

# “A Prophet Like Me”

## An Introduction to the Minor Prophets (1)

*Texts: Deuteronomy 18:9-22/Acts 3:11-26*

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When I announce that we are about to begin a series on the “Minor Prophets,” what is your first thought? Ugh . . . They have something to do with the Old Testament? Right? Short biblical books with weird names? Books of the Bible I’ve never read, and are not quite sure why I should?

As we begin a new series on the “Minor Prophets,” we need to know who these prophets were and why they are important to us. The last twelve books found in the Old Testament, the Jews know the Minor Prophets simply as “The Twelve.” Preachers shy away from these books because without spending time to establish a proper context and background, the Minor Prophets are just twelve difficult and obscure books who’s authors speak of events long since past, and of peoples and kings long since dead and gone. Some of these prophets are familiar to us—Jonah, Hosea, Joel, and Zechariah, come to mind. But others are much more obscure: Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi.

Why cover them? Nine of the Minor Prophets are directly quoted in the New Testament, with hundreds of echoes from all twelve of these prophets found throughout.<sup>1</sup> The Twelve are usually cited in reference to the coming of Jesus and a final judgment at the end of the age. Their message tends to be overtly negative—a call to repentance and a warning of judgment. But the minor prophets have much more to say than that to us even today, and as we will see, they are well worth our time and consideration.

These prophets came on the scene at a time after the reigns of David and Solomon—from about 780 BC–450 BC—when the people God were divided into two kingdoms; Israel—the northern kingdom, and Judah—the southern kingdom. These prophets appear before Israel’s destruction by Assyria in 722 B.C. and Judah’s exile in Babylon 586 B.C. The mission of these prophets; warn the divided people of God what was about to befall them, tell them unless God’s people repent of their sins against YHWH, especially their sin of idolatry, and return to YHWH seeking forgiveness, judgment is sure to come.

But the Minor Prophets speak to other matters as well—matters of national pride, tolerance and then embrace of evil-doing, and social injustice. It is in the latter context they are occasionally quoted or alluded to by politicians—the most common of which comes to mind is the phrase from Amos 5:24, “let justice roll down like a river.” Sadly perhaps, an interest in social justice—not redemptive history—is the only reason why people today are even remotely familiar with these writers and their prophecies. Their importance to us is found in the fact that the Minor Prophets have several common themes warning God’s people of his impending judgment, especially in connection to the grave dangers associated with living among pagans and finding ourselves increasingly drawn to pagan ways, beliefs, and practices.

These twelve prophets are sent by God at a time when the people of Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) want to be more like their pagan neighbors than YHWH’s covenant with

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<sup>1</sup> See the list of Minor Prophets cited in the New Testament in; G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1194-1197.

allows of them. God's people wish to be rid of his law—because keeping it is difficult. They want worship the gods of their neighbors—because their worship is more mysterious and exciting. They want to intermarry with the Canaanites—because they don't like being isolated and mocked by other nations.

As a result of Israel's unbelief and disobedience, the Twelve come from YHWH as divine process servers—announcing YHWH's covenant lawsuit against his disobedient people. Because his people have broken their covenant with YHWH—unless his chosen people truly repent and return to him seeking forgiveness and restoration—YHWH will issue a decree of judgment. The writings of the “Minor Prophets” are, in many ways, the courts transcript of YHWH's legal indictment of his covenant-breaking people. We tend to picture these prophets as clothed in sackcloth and ashes, carrying a sign which reads “turn or burn.” In reality, the prophets come directly from YHWH's court with the command to proclaim the exact words he has placed in their mouths to the people of God. These prophets are best understood as preachers of divine words of blessing and curse. Not so much as predictors of the future.

According to the terms of the covenant YHWH made with Israel at Mount Sinai (a subject we will review next week when we look at the closing chapters of Deuteronomy), as YHWH's chosen nation about to enter the promised land, the Sinai covenant was renewed. The renewal service spelled out YHWH's promised blessings for obedience, and warns of covenant curses because of disobedience. YHWH has made plain judgment will come upon his people in the form of conquest by their pagan neighbors. God will use the great Pagan empires, Assyria to the North, and Babylon to East, to bring his judgment to pass, conquering and expelling Israel from the promised land. Yet, when YHWH issues these warnings, he also promises to restore his people and return them to the land after a time of great distress. This points to a coming messianic age and the person and work of a Messiah—Jesus Christ.

Each of the minor prophets speak at different points of time and in a different context, but they address a number of common themes.<sup>2</sup> These prophets are sent by YHWH to expose his people's sin and to call them to repentance. The people of Israel must realize that judgment begins in the house of the Lord—not with the godless Gentiles, or even with the other opposing Jewish kingdom. The prophet's words are specifically addressed to God's covenant people, but also they come as a warning to those Gentile nations who oppress them, not to ignore YHWH's impending judgment upon them as well. YHWH will punish all unrepentant sinners—beginning with his own people, but the pagan Gentiles will not escape.

Yet, these same prophets also promise forgiveness of sin to all who call upon the name of the Lord (even Gentiles). The Twelve remind the people of Israel and Judah, that even though judgment is at hand because of their sin, unbelief, and unrepentant hearts, YHWH always keeps his promises. He will preserve a believing remnant among his disobedient people. One day he will restore his people while bringing judgment upon those very same Gentile nations who serve as YHWH's agents of judgment upon Israel. Eleven of the twelve minor prophets speak of the coming Day of the Lord, judgment day, when all of YHWH's on-going judgments culminate in a terrible and final judgment.

In order to fully understand these prophets and their various ministries to God's people then, as well as now, some background is very important. We will spend the balance of our time speaking about the office of “prophet” and the role God's prophets play in redemptive history. Next week, Lord willing, we will briefly review the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai and consider what God expects of

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<sup>2</sup> Miles V. Van Pelt, editor, A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 327-337.

his people in terms of the obedience required for blessing, or the disobedience which brings down God's covenant curses (about which the prophets remind and warn Israel are sure to come).

Next, we will look at the terrible civil war in the years after the reign of David and Solomon, a war which divides the united kingdom into two completing kingdoms: Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. This will give us a context to address those prophets sent to the northern kingdom (Israel), who warn of imminent conquest by their powerful Assyrian neighbors as a consequence of Israel's unfaithfulness, sin and idolatry. Then, we will look at the life and ministry of one of the most famous prophets to the northern kingdom—Elijah, a non-writing prophet, and a sort of new Moses who brings Israel YHWH's word of impending judgment. Then, we'll take up the prophecies of Amos, Jonah, and Hosea, directed to Israel and the northern kingdom before we turn to the prophets God also sent to Judah before that kingdom's fall to the Babylonians in 586 BC. Some of these prophets we will cover in detail (verse by verse), others we will merely survey and hit the highlights.

When we consider what a prophet is and what they do, we tend to use the modern understanding of a prophet as someone able to predict the future—for good or ill. Biff, from the second “Back to the Future” movie is a good example—he becomes rich and famous because he has a sportsbook from the future with scores and outcomes of every sporting event, so he knows how to bet and then makes a fortune. We have the classic “prophet” in Nostradamus who, supposedly predicts everything from the rise of Hitler to space travel. We have the “she got it right enough for people to believe her” prophet, Jean Dixon, and we have everyone's favorite scam prophet, “Miss Cleo,” who was all-too happy to take your credit card number and then tell you what was about to happen with your job and love life.

Biblical prophets are in no way like our modern conception of future tellers. God's prophets do speak about the future, but only in the sense they have been given the very words of God to proclaim to the people, calling them to repentance, and warning them of judgment about to befall them. God's prophets speak of imminent events about to happen, while at the same time, speaking of events far off in the future—the coming of a Messiah and his return. This is why their message is so unpopular and why the successful and religious people of Israel and Judah hated them. God's prophets never tell you what you want to hear. They expose the sins of your heart, they expose your self-righteousness, and they remind you that you are no better than your pagan neighbor, whom you expect to be receiving God's judgment momentarily. They warn that while God will judge your neighbor, he will judge you first. They warn us that while our theology may be spot on, and our worship may appear to follow the biblical script, both are useless if our hearts are far from him.

God's prophets scare us a bit. They shake us from our lethargy. They pull back the darkness and let in light. But they also remind us that God always keeps his covenant promises and he will save his people, if only we turn to him in faith, renounce our self-righteousness, trust in the Savior he has sent to deliver us from the guilt and power of sin, and then strive to live lives of gratitude in accordance with his will.

The greatest prophet of the Old Testament era was John the Baptist—the last of the prophets, who in many ways closes out the Old Testament era. We know this because Jesus told us in Luke 7:28, *“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”* But the most significant prophet in the Old Testament is surely Moses. We don't often think of Moses as a prophet but he is exemplar (model) of those prophets who come after him. This includes the “major prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and we can include Daniel), and the “minor prophets,” to the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos, Jonah, and Hosea) and to the southern kingdom of Judah (Joel, Zechariah, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi).

In addition to the traditional distinction made between the Major Prophets (whose books are longer and give more information) and the Minor Prophets, when talking about prophets we need to keep in mind another distinction between “writing prophets” (like those just mentioned) and non-writing prophets, who engage in prophetic ministry, but who leave no written books behind. We read about them in the historical books (1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Samuel). These include people such as Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha. We even have people given the gift of prophecy, yet never called to the office of prophet. The story of Balaam comes to mind in Numbers 22:1-24:25. Balaam was a “rent-a-prophet” (a professional seer) employed by Israel’s enemies (king Balak of Moab), whose donkey could see things he couldn’t.<sup>3</sup>

Moses, however occupies the preeminent prophetic role throughout the Old Testament. In his prophetic office, he clearly prefigures the Lord Jesus. This is affirmed in a number of ways. One of the most significant of these is recounted in Numbers 12:1-16, when Aaron and Miriam (Moses’ brother and sister) spoke out against Moses because he had married a Cushite (Ethiopian) woman. YHWH cursed Miriam for her actions, giving her leprosy and casting her from the camp until Moses interceded for her and she was healed. During this episode (vv. 6-8), YHWH says of Moses, “*Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?*” The characteristic of YHWH’s prophets is that they are given God’s words, at this point in visions and dreams. Unlike the others, Moses is given YHWH’s word directly and is allowed to see the “form of the Lord,” meaning that he sees the glory of the Lord (perhaps a vision of the pre-incarnate Christ), even as the law of God forbids us from representing YHWH in images.

Moses’ unique relationship to YHWH as covenant mediator is also reaffirmed in Exodus 33:7–11,

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

Then, in the next section of Exodus 33 (vv. 12-23), we read of how Moses was allowed to see the “form of the LORD,” while interceding for the people:

Moses said to the LORD, “See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of

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<sup>3</sup> Boda and McConville, eds., Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets (Downers Grove IVP Academic, 2016), 591.

the earth?” And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

Moses, as YHWH’s preeminent prophet is allowed to receive the words of YHWH as a friend speaks to a friend. He is given YHWH’s words, which he in turn is to speak to YHWH’s people. His prophetic office is confirmed when YHWH allows Moses to see the form of his glory (but not directly, for Moses would be consumed). Like Moses, all of Israel’s subsequent prophets are given the very words of God, to be spoken to YHWH’s people. This is also characteristic of the Minor Prophets when they proclaim YHWH’s words to both Israel and Judah. “The word of the Lord came to me saying . . .”

No one sets out to be a prophet—like Moses, all of Israel’s prophets are called to this office by YHWH. They are either given the gift of prophecy, or else called the office of prophet. This is why false prophecy is condemned by YHWH as such great sin and such a grave danger to his people. False prophets are those not sent by YHWH. They come with their own authority. They are self-deceived or intentional deceivers who seek to draw God’s people away from him. As we saw in the first part of our Old Testament Lesson (Deut. 18:9-14), YHWH’s warns his people about such self-appointed prophets.

When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.

The critical point here is God’s prophets are called and sent by him to bring his word to his people. As we read in the following verses (15-22):

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’— when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

This passage reveals something to keep in mind as we proceed with our series. God “raises up” his prophets who speak his words until a final prophet appears—one like Moses, but with a far greater authority. Since the prophets come to Israel as the words which the Lord gave them, their words have the same legal authority as the Sinai covenant as decreed by the heavenly court. We see hints of this in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Psalm.

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. I said, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.” Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!

The series of prophets God will send to his people reflect the preeminence of Moses. They are called by God, given his words, words which arise from the deliberations in the heavenly court scene described in Psalm 82. The prophets speak those words given them by YHWH (i.e., through his Spirit) which repeat the promised blessings and curses in God’s covenant with his people made at Mount Sinai (the so-called Sinai or Mosaic covenant). The prophets call God’s people to live justly and serve him only. They call Israel not to neglect the afflicted or exploit the weak.

But woe to those who speak falsely on their own initiative. This is why it is so dangerous when people claim to know the future, or when professing Christians claim that their words are words given them by YHWH. Unless they have been summoned before the heavenly court and given these words by YHWH, they are nothing but lies. When someone comes to you and says “I have a word from the Lord,” show them your Bible and say “no thanks,” I already have one.

When Moses spoke of a “prophet like me,” he established a prophetic tradition in which YHWH will send prophets (some with the temporary gift of prophecy—some called to the office of prophet) who will proclaim his words to his people. There are major prophets (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel), and then there are the Twelve, three prophets sent to Israel in the North, and nine sent to Judah in the South. But this series of prophets will culminate in a final prophet—one who has been present in the heavenly court from all eternity, and who as the eternal word made flesh, speaks once and for all the final and complete words from God to his people. Once he has spoken, what else is there to say?

As we read in our New Testament lesson, shortly after Pentecost, Peter and John healed a lame beggar in the temple. A crowd gathered, the lame beggar, “*clung to Peter and John,*” while all “*the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s.*” Peter (speaking himself as a new covenant prophet) proclaimed the very words of the Lord, and announced to all that the one of whom Moses had spoken—the prophet yet come—was none other than Jesus. It was Jesus who had died for our sins and was then raised from the dead three days later.

And when Peter saw [the lame man now healed] he addressed the people: “Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the

dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. “And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.’ And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’ God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.”

A Prophet like Moses has come. He speaks the very words of God. All of God’s prophets (including The Twelve) point forward to his day—when Jesus suffers and dies for our sins, when he is raised from the dead, and promises to come again. That day will come because God in his long-suffering patience sent his messengers to Israel and Judah to proclaim to them his words, calling them to repent and promising them a full and glorious salvation in Jesus Christ, who is as Moses said, “A Prophet Like Me.”