

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 47

Minor Prophets – Part One JOEL and AMOS

I. BACKGROUND

Who are the Minor Prophets?

There are twelve books in the Old Testament that are called the “Minor Prophets.” These are twelve short books that end the Old Testament. In their Hebrew form, the books were all included on one scroll. This scroll of twelve was referenced as early as 190 B.C. by a fellow named Jesus ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus 49:10). The phrase “Minor Prophets” dates from Augustine (The City of God, 18.25) around 400 A.D. It is not a phrase saying the books are of lesser importance. It references, rather, their size as compared to the Major Prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

When were the Minor Prophets written?

These books were written over a time span that might range as early as the 800’s B.C. to about 430 B.C. We are not certain of the era for Joel or Obadiah, although we can narrow it down to two more likely time periods. A fair approximation of the dates covered by the Minor Prophets is:

Joel	–	anywhere from 800 - 400
Amos	–	760ish
Micah	–	mid 700’s
Hosea	–	+/- 753 – 722
Jonah	–	730ish – 450ish
Zephaniah	–	630ish
Habakkuk	–	605ish
Nahum	–	mid 600’s to late 600’s
Obadiah	–	anywhere from 800 – 450
Haggai	–	520ish
Zechariah	–	late 500’s to 400’s
Malachi	–	450ish to 430ish

Why are the Minor Prophets in the order we find them?

No one is certain of the answer to this question.

II. JOEL

There is some level of uncertainty as to when the book of Joel was written. We know the author by his name because of the internal evidence within the book. Beyond what we read in the book, we know little to no more about the author.

The book falls into two sections. The first deals with a plague of locusts (1:1-2:27). The second section relays a vision of God pouring out his Spirit (2:28-3:21). The book seems to have responded to an incredibly severe locust plague that caused people to wonder if the “Day of the Lord” was near. Because locust plagues were recurrent problems in the Middle East, we are not able to use secular sources to help us identify a time of authorship based upon the events described. Therefore, scholars speculate about when Joel was written. Some view it as early as the 800’s; others view it as late as the 400’s. The bases for these dates stem from whether Joel is familiar with other prophets that came later or whether those prophets were familiar with Joel (Joel has passages that parallel others that are found in Ezekiel, Isaiah, Micah, and Amos).

Joel found his prophetic message in the locust plague of the day. Joel urged the people to see the plague as a warning from God that harsh judgment would follow if the people failed to repent. Joel anticipated that the coming judgment would be followed by spiritual blessings to the people.

Joel prophesies that in the coming day of the Lord, God will:

pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. (2:28-29)

This prophecy was theologically profound. At the time it was delivered, God had poured his Spirit out selectively upon certain chosen people among the Jews. The outpouring to all God’s children was a big change never before vocalized in such clear terms. Peter saw this prophecy fulfilled on Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. Acts 2 notes that the people were amazed over the work of the Spirit on the 12 Apostles; they even thought the recipients were drunk. In response, Peter quoted Joel 2:28-32 and explained the outpouring of the Spirit on all people had arrived. Acts continues to record that the Spirit of God was given to all who became children of God through Christ, both Jew and Gentile, men and women, old and young, slave and free.

III. AMOS

Who was Amos?

Unlike his contemporary prophets Isaiah and Hosea, Amos did not grow up in a higher social class. Amos eked out a living as a sheep raiser and a dresser of fig-mulberry trees (also called fig sycamore trees) (1:1; 7:14). As a common man, Amos prophesied by the Spirit of God against Judah, Israel and heathen nations.

The 9 chapters of Amos can be divided as:

1. Utterances against other nations (1:3-2:3)
2. Prophecies against Judah and Israel (2:4-16)
3. Judgment against Israel (3-6)
4. Visions of judgment (7-9:10)
5. Promise of restoration and blessing (9:11-15)

Background:

We should remember that after the death of Solomon, the Hebrew people underwent a civil war. The result was the establishment of two Hebrew nations. "Israel," the Northern Kingdom, was ruled by a succession of Kings in Samaria. "Judah," the Southern Kingdom, was ruled from Solomon's lineage in Jerusalem.

Amos lived and prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (Jeroboam reigned from 793–753 B.C.) and Uzziah of Judah (792–740 B.C.). Reading the prophecy itself provides great insight into the conditions of the Northern Kingdom during this time.

We should remember that the Northern Kingdom had long struggled with its neighbor to the North and East – Damascus (*a/k/a* "Syria"). With the 700's, however, Assyria rose to power. Assyria was North and East of Damascus, and so great was the Assyrian threat that Damascus stopped its border squabbles with Israel to the south and focused its efforts against the growing Assyrian threat to the North and East. This shift in Damascus's focus left Israel somewhat at peace. In fact, Israel was able to consolidate its northern and eastern borders and regain some areas that it previously lost to Damascus.

Meanwhile, to the south of Israel, Judah was still serving as a buffer with Egypt. Egypt itself was not amounting to a big threat at this time because of its own internal issues. The net result of these events was a time of great prosperity in Israel that had not been seen since the days of Solomon. There was a good deal of trade and commerce that caused a number of people to move from the country into the cities.

Along with this prosperity, however, came some problems. The people of Israel were into “get rich quick” schemes. These schemes included cheating, running over the backs of others, dealing in slavery, buying off and corrupting the courts, and playing at a religion that affirmed these sins as blessing from the gods. The middle class in Israel basically disappeared. The upper class and the lower class were divided by a deep chasm and “the rich got richer while the poor got poorer.”

This sinful approach to God’s goodness to the people resulted in an underlying decay that ate away the “successes” of the age. Into this atmosphere came Amos preaching the word of the Lord.

What did Amos say?

Not surprisingly, Amos condemned the social, moral, and religious inequities of the day. He came from the peasant class and spoke out against oppression, injustice and immorality. Amos prophesied doom upon the people unless the people left their immoral ways of life. The people were to seek the qualities of God: justice, righteousness, and holiness.

Failure to live out God’s character would result in a coming judgment where God would reassert the claims of his moral character. Amos explained the fact that the Israelites were chosen by God and were the recipients of the special covenant on Mount Sinai would not serve as a “get out of jail free card” for the nation. In fact, that special status dictated discipline for Israel’s sins even more than would otherwise be true. This plea and warning fell on deaf ears.

1. Utterances Against Other Nations (1:3-2:3)

Amos begins by announcing the judgments of the Lord against six of Israel’s neighbors. Damascus is condemned for her brutality against Israel. The Philistines are condemned for trading Israelites like cattle. The Phoenicians of Tyre are condemned for disregarding a treaty of brotherhood and selling entire communities into slavery. Edom (the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother) was condemned for its persistent violence toward Israel. Ammon was condemned for its genocide and destruction of pregnant women with their offspring. Moab was condemned for its irreverence toward the dead.

2. Prophecies Against Judah and Israel (2:4-16)

After pronouncing these judgments against the “heathen,” Amos turns his attention to Judah and Israel, the “chosen people.” Judah is condemned for rejecting God’s law and for idolatry. Israel is condemned for abusing the poor, for sexual immorality, and for false religiousosity.

3. Judgment Against Israel (3-6)

The condemnation on Israel is more pronounced because of its role as the chosen people (“You only have I chosen...therefore I will punish you for all your sins” 3:2). The fact that God had worked such miracles as the Exodus, the fact that God had sent prophets proclaiming God’s word, and the poor response of the people to these blessings heightened the need of disciplining punishment from God. The promised punishment would take the form of another country invading Israel and carting off those who abused the gifts of the Lord. God was not going to allow folks who got rich off ill-gotten gain to prosper under his protection. Instead, he would see that those people lost what they had gained.

The language Amos uses here is powerful. When Amos references the wealthy women, he states “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks!’” The judgment announced against these wealthy women goes beyond merely calling them cows of Bashan. They are ultimately to be taken away as fish from the sea (4:1-3).

The indictment against the religious people references their sinning in the midst of their offering tithes! The people would sacrifice and tithe and then brag about it. This action repulsed the Lord and called down judgment where the people are sacrificed and burned up rather than their offerings (4:4-5:6).

Courts exist for justice. Courts abused by the rich and powerful take away the sweetness of justice. This abuse the wealthy in Amos’s day had done. Amos indicts those “who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground” (5:7).

The wealthy are indicted for taking the court system and using it to oppress the poor rather than use it as a fair refuge of justice for all.

You hate the one who reproves in court and despise him who tells the truth. You trample on the poor...You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. (5:10-12)

These people are admonished to “hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts” (5:15).

Rather than assist the poor, the wealthy “trample on the poor and force him to give you grain” (5:11). In a moving indictment of this attitude and action, Amos writes:

Hear this you who trample the needy and do away with the poor...skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: “I will not forget....” (8:4-7)

Through Amos, God calls the people to turn from their abuse and sin. The turn is to “let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (5:24).

4. Visions of Judgment (7-9:10) and Promise of Restoration and Blessing (9:11-15)

Amos makes it clear that God gave the people warning after warning and chance after chance, but the people would still not repent or turn from their evil. Thus, Israel was to be destroyed, with the promise that God would one day restore “David’s fallen tent” (9:11).

IV. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Walk in the Spirit.
2. Be fair.
3. Treat others with love.
4. Remember the golden rule.
5. Let our knowledge of God elevate our concern for others
6. Be a voice for the underprivileged.
7. Mark our courts fair refuge for the poor and downtrodden.