracles Against the Nations (2:12-15)
 G' Judah Warned of Judgement (3:1-8)
 F' Conversion of the Nations (3:9,10)
 E' Preservation of Faithful Judah (3:11-13)
 D' Shout and Sing For Joy! (3:14)
 C' Blessing of Faithful Judah (3:15-17)
 B' Universal Gathering For Blessing (3:18-20)
 A' Says God (3:20f)</p> |
|--|

C. Theology

A major theme of Zephaniah is the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord motif permeates the entire book, confirming the eschatological nature of the message. It will be both a time of blessing (3:16) and of judgement (1:15).

The material of Zephaniah was chosen and arranged to present the theological message that the people better repent because God is going to decisively intervene in human affairs, and at that time by fulfilling all covenants He will establish His kingdom.

Zephaniah contains reference to the remnant theme (2:12, 13). God always preserves for Himself a small group of truly faithful followers. In Zephaniah God is presented as the Divine Warrior. He is also presented as sovereign over everything. The covenant keeping faithfulness of God also permeates this book.

Some key verses in Zephaniah are 2:11 and 3:14-17.

XII. Haggai

A. Background

Haggai was a contemporary of Zechariah (Ezra 5:1), and the ministry of these two prophets was instrumental in the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 6:14) after the return of the people from exile. Beyond this, not much can be said about the prophet himself. The literary style of Haggai is unique, consisting of prophetic speeches woven into an historical narrative.

Establishing the date of Haggai is easy. Each of the four oracles contained in the book is clearly dated and when converted to our modern calendar is as follows.

1:1 Aug.29, 520

2:1 Oct.17, 520

2:10 Dec.18, 520

2:20 Dec.18, 520

The historical context for Haggai's ministry is found in the latter part of 2 Chronicles and in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a decree allowing the exiles to go home in 539 BC (2 Chr.36:23; Ezra 1:2-4), the problem is that they didn't want to go back. Jeremiah had told the people to "build houses, settle down, plant gardens, marry and have sons and daughters" (Jer.29:5, 6) while they were exiled in Babylon. They did as he said and prospered. When Cyrus offered them their freedom, they wanted no part of it. Their lives of comfort and wealth meant more to them than their relationship with God. Nevertheless, about 50,000 of the exiles returned home (Ezra 2:65, Neh.7:66) but their priority became rebuilding their houses and planting crops (Hag.1:3-11). The purpose of Haggai's ministry was to re-orient the priorities of the returnees to the temple which was then completed in 516 (Ez.6:15). The temple was symbolic of the presence of God, and therefore their attitude towards the temple was indicative of their relationship with God.

B. Literary Structure

I. Message of Rebuke 1:1-11

II. Message of Promise 1:12-15

III. Message of Encouragement 2:1-9

IV. Message of Cleansing 2:10-19

V. Message of Establishment 2:20-23

C. Theology

The Kingship of God is a key theme. He demands that His followers place serving Him, on His terms, as their top priority. Even the legitimate needs and pursuits of this life are to take a back seat to serving God. The kingship of God is intimately

connected with His covenant keeping faithfulness. If His people do as He demands they will be blessed, if not they will be judged.

The priority of the people was their personal needs, and yet their efforts failed (1:6). This was judgement from God based upon the covenant renewal of Deuteronomy (Deut. 28:15-18, 30-10) because the people were not putting Him first (1:10-11). Their priority should have been to glorify God as would have been demonstrated by rebuilding the temple first, and their own lives second (1:8, 9).

After instructing the people to place God first, and calling for purity (2:10-19), the book closes with a picture of the realized kingdom (2:21-23), and the idea that only those who put God first will participate in it.

A key passage in Haggai is 2:4-5.

XIII. Zechariah

A. Background

Over 25 people in the Bible are named Zechariah, this one being the son of Berechiah the son of Iddo (1:1). This is probably the same person elsewhere called Zechariah son of Iddo (Ezra 5:1; 6:14; Neh.12:16) which would make him a member of one of the families of priests who returned from exile. He preached to the same audience as Haggai, having the same concern for the rebuilding of the temple. Thus most of the background to Haggai also applies to Zechariah.

There are parallels between the messages of these two prophets, for example, compare Hag.1:5-11; 2:15-19 with Zech.8:9-13 and Hag.2:20-23 with Zech.4:6-10. As was the case with Haggai, Zechariah's ministry is also easily dated. The superscription introduces the message in the second year of Darius which was 520/519 B.C.

The literary style of chapters 9-14 is noticeably different from that of 1-8. This has led some scholars to suggest that there are two different authors. While the stylistic differences between the sections are striking, a change in style does not mean a change in author. There is no convincing evidence that Zechariah is the work of two different authors.

B. Literary Structure

Superscription 1:1

I. Call to Repentance 1:1-6

II. Night Visions 1:7-6:15

A. Introduction

B. Four Horsemen 1:8-17

C. Four Horns, Four Smiths 1:18-21

D. Man with Measuring Line 2:1-13

E. Joshua and Satan 3:1-10

F. Gold Lampstand and Two Olive Trees 4:1-14

G. Flying Scroll 5:1-4

H. Woman in Ephah 5:5-11

I. Four Chariots and Their Horses 6:1-15

III. Real Reason for Fasting 7:1-14

IV. Results of God's Promise 8:1-23

V. Events Leading to the End of the Age ch.9-11

A. God, Lord of Hostile Cities 9:1-8

B. Zion's King Comes 9:9-17

C. Shepherdless People Gathered ch.10-11

VI. Events of the End of the Age ch.12-14

A. Siege Laid Against Jerusalem 12:1-3

- B. God Preserves Judah and Destroys Nations 12:4-9
- C. God Pours Out Grace 12:10-14
- D. Fountain of Cleansing Opened 13:1-6
- E. Judgement against the Shepherd 13:7-9
- F. Day of the Lord ch.14

C. Theology

The message of Zechariah is well summarized by Walter Kaiser who states, "the priest-prophet Zechariah traced the growth of God's kingdom from its humble beginnings to its triumphant victory over every opposing force" (Kaiser, p.253).

The theology of this book is centered on the interconnectedness between kingdom and covenant. God's kingdom is being constructed through His covenant faithfulness, and it will be fully realized when all covenants have been finally fulfilled. Zechariah presents several pictures of the realized kingdom (2:10-12; 8:18-23; 14:16-21). The remnant theme is also important in Zechariah (e.g., 8:6).

Some key verses in Zechariah are 13:9 and 14:3, 4.

XIV. Malachi

A. Background

Nothing is known with certainty about this prophet, in fact not even his name. Malachi literally means 'my messenger'. The name does not appear anywhere else, and so many scholars do not believe that it is a proper name at all in which case the book is anonymous. On the other hand Malachi may be a very uncommon proper name. The fact that it is not attested as a proper name in ancient documents does not mean necessarily that it is not one. Since neither side presents a conclusive argument, apart from a desire to be contrary there is no solid reason to set aside the traditionally dominant view that Malachi here is a proper name.

There is not much dispute about dating Malachi to the Persian period. The temple was rebuilt in 516/515, and in Malachi that event was far enough in the past to have allowed complacency and disillusionment to set in (1:10, 13; 3:1, 10). As the following list illustrates, there are enough similarities between the problems addressed by Malachi and those by Nehemiah to suggest that they were contemporaries (Dillard and Longman, p.439);

1 Mixed Marriages	Mal.2:11-15	Neh.13:23-27
2 Failure to Tithe	Mal.3:8-10	Neh.13:10-14
3 No Concern to Keep Sabbath	Mal.2:8-9; 4:4	Neh.13:15-22
4 Corrupt Priests	Mal.1:6-2:9	Neh.13:7-9
5 Social Problems	Mal.3:5	Neh.5:1-13

Based on this a ballpark date of 450 B.C. can be assumed. Interestingly, the conditions against which Malachi writes are strikingly similar to those in the church of our day. The Messianic age had been long anticipated but had not begun and some wept (2:13) while others were cynical (1:2; 2:17). Unethical behaviour was common (3:5), and organized religion was held in contempt because of the actions of those who called themselves the people of God (1:14; 3:7-12). For the most part, these were the people of God only in name but their lives showed their hearts were far from Him.

B. Literary Structure

- Superscription 1:1
- I. God's Love 1:2-5
- II. Denunciation of the Clergy 1:6-2:9
- III. Idolatry and Intermarriage 2:10-16
- IV. The God of Justice 2:17-3:5
- V. Withholding Tithes 3:6-12
- VI. The Righteous and the Wicked 3:13-18
- VII. Day of the Lord 4:1-6

Sections I through VI are disputations that follow the general pattern of Introduction – Question – Answer. Section VII, the conclusion of the disputations, is a chiasm constructed to emphatically provide an eschatological motivation for being faithful to covenant now.

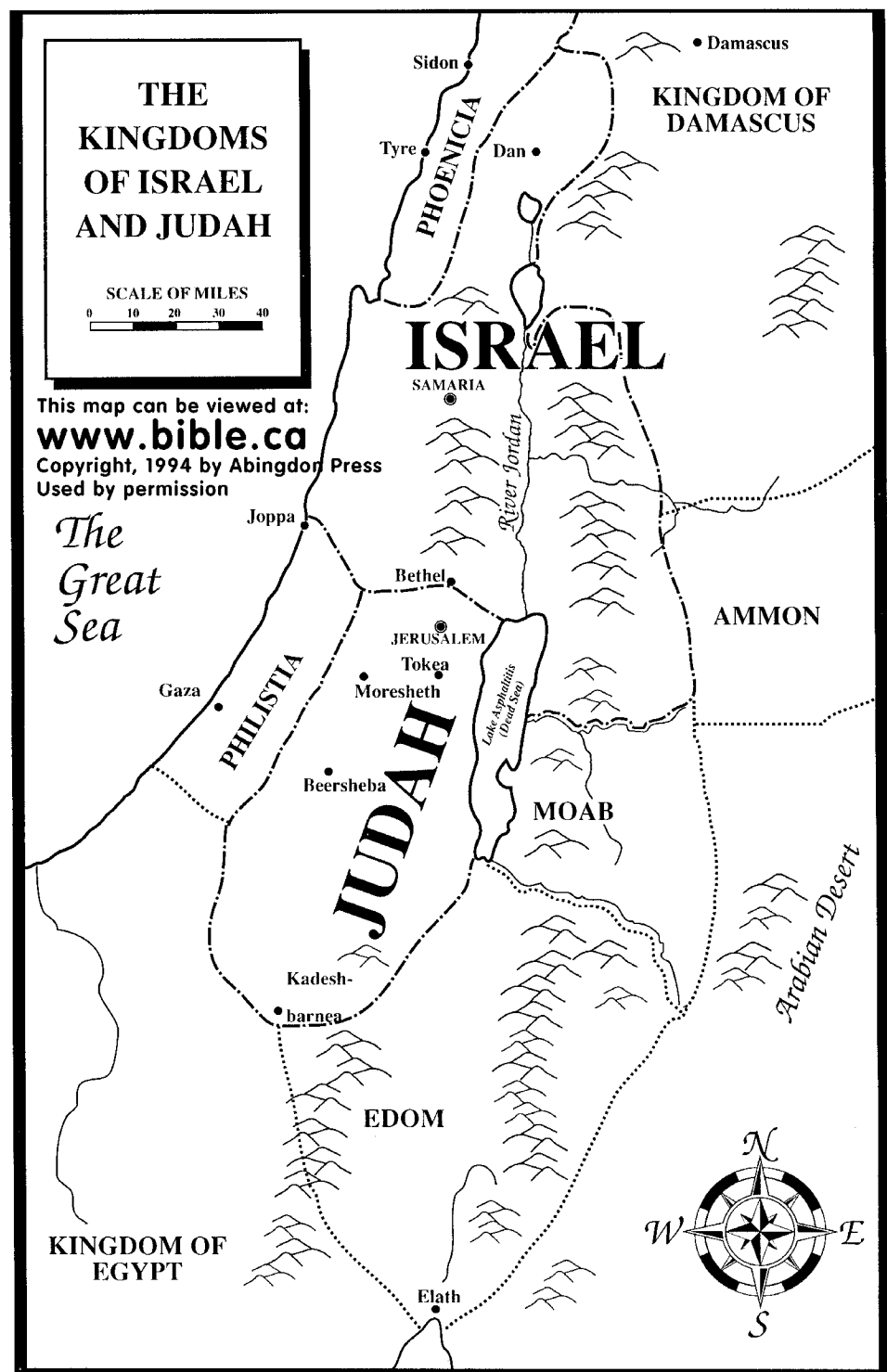
- 4:1 warning
- 4:2 blessing
- 4:3 warning (DOL)
- 4:4 be faithful to covenant
- 4:5 warning (DOL)
- 4:6a blessing
- 4:6b warning

C. Theology

Malachi calls a disgruntled and lukewarm people on the verge of full fledged apostasy to covenant faithfulness. First he reminds them of the covenant faithfulness of God towards them (1:2-5). Then he demonstrates how they are unfaithful towards God (1:6-3:18). Finally he shows that true blessing/cursing for covenant faithfulness/unfaithfulness is ultimately eschatological. God will ensure that righteousness and justice wholly prevail, but He will do so in His time. We are to live now in light of our knowledge of tomorrow.

Some key verses in Malachi are 1:11, 3:1 and 4:5.

XV. Appendix: Old Testament Map and Timeline



OLD TESTAMENT TIMELINE

