

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
Anchorage Grace Church
2015

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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

The Twelve

The corpus of biblical books we call the Minor Prophets has not enjoyed great prominence in the history of biblical interpretation. It is not difficult to understand why this is so. Where is the edification for a modern Christian in the dirge celebrating the downfall of an ancient city? How can the gloomy forecasts of captivity for Israel and Judah lift the heart today? The Minor Prophets seem to have been preoccupied with nations and events that have little relevance to today's world. How unlike the New Testament they are. A careful study of these prophets, however, reveals that many of the themes they expound transit the Testaments. They speak of the love of God as well as his justice. Their prophecies are not all doom, but are often rich with hope.... The fact that these prophets often expressed themselves in culturally and historically conditioned forms that seem foreign to us should not diminish the force of their messages. This fact should challenge us to discover how the prophets faced the foreboding circumstances of their times, and how their words illumined the dark night of human rebellion and divine justice. Anyone who turns from reading the Minor Prophets hearing only words of recrimination and judgment has not read them fairly. Within the dismal events these prophets describe lurks the hand of God, and beyond these events is the bright prospect of a kingdom inaugurated by One whom Zechariah portrayed as suffering betrayal, piercing, and eventual death. The Minor Prophets are not as time-bound as we may think.

Thomas Edward McComiskey, "Introduction," in *The Minor Prophets*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), ix.

I. Introduction

A. *Title*

Protestant bibles give no overarching title to these twelve books, but the popular title that has emerged refers to them as "The Minor Prophets." Unfortunately, this title has given many the impression that these books take a back seat in importance to the "Major Prophets," i.e., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. But in reality, they "minor" based on length alone, not on significance.

Within the Hebrew tradition, the books have been labeled "The Book of the Twelve Prophets." In fact, the earliest known record entitles this section "The Twelve Prophets," found in Ecclesiasticus 49:10, an apocryphal book from the LXX that dates to c. 190 B.C.

B. *Unity*

The title of the section, however, betrays a deeper question. How do these books relate to each other? Should we regard them as twelve separate books that were simply compiled and kept together for reasons of space and simplicity? Or, should we approach them as a single work with an overall literary thrust and structure? The answer is surprisingly tricky, since there is evidence supporting both approaches.

On the one hand, both the Masoretic Text (Hebrew manuscripts) and the LXX provide individual titles to each book, suggesting that the translators and copyists of those days at least inherited a tradition that separated each book into its own unique literary unit. Even internally, each book contains a superscription providing brief background information identifying the prophet and sometimes the occasion, suggesting that each book came together under different circumstances (e.g., Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1; Hag 1:1, etc.). What this suggests, then, is that these books were compiled together onto a single scroll, thus preserving their order, but were not regarded as part of a larger corpus.

On the other hand, both Ecclesiasticus 49:10 and the canonical list provided by Josephus refer to all twelve by the simple title, "The Twelve," indicating a separate tradition that seems the view the books as a literary unit. Additionally, key internal literary and structural links suggest that the books were purposefully arranged (i.e., redacted) to relate together in the current order. Structurally, then, they seem to provide a unified theological thrust based on their internal relationships and arrangements.

What's the answer? In reality, the jury is still out, and no dogmatic position can be taken. Much like the Psalms, it's difficult to determine whether tradition has forced these literary relationships or if they were intended in the inspiration process. The links seem to fit these books together as a whole, but there is no definitive reason to dogmatically hold to a unified view.

C. *Date*

The majority of the twelve books have fairly clear chronological markers that allow scholars to place them within OT chronology. Only two books pose serious difficulties for dating and are the battleground of much scholarly debate: Joel and Obadiah.

Both books fall early in the course of the Twelve, which has led some scholars to suggest an earlier date for these books. Yet in reality, none of the books are arranged chronologically in the Twelve. Order simply isn't a good determiner for dating a book in this context.

Instead, it's better to look for both explicit chronological references (e.g., the reign of a king, etc.), or implicit temporal references. Fortunately for Obadiah, numerous historical references abound, yet it is still difficult to pinpoint the exact timeframe for these references. This has resulted in dates for the book ranging anywhere from the 9th century to the 5th century B.C., a range of 500 years!

In contrast, Joel includes neither a superscription with historical information nor clear historical allusions. Any potential historical information is nebulous and open to a wide

array of interpretations. This has led to dates for the book ranging from 9th century to the 3rd century B.C.

In the end scholars both conservative and liberal fall across the spectrum for dating Joel and Obadiah. Yet this difficulty does not detract from the overwhelming clarity for the remaining books:

DATING OF THE TWELVE

Book Name	Translation	Date Range
Hosea	"Salvation"	746-724 B.C.
Joel	"Yahweh is God"	810-795/500 B.C.
Amos	"Burden/Burden-bearer"	760-746 B.C.
Obadiah	"Servant of Yahweh"	c. 845/500 B.C.
Jonah	"Dove"	c. 845 B.C.
Micah	"Who is like Yahweh?"	735-690 B.C.
Nahum	"Comfort"	c. 663-654 B.C.
Habakkuk	"One who embraces"	608-598 B.C.
Zephaniah	Yahweh hides	640-630 B.C.
Haggai	"Festal one"	520 B.C.
Zechariah	"Yahweh remembers"	c. 520-480 B.C.
Malachi	"My messenger"	c. 450-430 B.C.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE TWELVE (EARLY)

9th/8th Century	7th Century	6th/5th Century
DIVIDED KINGDOM	SURVIVING KINGDOM	POST-EXILIC NATION
Hosea (Israel) Joel (Judah) Amos (Israel) Obadiah (Judah) Jonah (Israel) Micah (Judah)	Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah	Haggai Zechariah Malachi

CHRONOLOGY OF THE TWELVE (LATE)

9th/8th Century	7th Century	6th/5th Century
DIVIDED KINGDOM	SURVIVING KINGDOM	POST-EXILIC NATION
Hosea (Israel) Amos (Israel) Jonah (Israel) Micah (Judah)	Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah	Haggai Zechariah Joel Obadiah Malachi

II. Major Themes

A. *The Day of Yahweh*

The most prominent and unifying theme in the Twelve is the emphasis given to the Day of Yahweh. The phrase alone occurs a total of 12x in the Twelve (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7, 14; Zech 14:1; Mal 4:5), although it is the subject of much discussion throughout the books as well as in other prophetic books (Isa

13:6, 9; Ezek 13:5; 30:3). For a full discussion of the Day of Yahweh, see the handouts on the previous series *Signs in the Heavens*. The following will be a brief overview.

1. *The Description of the Day of Yahweh*

Zephaniah 1:14-18 contains the most fullest and most succinct and clear description of the Day of Yahweh in the OT. Several prominent characteristics can be identified from Zephaniah's description:

- a) *Imminence* (1:14): the day could happen at any moment, and will occur swiftly
- b) *Wrath* (1:15, 17): the day marks the outpouring of God's wrath against humanity
- c) *Darkness* (1:15): the day will be characterized by supernatural darkness, both in usual celestial activity (cf. Joel 2:30-31) as well as the terrifying presence of Yahweh in his glory (Zech 14:6-8).
- d) *Universality* (1:18): the judgment will be against "all the earth" and "all the inhabitants of the earth." No individual or people-group is safe.

On the other hand, numerous descriptions elsewhere indicate a positive aspect of the Day of Yahweh. Just as a day includes both day and night, so the Day of Yahweh includes both judgment and blessing. Wrath falls upon the unbelieving, both in Israel/Judah and the nations, while blessing comes to the remnant who trust in Yahweh (Joel 2:30-31). Thus, the Day of Yahweh encompasses both the wrath of God and the kingdom of God, the tribulation and the millennial kingdom.

2. *The Timing of the Day of Yahweh*

More difficult is identifying the timing of the Day of Yahweh. The numerous references in the Twelve seem to indicate disparaging timings for the event. Was it fulfilled in an historical sense with the judgments of Israel (722 B.C.) and Judah (586 B.C.), with an as-yet future event anticipated against the nations? Or is the event a completely future event still to come?

Once again, refer to the handouts for the *Signs in the Heavens* series for more detailed information on navigating these questions. The short answer is that it seems best to understand the Day of Yahweh as a future eschatological event to which earlier events such as Israel's and Judah's exiles, the fall of Babylon and Egypt, etc. all point as anticipatory events. They were not really "the Day of Yahweh" as much as they typified God's judgment in an historical, temporal manner and gave readers clear references points for understanding what the true event would be like.

B. *The Sin of Israel/Judah*

The warning of the Day of Yahweh comes because of Israel and Judah's sin. The prophets take their messages both to Israel (Hosea, Amos, Jonah) and Judah (Joel, Obadiah, Micah; Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi), exposing both nations' sin in terms characteristic of spiritual adultery (Hos; Mic 1; Zeph 1; Zech 13) and social injustice (Hos 4; Amos 3, 4; Mic 2). In other words, the nations had two great evils: they were not loving God with all their hearts, nor loving their neighbors as themselves. They were abandoning their covenant with Yahweh to pursue paganism and they were abandoning the poor and vulnerable of society in pursuit of pleasure, luxury, and extravagance.

C. *The Judgment of Israel/Judah*

The consequence for Israel and Judah's sin would be that they would fall under the same punishment as that of the nations (Hosea 13; Joel 2; Amos 2; Hab 1; Zeph). Israel apparently had a well-developed understanding of the Day of Yahweh as early as Amos, for the prophet chides the people for assuming that they can live like the pagans and yet escape the judgment for the pagans (5:18-20). The consistent warning of the prophets was that judgment was imminent and that only heart-felt repentance would ward it off.

D. *The Restoration of Israel/Judah*

Just as consistent as the prophets warned Israel and Judah of certain judgment for their sin, they also encouraged these nations that judgment was necessary as a preparatory element for Yahweh's ultimate blessing. In other words, their judgment at the hands of foreign nations in a Day-of-Yahweh-like event would not spell the end of the nation. Yahweh's commitment to the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants ensured that restoration would follow judgment. Restoration in these contexts, however, carries a distinct air of kingdom blessing. What follows judgment in the eyes of the prophets is not temporary but permanent restoration, which means that whatever judgment befell the nations in history did not exhaust God's prophet plans for Israel.

E. *The Judgment of the Nations*

A large aspect of the prophetic message of the Twelve and the intent of the Day of Yahweh as a whole is God's final dealing with the nations. Throughout OT history, God had allowed the nations to go their own way and operate independently of him. He had brought temporal judgment on certain nations for certain sins (e.g., Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, etc.). However, his main concern throughout history had been Israel. But the prophets warned not just God's people but *all peoples* that God's judgment was coming. In fact, two prophets write messages specifically to foreign nations warning them of the coming divine judgment (Nahum; Obadiah).

III. Purpose

Israel's restoration will come at the Day of Yahweh.

IV. Literary Structure

Traditionally, the structure of the Twelve was assumed to be based on chronology. The first six prophetic books corresponded with the 8th century, the next three with the 7th century, and the last three with the 6th century.¹ This approach, however, dissolves if Joel and Obadiah are viewed as post-exilic.

Another option is that the order of books corresponds with a thematic approach:

¹ Mark F. Rooker, "The Book of Hosea," in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2011), 414.

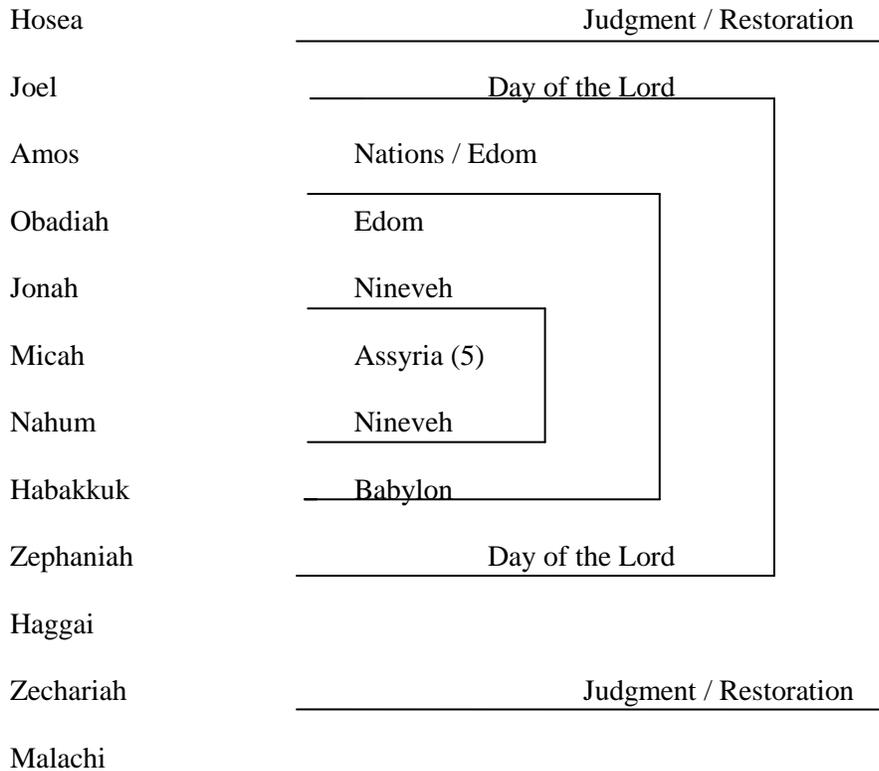
THEMATIC ARRANGEMENT

COVENANT BREAKING	DAY OF YAHWEH	RESTORATION
Hosea	Nahum	Haggai
Joel	Habakkuk	Zechariah
Amos	Zephaniah	Malachi
Obadiah		
Jonah		
Micah		

The strength of this approach is that it is loosed from the chronological restraints of Joel and Obadiah. Whether pre- or post-exilic, they can still unify around a common theme. The weakness of this view is in its attempt to overlay a theme upon certain books, while ignoring similar themes in other books which don't fit the "mold." For instance, only Zephaniah deals directly with the Day of Yahweh. Yet Joel, Amos, Zechariah, and Malachi also refer extensively to that day, yet are placed in different "themes." Meanwhile, Malachi carries a large emphasis on Judah's covenant infidelity post-exile, while both Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Micah include deep veins of restoration themes.

A third approach suggests a possible chiasmic arrangement centering on Micah as the hinge, with its focus in chapter 5 on the judgment of Assyria. The approach relies on numerous verbal and thematic links between each book, an approach which while novel also carries the liability of extreme subjectivity:

CHIASTIC ARRANGEMENT



VERBAL/THEMATIC LINKS

Hosea: wise/discerning (14:9)	Joel: "Tell your sons about it" (1:2-3)
	Joel: "Yahweh roars from Zion" (3:16)
Amos: "Yahweh roars from Zion" (1:2)	
Amos: "Possess the remnant of Edom" (9:12)	Obadiah: "concerning Edom" (1)
	Obadiah: nations...those who escape (16-17)
Jonah: "Go to Nineveh" (1:2)	
Jonah: anger toward God (4:1-11)	Micah: "sins/rebellion of Jacob/Israel" (1:5)
	Micah: judgment on nations (7:16-17)
Nahum: judgment on Nineveh (1:1-2)	
Nahum: judgment on Nineveh (3:1-7)	Habakkuk: judgment on Judah (1:5-11)
	Habakkuk: earth devastated (3:17)
Zephaniah: earth devastated (1:2-3)	
Zephaniah: "gather you together" (3:20)	Haggai: "sow much, harvest little" (1:6)
	Haggai: nations, house (2:7)
Zechariah: nations, house (1:15, 16)	
Zechariah: "angel of Yahweh" (12:8)	Malachi: "My Messenger" (1:1; 3:1)

Some of the proposed "links" between these books are obviously highly tenuous. While some verbal links may have played a part in their arrangement within the Twelve (e.g., Joel/Amos/Obadiah; Zechariah/Malachi), it seems doubtful that they play as prominent a role in their arrangement as this version requires.

In reality, large-scale chiastic arrangements, even those that span over a few chapters of a book, are highly suspect because of the innate tendency toward confirmation bias. Once an observer thinks there might be a chiastic arrangement, he has a tendency to "see" links in the text that confirm his hypothesis, making mountains out of verbal molehills in an attempt to identify a larger structure.

All this to say, there does appear to be a macro-structure to the arrangement we see in the Twelve, but it most likely is not based on a chiastic structure. Both the chronological and thematic approaches have merit, but are not without their difficulties. In the end, the order of these books should not be allowed to heavily dictate their overall theology.