

# *The Minor Prophets*



A Small Group Inductive Bible Study

## **Welcome to the World of the Minor Prophets!**

In the following weeks, you will discover for yourself the messages of the Minor Prophets. This study is designed for you to do original investigation into the themes of the Minor Prophets and apply the principles you learn to your life. Each week, you will study one Minor Prophet. In preparation for each study, pray and ask God to give you insight into his Word and to speak to your life. Then read through the introductory material at the start of this study. After that, read the introductory material at the end of each study.

For each study, read through the book a few times, looking for the key themes outlined at the start of each study. Then, using your observation skills, fill in the blanks in the charts. Use the text first to answer the questions. Then you may use commentaries, cross-references, dictionaries, and encyclopedias to supplement your original investigation.

Let's dig into the Bible!

**Designed by Andrew Hancock**

# Prophets in Relation to the Exile

Pre-Exile 800bc	Exile 70 yrs 586bc	Post-Exile 400bc
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Written To Israel
Hosea
Amos

Written about Assyria
Jonah
Nahum

Written To Jews in Exile
Ezekiel
Daniel

Written To Jews in Jerusalem
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Written To Judah
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Joel
Micah
Zephaniah
Habakkuk

Written about Edom
Obadiah

## Minor Prophets with Corresponding Historical Contexts

Minor Prophet	Historical Text of the Prophet's Time	
Obadiah	2 Kings 9-12	2 Chronicles 22-24
Joel	2 Kings 12	2 Chronicles 24
Jonah	2 Kings 14	
Amos	2 Kings 13-15	2 Chronicles 26
Hosea	2 Kings 14-20	2 Chronicles 26-32
Micah	2 Kings 15-20	2 Chronicles 27-32
Nahum	2 Kings 21-23	2 Chronicles 33-35
Zephaniah	2 Kings 22	2 Chronicles 34
Habakkuk	2 Kings 22-23	2 Chronicles 34-35
Haggai	Ezra	
Zechariah	Ezra	
Malachi	Nehemiah	

## THE WORLD OF THE PROPHETS

(I) = Israel    (J) = Judah

The Prophet	Date of Ministry	Contemporary Prophets	Audience	World Power	Contemporary Kings
Hosea	756–725	Amos, Isaiah, Micah	Israel	Assyria (Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser V)	(I) Jeroboam II, Zechariah, Shallum, Manahem, Pekahiah, Pekah, Hoshea (J) Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah
Joel	830–810	Elisha	Judah	Assyria (Adad-Nirari III, Shalmaneser III)	(J) Joash (I) Jehu, Jehoahaz
Amos	ca. 760–757	Hosea	Israel	Assyria (Ashur-dan III, Ashur-Nirari V)	(J) Uzziah (I) Jeroboam II
Obadiah	848	Elijah	Judah	Assyria (Shalmaneser III)	(J) Jehoram, Ahaziah (I) Jehoram, Jehu
Jonah	ca. 800	None	Nineveh	Assyria (Adad-Nirari III)	(J) Joash (I) Jehoahaz
Micah	735–690	Isaiah, Hosea	Judah Israel	Assyria (Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, Sennacherib)	(J) Ahaz, Jotham, Hezekiah (I) Pekah, Hoshea
Nahum	ca. 640	Zephaniah	Judah	Assyria (Ashurbanipal)	(J) Amon, Josiah
Habakkuk	608–597	Jeremiah	Judah	Babylonia (Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar)	(J) Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah
Zephaniah	640–630	Nahum, Jeremiah	Judah	Assyria (Ashurbanipal)	(J) Amon, Josiah
Haggai	520	Zechariah	Judah	Medo-Persia (Darius I)	Zerubbabel—governor of Judah
Zechariah	520–475	Haggai, Esther	Judah	Medo-Persia (Darius I, Xerxes)	Zerubbabel—governor of Judah
Malachi	ca. 435	Nehemiah	Judah	Medo-Persia (Artaxerxes I)	Nehemiah—governor of Judah

<sup>1</sup>Archer, G. L. (1998, c1994). *A survey of Old Testament introduction* ([3rd. ed.].) (Page 346). Chicago: Moody Press.

# Hosea

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

*Specific things to take notice of:*

- Find the many metaphors for God and the metaphors for Israel.
- Find the sins and their consequences—also look for all the promises of hope and future.
- Notice the comparisons and contrasts between two relationships Hosea/Gomer and God/Israel.
- Study the many places Hosea is quoted in the NT—why is it used in those places?

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

Make a table of  
**Contents**

Fill in the Chart by writing the theme of each chapter in the appropriate box.

<b>Hosea's marriage and its message</b>	1.
	2.
	3.
<b>Prophecies of judgment and promises of restoration</b>	4.
	5.
	6.
	7.
	8.
	9.
	10.
	11.
	12.
	13.
	14.

Identify  
**Chief  
Characters**

Who are the main people? List their characteristics. What do you learn about God's character?  
Write out how He is described. How is Christ foreshadowed?

Recognize  
**Crucial  
Themes**

Make a list of the important themes of the book with their corresponding references.

Face your  
**Challenges**

Make a list of the questions you have about what you are encountering in the book. Attempt to find the answers to some of these through commentaries, study notes, and other Bible study helps.

Organize  
**Cross-References**

Research other places in the Bible that talk about some of the themes you have identified.

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Select a key verse or two that help summarize the message of the book and its importance to life.

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What is God communicating through this prophet? List the major principles and lessons you learn from the book.

Create a  
**Caption**

What central thought is the writer trying to communicate? Write a short descriptive, catchy, mental picture producing title. Why: the shorter, the more likely you'll remember it. Try to limit to 3-7ish words.

Come to a  
**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## INTRODUCTION TO HOSEA

Hosea was one of four ‘writing prophets’ (prophets whose prophecies were written down and preserved for us in the Bible) who lived in the eighth century BC . These four were (in roughly chronological as well as alphabetical order): Amos and Hosea, who prophesied in the northern kingdom, Israel; and Isaiah and Micah, who prophesied in the southern kingdom, Judah.

They lived in times of comparative affluence in Israel and Judah. This affluence, however, was not shared. The rich and powerful got richer and more powerful at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. All the prophets addressed this situation but they have different emphases. Whereas Amos concentrated on the social injustices of the people, Hosea stressed their unfaithfulness to God in their idolatry.

### Hosea the prophet

Although we do not know much of the details of Hosea’s life ( *e.g.* where he came from, or who his father Beeri was) his circumstances were of supreme importance for bringing home the significance of his message. For Hosea married Gomer, a woman who turned out to be like the people of Israel—unfaithful. She left him for someone else and in doing so, gave an accurate picture of the people of Israel who forsook God to ‘go after other gods’. Hosea, however, was commanded to go and take back his former wife, and so provide a powerful visual aid for the message that God had for his people: ‘You have sinned and must be punished, but I will take you back to myself and restore our relationship’ (see on chs. 1 , 3 especially).

The prophet’s wife bore him three children and each of them was give a prophetic name: ‘Jezreel’, ‘Not-shown-compassion’ and ‘Not-my-people’ (see on 1:4–9 ). Together they speak of God’s judgment, but the judgment is also reversed ( 1:10–2:1 , 21–23 ).

Hosea seems to have had a prophetic ministry of over thirty years, as we can see from the kings listed in 1:1 , and from allusions to historical events in the book. He probably received his call to prophesy around 760 BC , towards the end of the reign of Jeroboam II ( *c.* 793–753) and continued for about thirty years. In this year the so-called Syro-Ephraimite war took place. Syria and Israel (the northern kingdom, often referred to as Ephraim) tried to force Judah to join them in a rebellion against Assyria. Judah refused to join and appealed to Assyria, which then crushed Syria and Israel without trouble. Hosea may well have prophesied almost up to the time of the fall of Samaria in 722.

Hosea proclaimed his message verbally at the natural meeting-places. These would include sanctuaries ( *e.g.* Bethel and Gilgal; 4:15 ) where people came to worship and offer sacrifice, and the city gates, where the elders gathered to settle legal disputes. He probably spent some time in the capital Samaria, which features in several prophecies ( *e.g.* 7:1 ; 8:5–6 ).

In view of the references to Judah in the book ( *e.g.* 1:1 , 7 , 11 ; 4:15 ; 5:10–14 ), it is possible that Hosea took refuge there at some point in his ministry. This would also explain how his prophecies came to be preserved when the northern kingdom was destroyed (see also the chart ‘ The prophets ’ in The Song of Songs ).

### Historical background

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During the first part of the eighth century BC the great powers of the known world were less dominant than they had been: Assyria and Babylon were engaged elsewhere and Egypt was comparatively weak (see the time chart in *Approaching the Bible*). This allowed the smaller states of Palestine to expand and engage freely in trade. Jeroboam II was a bad king, according to 2 Ki. 14:23–29; he achieved military success but caused suffering to the people of Israel. He was the fourth and last but one in the dynasty of Jehu, who had been anointed king by a representative of the prophet Elisha (2 Ki. 9:1–10) to destroy the line of Ahab. Jehu then killed Joram (2 Ki. 9:24) who had been recovering from his wounds in Jezreel, and followed this up with a massacre of the rest of his family (2 Ki. 10:1–8), also in Jezreel. Having got the taste for blood he apparently went way beyond God's commands. He killed Ahab's 'chief men', 'close friends' and 'priests' (2 Ki. 10:11), and followed this up by killing a temple-full of Baal worshippers (2 Ki. 10:18–28). The commendation given in 2 Ki. 10:30 is severely modified by Hosea's reference to the 'blood of Jezreel', as it is by the statement that 'he did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit' (2 Ki. 10:29). Jehu was followed by his son Jehoahaz and his grandson Jehoash. The third king after Jehu was the above mentioned Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash.

2 Ki. 15 tells how when Jeroboam died (753) there was a series of brief reigns and assassinations. Jeroboam's son Zechariah (not the prophet of Judah) was killed by Shallum, who was killed by Menahem. Menahem's son Pekahiah succeeded him, but after two years was killed by Pekah, who was killed by Hoshea. (This name is spelt the same in Hebrew as Hosea the prophet, but clearly they were not the same person.) Ho. 1:1 does not refer to these kings although they overlap with the kings of Judah mentioned. This is possibly because they were each so insignificant.

The kings of Judah were Azariah (also known as Uzziah; *c.* 791–740), Jotham (*c.* 750–732), Ahaz *c.* 744–716) and Hezekiah (*c.* 716–687). Note that the dates overlap. This is because they adopted a system of co-regency: the king's son was appointed co-ruler before the king died. This served to make the change-over smoother and less vulnerable to uprisings and attempted *coups*.

The religious context in which Hosea prophesied is reflected in many parts of the book. The Israelites under Joshua had conquered the land of Canaan but had failed to destroy the peoples already settled there. They and their descendants, and their religion, continued. The Canaanites worshipped many gods, the chief of which was called Baal. Baal was supposed to be the god who gave fertility to the land. According to a widespread myth he was killed by Moth, the god of summer and drought, but rose from the dead after the goddess Anath avenged his murder. This dying and rising reflected the annual cycle of the seasons. Canaanite religion was designed to give fertility to the land; it did not place a high value on morals. At the temples, men were able to 'worship' Baal and stimulate him to acts of fertility by having sexual intercourse with 'sacred' resident prostitutes.

Israel was supposed to worship one God, 'the LORD', who had no goddess consort. He could not be manipulated by ritual but required strict obedience instead. Clearly, the two religions were incompatible, but the Israelites tried to mix them (1 Ki. 18:2).

# Joel

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

Specific things to take notice of in the book:

- Pay careful attention to the use of present and future tenses. He changes quite often. Note reference to time with a symbol of a clock if it helps.
- Make sure to make a list of the characteristics of God.
- Write out all the things we learn about the end times.
- Note how God will judge the people and how they will be blessed if they repent.

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

Make a table of  
**Contents**

Summarize, describe, paraphrase, outline, make a chart or make a list of major points. Don't try to interpret, just simple observations.

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Who are the main people? List their characteristics. What do you learn about God's character?  
Write out how He is described. How is Christ foreshadowed?

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How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## Scripture Memory Verse: Joel 2:12-13

### INTRODUCTION TO JOEL

#### Date

The heading in 1:1 gives no information about the prophet apart from his father's name. The divine message, rather than the messenger, is what matters. So background knowledge can be gleaned only from internal evidence. It is useful to discover as much as possible about the historical and social background to prophetic writings. Then we can enter intelligently into the message of the prophet for his own times, and this helps us to apply it to our own situation.

It used to be thought that the order of books in the minor prophets was significant for the dating of Joel. Certainly there is a loose historical sequence, but we must not be locked into an early date just for that reason. The placing of the book of Joel is an interesting topic, to which we shall return later (see also the chart 'The prophets' in *The Song of Songs*).

The clearest clue for dating Joel comes from the historical information supplied in the accusations of 3:2–3, 5–6. It is now generally accepted that they fit best the terrible events of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and its aftermath. The temple was destroyed at that time, but both it and its rituals are

conspicuously present in the messages of Joel (1:9, 13–14, 16; 2:14, 17; 3:18). Therefore a date not only after the Judeans came back from exile in Babylon but after the rebuilding of the temple in 515 BC is indicated. The Sabaeans (3:8) were displaced by the Mineans as important Arabian traders by 400 BC. In line with this general time-frame is the impression that Joel cites a number of Scriptures and traditions as evidently written earlier and well known to his hearers.

#### Occasion

We know from other post-exilic books that this period was a very difficult time politically and economically for the Judean settlers. Haggai mentions a bad harvest that devastated the community when they had insufficient resources to tide them over (Hg. 1:6, 10–11; 2:19). It was an agricultural crisis that was the burden of Joel's ministry, one that threatened the survival of the struggling settlers. They experienced a severe locust plague that affected more than one year's harvest (1:4; 2:25). Locusts are still a serious threat, notably in African countries, although the spraying of pesticides, especially from the air, has decreased their harmfulness by killing them before they mature and breed. To this end in a single week in September 1986 four DC-7 aircraft sprayed nearly one million acres in Senegal with malathion. One swarm can contain up to ten billion individual locusts. As many as a thousand newly hatched hopping locusts can occupy one square foot. A single locust can travel 3,000 miles during its lifetime, stripping vegetation wherever it and its swarm land. A swarm can devour in one day what 40,000 people eat in one year. In a 1958 visitation Ethiopia lost 167,000 metric tons of grain, enough to feed more than a million people for a year. (Most of these facts are taken from *World Vision*, Dec. 1986–Jan. 1987.)

Such an infestation meant that a large question mark was placed against the survival of the Judean community. What could they do? Religion played an important role in ancient society, and Judah was no exception. Prophets were accepted figures in Judean religion. So it was Joel's function to interpret the locust plague in religious terms and guide the community to take suitable religious measures to cope with the problem. Joel seems to have been an official temple prophet. The crucial part played by such prophets at times of national crisis is illustrated by the narrative in 2 Ch. 20:1–20. There the prophet has authority to answer a national prayer of lament in the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel, and to promise deliverance from the crisis. That same power is claimed by Joel. The Psalms too provide evidence of these prophets' ministry of warning the people to mend their ways (Pss. 81:8–16; 95:7–11). This role is evident in the first half of the book of Joel.

# Amos

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

Things to notice in the book for observation:

- Note the many metaphors used from shepherding and farming.
- Make a list of how God is portrayed as Sovereign.
- What can you compile about the Day of the Lord? How is this concept here the same or different than in the other Minor Prophets?
- Note repeated phrases and sayings.

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

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Select a key verse or two that help summarize the message of the book and its importance to life.

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What central thought is the writer trying to communicate? Write a short descriptive, catchy, mental picture producing title. Why: the shorter, the more likely you'll remember it. Try to limit to 3-7ish words.

Come to a  
**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## **INTRODUCTION TO AMOS**

### **1. Background**

In many ways the eighth century B.C. was unique in the history of Judah and Israel. It witnessed the toppling of the northern kingdom from the glory of economic prosperity and international influence to virtual subjugation by a foreign power. It also witnessed the near collapse of Judah, averted only by the steady hand of King Hezekiah, who could do no more than slow Judah's progress toward certain ruin.

At the same time, however, the eighth century witnessed the rise of one of the most potent moral forces the world has ever known--the writing prophets. These men shared an overwhelming conviction that God had called them. They denounced the sins of their contemporaries and also looked far into the future as they spoke of deliverance for both Jew and Gentile.

The dawn of the eighth century brought new hope to Israel and Judah. Israel's subjugation to Damascus ended abruptly when the Assyrians under Adad-nirari III crushed Damascus in 802 B.C. The internal difficulties that had plagued Judah also ended with Uzziah's accession to the throne (792-740 B.C.). He built up a powerful army and increased Judah's mercantile activities. In the northern kingdom, Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.) came to the throne at roughly the same time as Uzziah. This king of Israel restored much of the territory that had fallen to Damascus (2Ki 14:28).

The conquest of Damascus and the attendant quiescence of Assyria, coupled with the brilliant leadership of Uzziah and Jeroboam, brought Judah and Israel to heights of prominence second only to Solomon's golden age. The kingdoms prospered and expanded their borders. But as their economic well-being and national strength continued to foster their security, an internal decay was at work. It was primarily moral because it involved a basic violation of the covenant established by God at Sinai.

The covenantal stipulations required loyalty to God and love toward one's fellow human beings. Yet the idolatrous worship of their pagan neighbors had infiltrated the two kingdoms, producing a strange syncretistic worship. While pagan high places dotted the countryside and people disobeyed God by worshipping idols that stood within the cities, they continued to trust in such concepts as the "day of the LORD" (5:18) and aspects of Levitical worship (4:4-5). Furthermore, they violated the social legislation of the covenant. Amos was particularly vehement in denouncing lack of social concern.

The erosion of Israel's social structure showed itself primarily in a cleavage between the rich and the poor. The improved economic situation in Israel led to an increase of the wealthy, who not only neglected the poor, but used them to increase their own wealth. God's will, as it applied to the nation of Israel, was ignored, and this spurred the eighth-century prophets to action. Their protest largely contributed to the establishment of a believing remnant. The prophets preserved faith by assuring the people that God had not forsaken his promise.

### **2. Authorship and Date**

Almost all agree that the prophecy of Amos is an authentic production of the man whose name it bears. The consonance of his message with the eighth-century milieu and his forthright style make it difficult to think otherwise. Little is known of him apart from the sketchy references in the superscription and the body of the prophecy. Amos lived and worked in Tekoa (1:1), a town ten miles south of Jerusalem. He was a shepherd and also tended sycamore trees (7:14). God then called him to be a prophet. His character, molded in the harsh terrain of the wilderness of Tekoa, enabled him to stand before the priest and the people, proclaiming the word God had given him.

We may best place the prophetic activity of Amos in the latter half of the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.; cf. 7:10). It would certainly have taken some time for the affluence during Jeroboam's reign to lead to the social decay that was so widespread when Amos carried out his mission to the northern kingdom. But it is difficult to find a more exact time in which Amos's mission would fit. Jotham, Uzziah's son, acceded to the regency of Judah when Uzziah was stricken with leprosy (c. 750 B.C.). That 1:1 mentions only Uzziah

and not Jotham may point to a time before Jotham's accession. The phrase "two years before the earthquake" (1:1) limits the date of the prophecy to a narrow period. This earthquake may have occurred around 760 B.C., according to excavations at Hazor. Thus it seems best to place the prophetic ministry of Amos shortly before 760 B.C.

From the *New International Version Bible Commentary*

# Obadiah

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

Specific things to make sure you look for:

- Remember Jacob and Esau here are brothers. Esau is the father of the Edomites. For a refresher read the following passages: Gn 27:1-28:9; Rom 9:10-13; Num 20:14-21; Gn 36
- This is a small book so dig as deep as possible into the themes. Identify as many as you can and look for any and every cross-reference to study.

Explore the  
**Culture**

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How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## **INTRODUCTION TO OBADIAH**

### **Places and people**

Geography and history play important roles in this prophecy, with sharp hostilities evident between Israel and its neighbour to the south-east, Edom. This ill-feeling had deep roots. Esau, Isaac's eldest son and the grandson of Abraham, saw himself as cheated by his younger brother Jacob, losing the privileges which were his due as eldest son ( Gn. 25:27–34 ; 27:1–29 , see v 41 ), though according to the writer of Hebrews, Esau himself was in the wrong ( Heb. 12:16 ). While not exonerating Jacob, the episode shows that a sinful person can still receive God's blessing (Heb. 11:9 , 21 ). During their lives, both brothers received other names; Esau was also known as 'Edom' ( Gn. 36:1 , 9 ) and Jacob as 'Israel' ( Gn. 32:22–32 ). These names were adopted by the nations of which the two men were the ancestors. The animosity beginning with these two brothers continued between the two nations as well.

After the exodus from Egypt, the Edomites would not let the Israelites pass through their territory in Transjordan ( Nu. 20:14–21 ; Jdg. 11:17–18 ). Their own conquest was prophesied by Balaam ( Nu. 24:18 ). King Saul fought against Edom ( 1 Sa. 14:47 ), and David conquered it ( 2 Sa. 8:13–14 ; 1 Ki. 11:15–16 ). Solomon had the run of Edom ( 1 Ki. 9:26–28 ), though not with Edom's approval ( 11:14–22 ). During the reign of Jehoshaphat (ninth century BC ), Edom, in a military alliance, raided Judah ( 2 Ch. 20:1–2 ). They rebelled against Jehoram (Joram), freeing themselves from the Judean yoke for some forty years, until late that century ( 2 Ki. 8:20–22 ; 2 Ch. 21:8–10 ). (See map in Joshua .)

Early the next century, Amaziah of Judah recaptured Edom with much bloodshed ( 2 Ki. 14:7 ; 2 Ch. 25:11–12 ), moving into its territory as far as Sela, the capital. Tables were turned later that century when Edom raided Judah when Ahaz was king ( 2 Ch. 28:17 ), taking prisoners of war and permanently freeing itself from Judah's domination.

Edom became an Assyrian vassal, and later came under Babylonian domination, though it did periodically consider rebellion ( Je. 27 ). Biblical and extra-biblical sources are relatively quiet regarding Edom's activities at the time of Judah's destruction by the Babylonians in 587 BC , but 1 Esdras 4:45 places the blame for burning the temple upon Edom's shoulders. This is not confirmed elsewhere ( *cf.* La. 4:21–22 ).

In the sixth century BC , Edom itself was waning, as is revealed by archaeological sources. Towns were abandoned and populations shifted ( *cf.* 1 Macc. 5:65 ). Arabs gained control of this geographical area between the sixth and fourth centuries BC ( *cf.* Ne. 2:19 ; 4:7 ; 6:1 ). The Nabateans, in particular, displaced the Edomites, forcing some of them into southern Judah, which became known by the Hellenized name Idumea ( 1 Macc. 4:29 ), based on the Hebrew 'Edom'.

This prolonged antagonism between Judah and Edom is in evidence in Obadiah, serving as the prophecy's framework. Geography also plays a role in the prophecy. Edom's location east of the Jordan was among the rocky crags towering above the Dead Sea. The famous rock city of Petra, built by the Nabateans, is a model of the natural defences upon which Edom was able to rely. Their inaccessibility to attack led to arrogance and self-centred assurance in their own invulnerability, and this ultimately led to their downfall.

# Jonah

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

Specific things to look for as you go through Jonah:

- Look up 2 Kings 14:23-27 for info about Jonah and his ministry during Jereboam II, king of Israel. Take note of all the geographic references.
- List out how the book shows God's compassion for outsiders.
- Research how Jesus compared and contrasted his ministry with that of Jonah; Mt 12:38-45; Luke 11:24-32; Luke 24:46

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

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Recognize  
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Themes**

Make a list of the important themes of the book with their corresponding references.

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**Challenges**

Make a list of the questions you have about what you are encountering in the book. Attempt to find the answers to some of these through commentaries, study notes, and other Bible study helps.

Organize  
**Cross-  
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Research other places in the Bible that talk about some of the themes you have identified.

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**Choice  
Verse**

Select a key verse or two that help summarize the message of the book and its importance to life.

Derive a  
**Central  
Lessons**

What is God communicating through this prophet? List the major principles and lessons you learn from the book.

Create a  
**Caption**

What central thought is the writer trying to communicate? Write a short descriptive, catchy, mental picture producing title. Why: the shorter, the more likely you'll remember it. Try to limit to 3-7ish words.

Come to a  
**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## **INTRODUCTION TO JONAH**

### **Introduction**

The book of Jonah is a story about a prophet who bitterly resented the fact that God loves and cares for evil people. The book does not teach that God loves evil people because they are evil, but rather because they are human, of intrinsic worth to him in spite of their behaviour and their disregard for the true God. Much is made in the book of how Jonah attempted to resist the assignment that God gave him, which was to preach a warning to the people of Nineveh, a great city in ancient Assyria. Jonah knew that this warning might prompt the people of Nineveh to repent and be forgiven.

This is precisely the outcome that he opposed, since the ancient superpower Assyria was a cruel enemy of the Israelites, among many other nations, and Jonah, a nationalistic Israelite, wanted the Assyrians to be harmed, not helped. Nevertheless, the Lord forced Jonah to carry out his prophetic assignment, and in the process taught Jonah—and the readers of the book—that he is a God who has concern for peoples and nations beyond his own special chosen people.

The book does not suggest universalism, that all peoples or nations are chosen, but does teach that non-believing peoples may still benefit in some ways from God's compassion. In this regard the book teaches the biblical doctrine of common grace ( *i.e.* that some of God's blessings in this life are given to all people in general, not just believers). The book also represents one of several OT foreshadowings of the new covenant enlargement of the kingdom of God to include believers from the Gentiles as well as from the Israelites. And most especially, it is an early version of Jesus' radical teaching that his followers must love their enemies.

There is no hint in the book that Jonah thought of himself as trying to introduce the people of Nineveh to the one true God that they, in their mistaken polytheism and pagan worship, had nevertheless been dealing with all along (as Paul does for the Athenians in Acts 17 ). Nor does the book give any indication that the Ninevites thought of themselves as converting to faith in Yahweh in any way whatever by their repentance described in ch. 3 . Thus the book does not attribute to the Ninevites what is commonly called 'special grace', the benefits of actually knowing and obeying the one true God revealed in the Bible.

### **The person of Jonah and the book's authorship**

Outside the book of Jonah itself, Jonah is mentioned at only one place in the OT ( 2Ki. 14:25 ) where he is identified as a northern Israelite prophet who rightly predicted during the days of King Jeroboam II that Israel would recapture territory from Syria that was traditionally part of the promised land. Both Jonah and Jesus were prophets from Galilee. Jonah was from Gath-Hepher ( 1:1 ), a city in the district of Zebulun, just three miles north east of Nazareth. It is not surprising therefore, that Jesus, who grew up in Nazareth, should take the story of this well-known local prophet to symbolize his own resurrection, and to use Jonah's warning to the people of Nineveh to repent as a symbol of his own call for repentance ( Mt. 12:38–41 ; Lk. 11:29–32 ).

Jonah's name means 'dove' in Hebrew, but there is no symbolism to his name. Many Israelites bore similar animal names ( Peter's father Jonah, Mt. 16:17 ). His father's name was Amittai ( 1:1 ) but otherwise nothing can be known of his family or personal background. It is usual for prophetic books to give few family details about their authors or subjects. Like virtually all ancient prophets, Jonah was a poet, so that his composition or recitation of a poem, even from inside a great fish or whale (ch. 2 ) is hardly surprising. He appears in the book as an ardent nationalist, pro-Israelite and anti-foreign.

Presumably, whatever advanced Israel and contributed to the decline or defeat of its enemies, he would have favoured. His strong nationalism led him to sin by resenting God's compassion towards an enemy people, and resisting God's command. His theology was also imperfect in regard to God's sovereignty. His attempted flight indicates that Jonah may have thought, as many ancient peoples did, that a god or goddess had greatest power in those regions where he or she was known and worshipped, and that geographical distance from Yahweh's land meant at least some degree of freedom from Yahweh's control. Alternatively, he may have believed that he could best resist the call of God by heading in the opposite direction to Nineveh (which was to the east), sailing as far west as possible (out to sea on the Mediterranean) hoping that God would then choose some other prophet to preach to Nineveh and leave him alone. Getting away from Israel meant getting away from the Lord's assignment in this view. Jonah quickly learned better, of course, but the book honestly portrays him as one whom God spared and used in spite of his follies and failures, as is the case with all human beings whom God uses. Jonah, in other words, is hardly a model for us to follow. Some of his behaviour and some of his beliefs were absolutely reprehensible, but he was a genuine, inspired Israelite prophet.

The author of the book is not identified. All the information in the book could have come to the author's attention from as few as two human sources: Jonah himself, who knew the details of most of the story, and the sailors mentioned in ch. 1, who knew that they had brought sacrifices to the Lord after their sudden deliverance at sea from the storm ( 1:16 ). The fact that the book is so often critical of Jonah does not mean that he could not have been its author. Comparably, the NT gospels are frequently critical of the disciples, among whom are their authors. The book shows no evidence of composite authorship or of insertions or deletions from the original text (See the chart ' The prophet ' in *The Song of Songs* .)

### **Date and setting**

Virtually no evidence exists to tell us when the book itself was composed. We cannot be sure of the precise date, since its language does not betray any features known to be either especially late or early in the development of Hebrew. Attempts to discern supposed 'Aramaisms' (Hebrew word forms derived from Aramaic after about 600 BC ) or dependence of statements in Jonah on other prophets, such as Jeremiah, have been unsuccessful. The psalm in ch. 2 does employ some early terminology ( e.g. Hebrew *nephesh* in the sense of 'throat'; v 5 is [lit] 'water enveloped me to my throat') but such is characteristic of Hebrew poetry so often as to be insignificant. Assyria was widely hated after 745 BC , when Tiglath-pileser III revived and institutionalized its imperialism and began threatening Syria and Palestine, so that one of the book's central emphases (that God loves even the Assyrians) would certainly have been greatly needed in Israel any time after that date. The book could have been composed in advance of 745 in anticipation of that need, or thereafter in response to it. The message of the book is virtually timeless at any rate, and the language simple and direct—standard, classical Hebrew. *The seventh century BC setting for the book of Jonah*

As to the events described, these are easier to pin down. 2 Ki. 14:25 links Jonah to the period of the long reign of Jeroboam II in Israel (793–753 BC ). 1:1 refers to Nineveh's 'trouble' (or hardship, calamity, misery; NIV 'wickedness' is a less likely translation, especially since throughout the book God's attitude towards Nineveh is not denunciatory but merciful, in sharp contrast to Jonah's). This suggests a date in the decades prior to Tiglath-pileser III, during which Assyria experienced a period of political turmoil and economic decline ( i.e. 'trouble') under a succession of weak kings. Any date between about 800 and about 750 would fit. But it may be possible to be even more precise. Assyria's weakest point during that half-century came during the reign of Ashurdan III (772–756) under whose leadership Assyria suffered both major military losses and economic reversals. Anti-government riots forced Ashurdan to flee his royal residence at least once, and a total solar eclipse on June 15, 763 BC (considered an omen of severe divine displeasure by the highly superstitious Assyrians) may well have provided the occasion for the sort of popular repentance rituals described in 3:5–9 . There was probably good reason for a weak king to join and support officially the popular outpouring of repentance at Jonah's preaching on the part of a war-weary, famine-stricken population frightened by a solar eclipse. A date for Jonah's mission in the late 760s BC cannot be too far afield.

From the *New Bible Commentary*

# Micah

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

*Things to take notice of:*

- Watch what God is going to do and to whom.
- Always be aware of to whom Micah is referring and mark each in a special way to remember them; Samaria, Jerusalem, and Judah.
- Take note of all the references to time: such as when, then etc.

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

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Recognize  
**Crucial  
Themes**

Make a list of the important themes of the book with their corresponding references.

Face your  
**Challenges**

Make a list of the questions you have about what you are encountering in the book. Attempt to find the answers to some of these through commentaries, study notes, and other Bible study helps.

Organize  
**Cross-  
References**

Research other places in the Bible that talk about some of the themes you have identified.

Choose a  
**Choice  
Verse**

Select a key verse or two that help summarize the message of the book and its importance to life.

Derive a  
**Central  
Lessons**

What is God communicating through this prophet? List the major principles and lessons you learn from the book.

Create a  
**Caption**

What central thought is the writer trying to communicate? Write a short descriptive, catchy, mental picture producing title. Why: the shorter, the more likely you'll remember it. Try to limit to 3-7ish words.

Come to a  
**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## Scripture Memory Verse: Micah 6:8

### INTRODUCTION TO MICAH

#### The man Micah

Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Micah does not describe his initial call to ministry ( . Is. 6 ; Je. 1 ; Ezk. 2 ). The book's heading ( 1:1 ), however, claims that 'the word of the LORD ' came to him in a 'vision' ( *i.e.* supernatural sight and/or supernatural hearing), making him the Lord's messenger ( *cf.* Is. 21:10 ). In his book the invisible God becomes audible.

Micah came from Moresheth Gath ( 1:1 , 14 ), modern *Tell el-Judeidah* , a rather imposing mound about 400 m (1,240 ft) above sea level in the foothills of south-western Judah. It overlooked the undulating coastal plain to the west, dotted with fortified cities. About 35 km (22 miles) south-west of Jerusalem it was connected with a network of 'hedgehog' fortifications along the eastern edge of the foothills. These fortifications protected Jerusalem (on the spine of Judah's central ridge) from attacks mounted by invaders from the coastal highway connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia.

His name means 'who is like Yah[weh]'. By this name his parents celebrated the incomparability of Israel's God. Micah added to God's lustre by associating this name with his incomparable forgiveness and fidelity ( 7:18–20 ), the theme of Micah's book.

#### Historical background

Many commentators attribute most of chs. 1–3 to Micah and the rest to anonymous successors spanning the exilic and post-exilic periods. The inspired heading ( 1:1 ), however, identifies Micah as the author of all the book's prophecies. The editorial comment at 3:1 suggests that Micah himself edited the book. No linguistic or historical data refutes the Bible's own assertion.

Micah prophesied from the time of Jotham (740–732 BC ) to that of Hezekiah (715–686), a period when the Neo-Assyrian empire was rising to power (see the chart ' The prophets ' in Song of Songs ). The determined Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727) launched Assyria on an ambitious policy of imperial expansion. He assaulted Israel's coastal plain in 734 and annexed northern Israel in 733 ( 2 Ki. 16 ; 2 Ch. 28 ; Is. 7–8 ). Shalmaneser V (726–722) attacked Samaria from 725 to 722, and it fell to Sargon II (721–705; 1:2–7; *cf.* 2 Ki. 17 ). Periodic rebellions by the nations in Syria-Palestine against the tributes imperial Assyria exacted from them kept them in a constant dread of Assyria's reprisals. The invincible and cruel Assyrians invaded the area in 721–720 and from 714 to 701. The last proved most devastating to Judah. Sennacherib (704–681) captured all of Judah's foothill fortifications. Only Jerusalem miraculously survived ( 1:8–16 ; 2:12–13 ; 2 Ki. 18–20 ; 2 Ch. 32 ; Is. 36–39 ) because Hezekiah repented in response to Micah's preaching ( Je. 26:18 ).

Micah's language, though drawn from this historical background, is poetic and abstract so that God's people under similar circumstances can identify themselves with his messages.

From the *New Bible Commentary*

# Nahum

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

Take notice of these things in the book:

- Observe his two visions and summarize the message of each: 2:3-10; 3:2-3
- Make a list of all the things you learn about Nineveh.
- Watch for repeated pronouns such as “you” and “your”

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

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Make a list of the important themes of the book with their corresponding references.

Face your  
**Challenges**

Make a list of the questions you have about what you are encountering in the book. Attempt to find the answers to some of these through commentaries, study notes, and other Bible study helps.

Organize  
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Research other places in the Bible that talk about some of the themes you have identified.

Choose a  
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Select a key verse or two that help summarize the message of the book and its importance to life.

Derive a  
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What is God communicating through this prophet? List the major principles and lessons you learn from the book.

Create a  
**Caption**

What central thought is the writer trying to communicate? Write a short descriptive, catchy, mental picture producing title. Why: the shorter, the more likely you'll remember it. Try to limit to 3-7ish words.

Come to a  
**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## Scripture Memory Verse: Nahum 1:7

### INTRODUCTION TO NAHUM

#### Nahum the prophet

All we know about Nahum comes from the book itself. He came from Elkosh, but we do not know where this was. At least four different locations have been suggested, from Judah to Assyria! Most commentators assume that he delivered his prophecies in Jerusalem (or at least Judah), but he could perhaps have been one of the people previously deported from Israel to Assyria or scattered among the nations ( Je. 23:1–3 ; Ezk. 11:16 ; Joel 3:2 ).

Nahum means ‘consolation, comfort’. The root has a meaning ‘be relieved by taking vengeance’ ( Is. 1:24 ; 57:6 ), and this would be especially fitting for Nahum. Comfort and relief is brought to God’s people when he takes vengeance on their enemies!

Nahum probably lived shortly before the destruction of the Assyrian Empire which was assured by the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC and which is the event upon which he focuses. He probably prophesied after the sack of Thebes on the Nile in 663 as this seems to be referred to in 3:8 . (See the chart ‘ The prophets ’ in Song of Songs .)

#### The historical situation

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, the most cruel and ruthless nation of the ancient world. The Assyrians terrified their intended victims because not only did they destroy and burn the cities they conquered, they also subjected the inhabitants to various kinds of suffering and humiliation.

One king, Ashurbanipal, boasted in the following terms about some plotters that he had foiled: ‘As for those common men who had spoken derogatory things against my god Asher and had plotted against me, the prince who reveres him, I tore out their tongues and abased them. As a posthumous offering I smashed the rest of the people alive by the very figures of the protective deities between which they had smashed Sennacherib my grandfather. Their cut up flesh I fed to the dogs, swine, jackals, birds, vultures, to the birds of the sky, and to the fishes of the deep pools’.

The Assyrians were the ones who had destroyed Samaria and with it the northern kingdom. In 2 Ki. 17:5 it says, ‘The king of Assyria ... laid siege to it [Samaria] for three years’. We can imagine the people getting hungrier, more desperate and more hopeless, as they looked out on the Assyrian army, an invincible multitude. They also knew that these soldiers were completely ruthless. They would flay people alive—strip the skin off them and drag them off with hooks in their flesh. And if the people didn’t already know what their enemies were capable of, the Assyrians would have reminded them every day (the speech of the Assyrian field commander to Hezekiah in Is. 26:4–10 ). In the British Museum there are stone carvings taken from Nineveh which show how the Assyrians dealt with conquered cities. One shows a great heap of heads. The picture of the siege of Lachish shows three men impaled on wooden stakes outside the city, a grisly visual aid to those who were still shut up inside. Captives were often mutilated by cutting off hands, feet, noses, ears or tongues. A relief from Khorsabad shows Assyrian chariots driving over mutilated bodies. Infants were often dashed in pieces ( Na. 3:10; Ps. 137:9 ). Women might be taken as spoil and pregnant women were usually disembowelled.

Having conquered a city, the Assyrians would take steps to see that they did not have any more trouble there in future. So, when Samaria fell in 721 BC 27,000 were exiled and a comparable number of deportees from other places was brought in. This destroyed the unity and even identity of the nation and made it very difficult to organize resistance in future.

We can see why people were (and still are) worried about the idea that God would allow Assyrians to carry out judgment on his behalf. Nevertheless, the Bible says in several places that the Assyrians were his instruments of judgment.

Nahum comes long after the fall of Samaria. The city of Nineveh fell in 612 BC , and Nahum is to be placed shortly before this. Ninety years is a long time to wait for the judgment of an evil nation. Incidentally, Jonah carried out his ministry to Nineveh quite some time before 721. He is mentioned in 2 Ki. 14:25 (which refers to the reign of Jeroboam II, 782–753) as having prophesied previously.

Though God's judgment may be delayed, it is never forgotten; he cares passionately about right and wrong. The book of Nahum makes that abundantly clear.

*From the New Bible Commentary*

# Habakkuk

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

*Things to take notice of:*

- So you don't get confused, note when God is speaking and when Habakkuk is speaking.
- Outline it according to who is talking when and summarize the message of each.
- Note all the references to the word "Lord" and write down what you learn.

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

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What central thought is the writer trying to communicate? Write a short descriptive, catchy, mental picture producing title. Why: the shorter, the more likely you'll remember it. Try to limit to 3-7ish words.

Come to a  
**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## **INTRODUCTION TO HABAkkUK**

### **Who was Habakkuk?**

Habakkuk is a shadowy figure, with neither parentage nor time indicated in the prophecy. Only his role as prophet, an intermediary between Yahweh and Israel, is given. His name is apparently Hebrew but reflects the influence of the Mesopotamians, who ruled over Israel from the ninth to the sixth century BC. In their Akkadian language his name means a plant or fruit tree.

In later Jewish tradition of the apocryphal 'Daniel, Bel and the Snake', Habakkuk brings Daniel food in the lions' den. The musical notation and the form of the psalm in Hab. 3 have suggested he was a Levite, which was a tribe associated with music (Ezr. 3:10; Ne. 12:27). This is supported by one manuscript which identifies his father as Jesus, a Levite. Others suggest he was an official court or temple prophet. All suggestions are speculative, with no compelling evidence for any of them.

While Habakkuk's identity is in doubt, his character is clear. A sincere, devoted follower of Yahweh, he not only submitted himself to his Lord's will, but also confronted that same Lord when he felt God was ignoring his own promises. Like Job, Habakkuk does not hesitate to question God, in a form of literature called a 'theodicy'. He questions God for different reasons, however. Where Job maintains his innocence, asking why, in the light of it, he is punished, Habakkuk has the opposite question—since the wicked are clearly not innocent, why are they *not* punished, even though they are unjustly treating the righteous? Not praying for relief from suffering (Pss. 10; 12 *etc.*), he asks why judgment does not fall.

Habakkuk's questioning does not lessen his faith in God, with whom he enjoys a personal bond (1:12). He is aware of the awesome power of the King and Creator of the universe (3:16), but he also knows this one's care for him (3:17–18). Habakkuk the prophet teaches us that questioning God is acceptable; it is refusing to trust God that causes our downfall.

### **Background and Date**

Habakkuk's prophecy is set against a background of the decline and fall of the Judean kingdom (c. 626–586 B.C.). Although nothing is known of the prophet himself apart from the book bearing his name--the book is not dated in the usual manner (cf. Am 1:1; Zep 1:1; et al.)--the general background of Habakkuk is clear from the internal data. Verses 5–11 represent a period before 605, the year the Babylonians (the Chaldeans, 1:6; see NIV note) rose to power, and probably prior to the 612 destruction of Nineveh. By contrast it is sometimes argued that 1:12–17 and 2:6–20 must reflect a period after 612 B.C., when the power and rapacity of the Babylonians had become common knowledge to the prophet. The best solution seems to be to take the sections of the dialogue as representative of Habakkuk's spiritual struggles over a long period of time, possibly beginning as early as 626 and continuing as late as 590 or after.

During this period Judah enjoyed its last bit of prosperity under Josiah (d. 609 B.C.); Assyria's wound was revealed as fatal with the ultimate fall of Nineveh in 612; and the short-lived Babylonian Empire established its dominance over Palestine with Jerusalem a casualty and its people taken into exile in 586 B.C. Conditions during the life of the prophet would have progressed from excellent--with considerable material prosperity and even promise of spiritual revival--to the height of desperation as the net was drawn closer and closer around the hapless capital. There is no direct evidence from the book that Habakkuk lived past the destruction of Jerusalem (but cf. 3:16–19).

## Occasion and Purpose

Habakkuk was unique among the prophets. He did not speak for God to the people but to God about his people. The similarity with the other prophets is in the setting. Violence and covenant violations abounded. The Lord should have arisen to correct the situation, but such had not been forthcoming, and the prayers of the righteous seemed in vain.

The Assyrians would naturally have been a threat to Judah; and apart from the problem of the future of God's covenant promises, the prophet would have expected Assyria to be "the rod of God's anger." The new element externally is the introduction of Babylonian power, with such awful potential consequences and with no clear vision of when and how the Lord would continue his commitments to the chosen line. But initially Habakkuk was more concerned with internal injustices and the Lord's apparent complacency toward the evil generation. It was God's reply (1:5-11) that catapulted the prophecy onto the international and eschatological level.

Chapters 2-3 carry us well beyond the last days of Judah to the future. Habakkuk himself was never told when or exactly how it would end, but 2:14, 20 assured him of the ultimate triumph of the Lord; and the psalm in ch. 3 shows that Habakkuk learned to live in the light of this fact.

*From the New International Bible Commentary  
AND The New Bible Commentary*

# Zephaniah

Spend a few hours studying this prophet so that you can be prepared for your group. Read through the book several times to become familiar with it. Then go through the 10 C's of studying the Minor Prophets below, taking notice to fill in the spaces with your thoughts. Have fun digging into the Scriptures for yourself!

Specific things to look for in this book

- Make a list of what the Day of the Lord will be like.
- Look for the Day of the Lord and the Day of Christ or similar phrases in Paul's writings.
- Note carefully all the references to people and places such as Moab etc.

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

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Write out how He is described. How is Christ foreshadowed?

Recognize  
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Themes**

Make a list of the important themes of the book with their corresponding references.

Face your  
**Challenges**

Make a list of the questions you have about what you are encountering in the book. Attempt to find the answers to some of these through commentaries, study notes, and other Bible study helps.

Organize  
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Research other places in the Bible that talk about some of the themes you have identified.

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Select a key verse or two that help summarize the message of the book and its importance to life.

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What central thought is the writer trying to communicate? Write a short descriptive, catchy, mental picture producing title. Why: the shorter, the more likely you'll remember it. Try to limit to 3-7ish words.

Come to a  
**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## **INTRODUCTION TO ZEPHANIAH**

### **The author and his times**

Zephaniah, the prophecy's author, was of godly stock, as is shown by his name, which means 'Yahweh has hidden or protected'. While not unique in the OT ( Je. 21:1 ; Zc. 6:10 ), it shows his parents' assurance of the providence of Israel's God even at their son's birth. He was apparently descended from the fourteenth king of Judah, Hezekiah (716–687 BC ), as described in his genealogy ( 1:1 ), the longest found in any prophetic book. The same verse dates the prophecies during the reign of Josiah, the sixteenth king of Judah (640–609 BC ), himself a descendant of Hezekiah. (See the chart ' The prophets ' in Song of Songs .)

The period between the godly kings Hezekiah and Josiah was marked by religious decay. True worship was perverted by the evil Manasseh ( 2 Ki. 21:1–18 ) and his son Amon ( 2 Ki. 21:19–26 ), Josiah's grandfather and father respectively. Perhaps God's preservation of a righteous family and their son during this turbulent period led to his parents giving Zephaniah his name.

When during Josiah's reign Zephaniah's prophecies were spoken is debated. Some suggest a date before Josiah restored Yahwism, the correct response of Israel to Yahweh, the God to whom she had sworn allegiance at Mount Sinai ( Ex. 19–24 ). The entire life of the people, political, social and religious, was to be directed by God's will as revealed at Sinai in the law as recorded in the Pentateuch, but they repeatedly chose to ignore it, living by their own devices. It was only under Josiah that a vision for Yahwism was recaptured ( 2 Ki. 22:1–23:30 ; 2 Ch. 34:1–35:27 ). A date prior to Josiah is suggested, since pagan practices still existed ( 1:4–9 ). This dates the book before 621 BC , the beginning of his reforms. The argument is not convincing, however, since national religious reform instituted by a king was not universally followed by the people, or even future rulers.

While officially banned by Josiah, pagan practices undoubtedly continued among the people, thus not ruling out a date any time during his reign. Zephaniah's contemporary, Jeremiah, condemned some of the same practices ( 1:4–5 ; cf. Je. 2:8 ; 8:2 ; 19:5 , 13 ; 32:35 ), and the need that arose at about the same period for other prophets, Nahum and Habakkuk, also suggests that Josiah's reforms were not complete and permanent.

The striking parallels between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy (see on 1:5 , 13 , 18 ; 3:5 ) support a date after the beginning of Josiah's reform which was prompted by the discovery of the 'Book of the Law' in the temple ( 2 Ki. 22:8 ). It is generally accepted that the document which was discovered was a form of Deuteronomy, which served as the basis for re-establishing Yahwism. The apparent references by Zephaniah to Deuteronomy leads one to suggest that he prophesied after the book's rediscovery.

Several nations are mentioned in chs. 2–3 , and the reference to Assyria ( 2:13–15 ) in particular helps determine the book's date. Zephaniah foretold the destruction of Assyria's capital, Nineveh ( 2:13 ). Assyria, since its defeat and deportation of Israel in 722 BC ( 2 Ki. 17:4–41 ; 18:9–12 ), was the major threat looming over Judah. Though appearing invincible to Judah, under God's hand using the might of the neighbouring Babylonians, Assyria's days were numbered. By the end of the sixth century it was rapidly fading. In 612 BC Nineveh fell to Babylon and the whole empire was taken by 605, so Zephaniah's prophecy must precede 612 BC .

Other nations mentioned include the Philistines ( 2:4–7 ), Moab and Ammon ( 2:8–11 ) and Cush ( 2:12 ). The Philistines had been antagonists of Israel since their return from Egypt after the exodus, and were eventually subdued, though not eradicated, by David. Their five city-state league, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron and Gath, was on the Mediterranean, west of the Dead Sea. Gath had apparently declined by

the time of Zephaniah's prophecy, since it is not included in his judgment oracle, which was not unique in its warnings concerning these people ( *cf.* Is. 14:28–32 ; Je. 47 ; Am. 1:6–8 ; Zc. 9:5–7 ).

The two Transjordanian nations, Ammon and Moab, were related through their ancestors, the sons of Lot by his daughters ( Gn. 19:36–38 ), and so (through Lot's kinship with Abraham; Gn. 12:5 ) were also related to Israel. This kinship was not close, however, since there was frequent opposition between Israel and her 'cousins' across the Jordan ( *cf.* Jdg. 3:12–30 ; 1 Sa. 11:1–11 ; 2 Ki. 3:4–27 ).

Cush, or Ethiopia, had been defeated by the Babylonians in 663 BC when they invaded Egypt, over which Cush had seized control during the twenty-fifth dynasty (716–663 BC ). 2:12 could be a memory of this destruction, or, more likely, Cush is being used as an alternative designation for all of Egypt (see Is. 20:4 and Ezk. 30:4–9 ). God's judgment would thus not only fall on Judah's smaller neighbours, but also on the major world powers, Egypt and Assyria, which were further away.

*From the New Bible Commentary*

# Haggai

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Specific things to take notice of:

- List what the temple is like and the significance.
- Summarize the content of each oracle.

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

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What is God communicating through this prophet? List the major principles and lessons you learn from the book.

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What central thought is the writer trying to communicate? Write a short descriptive, catchy, mental picture producing title. Why: the shorter, the more likely you'll remember it. Try to limit to 3-7ish words.

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**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## **INTRODUCTION TO HAGGAI**

### **1. Background**

Everything in this brief prophecy hangs on this one imperative--build God's house (1:8)! The setting reflects much of the history of Israel--the days of the tabernacle, the beginning of the monarchy under Samuel, David's desire to build a dwelling for God, Solomon's building the temple, its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, and the returning exiles who began to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem in 538 B.C. More immediately the setting of 1:8 begins with the rise of Cyrus.

In 559 B.C., Cyrus was only the king of An-shan, a district in Elam. He joined with Nabonidus, a weak successor of Nebuchadnezzar, to conquer Ecbatana, the capital of Media, in 550. Cyrus broke with Nabonidus and turned against him to capture Babylon in 539. Nabonidus had lost support because of his disinterest in Marduk and other traditional Babylonian deities. He failed also in his effort to secure Egyptian help against Cyrus. On the other hand, Cyrus, respectful of all deities, was probably welcomed to Babylon by the priests of the religion so unpopular with Nabonidus.

Nabonidus, the fourth king after the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 B.C., himself died in 539, after a seven-year reign. Belshazzar, his son, had evidently been coregent; but in fulfillment of Da 5:25-28, he too died. Cyrus, who had been king of Media and Persia since 549, now brought Babylon under his control. In the following year he made his famous edict (see Ezr 1:2-4; 6:3b-5), allowing all peoples to return to their native lands. The peaceful surrender of Babylon is recorded in both the so-called Nabonidus Chronicle and the Cyrus Cylinder. Ezr 5:13-14 describes the effect of Cyrus's decree on God's people.

According to Ezr 5:16, the foundations of the temple were laid by Sheshbazzar and his company, and Ezr 3:2 tells how the leaders built the altar and began sacrificing burnt offerings. Obviously, however, the work was not completed eighteen years later. Otherwise Haggai would not have preached his sermons.

Why did the enthusiasm of God's people wane? For one thing, during the seventy years in Babylon, most of the exiles had come to consider it their home (cf. Jer 29:5-7). Further, some may have been doing so well financially that they were reluctant to return to Jerusalem and face the dangers involved in rebuilding the temple. Those who did return in 538 B.C. were probably the poorer ones who had nothing to lose in such a venture.

The reconstruction project may have faltered also because of the unstable political situation that followed the death of Cyrus in 529 B.C. Cambyses came to the throne and reigned for seven years. His major accomplishment was bringing Egypt under Persian control. The passage of his armies through the land of Israel may have worked a hardship on the native population. Demands for food, water, clothing, and shelter may have greatly diminished the meager resources of a people engaged in a building project well beyond their means.

When Cambyses died in 522, there were several contestants for the throne; and one of them actually ruled for two months. He was the Pseudo-Smerdis, the real brother of Cambyses. In any event, Darius I, or Darius the Great, the son of a general named Hystaspes, became king and ruled until 486. He is the Darius of the book of Haggai. With him came the stability the Jews thought necessary for continuing the work on the temple. Even then it was the second year of his reign before Haggai appeared on the scene to stir them to action.

The biggest problem the returned exiles faced was the opposition from the Samaritans and others who lived in the land (cf. Ezr 4). At first the "enemies" offered to help build the temple, claiming that they had been sacrificing to God since the time of Esarhaddon, the Assyrian king whose policy of exchanging populations had brought them there. But Zerubbabel, Joshua ("Jeshua" in Ezra), and the other leaders declined the offer and insisted on doing the work themselves. This antagonized those who had offered to help, and they continued to hinder the reconstruction project. They even secured temporary restraining

orders and frustrated the plans of the faithful Jews throughout the reign of Cyrus and down to the reign of Darius (Ezr 4:5). At this point Haggai and Zechariah, who prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel (Ezr 5:1), came on the scene.

## **2. Authorship**

Haggai is unknown to us apart from his short book, the two isolated occurrences of his name in Ezra (5:1; 6:14), and an allusion in Zec 8:9. The word "Haggai" seems to be an adjective from the Hebrew word for "feast," and therefore the prophet's name may mean "festal." If the "i" ("y" in Hebrew) on the end suggests a shortened form of the name "Yahweh" (translated as "the LORD"), the prophet's name would mean "Feast of Yahweh."

If 2:3 indicates that Haggai saw Solomon's temple before it was destroyed, then he must have been at least seventy years old at the time of his prophecy. Since he was usually linked with Zechariah, and since his name comes first, Haggai was probably the older of the two. It is likely that he had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel eighteen years earlier (in 538).

The lists of returnees in the opening chapters of Ezra do not mention Haggai; and we know nothing of his ancestry. Nor is there any information about his occupation other than that he was a prophet. The brief record of his ministry shows him as a man of conviction. Unique among the prophets, he was listened to, and his words were obeyed. In a mere four years the temple was complete.

## **3. Date and Place of Origin**

Haggai dates his prophecies with precision. Four specific dates are mentioned (cf. 1:1, 15; 2:1, 10, 20), ranging from August 29 to December 18, 520 B.C. Thus the ministry of Haggai lasted less than four months. He obviously wrote in Jerusalem. His book refers to the house of God (the temple in Jerusalem). The command to go to the nearby mountains to fetch wood for the construction of the temple clearly implies this setting (1:8). Since neither Babylonia nor the adjoining part of Assyria has mountains, these references must be understood as the mountains of Judea.

*From the New International Version Bible Commentary*

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Things to take notice of as you read through the book:

- Make a list of all the prophecies concerning the Messiah.
- Also list all the things that Zechariah predicts about the future.
- Note all the references to the "Word of the Lord"
- Summarize the message of the visions.

Explore the  
**Culture**

List out the background of what was happening at the time of the book. Study who the book was written to, what historical events were happening, who the significant people were, etc. The background article attached will help you with this. Also see your initial packet on the Prophets.

Make a table of  
**Contents**

Summarize each chapter and write it below:

Present assurance of finished temple	1.		
	2.		
	3.		
	4.		
	5.		
	6.		
	7.		
	8.		
	9.		
	Future assurance of glorious temple	10.	
		11.	
		12.	
		13.	
		14.	

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## **INTRODUCTION TO ZECHARIAH**

### **Historical background**

In 538 BC King Cyrus conquered Babylon and published a decree allowing exiles from many countries, including Judah, to return home. The Jews had permission to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem (Ezr. 1:1–4) and came back full of joy and hope, under the leadership of Zerubbabel (who may also have been called Sheshbazzar; cf. Ezr. 3:8 ; 5:14–16 ). They managed to lay the foundations of the temple, but were hindered in their work by the neighbouring peoples throughout the reign of Cyrus (538–522 BC ; Ezr. 4:4–5 ).

Zechariah and Haggai urged the people to take heart and take up the rebuilding again; Tattenai, governor of the province of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates objected to this work and demanded to know their authority to carry it out ( Ezr. 5:3 ). The authorities searched the royal archives in Babylon and discovered Cyrus’s decree ( Ezr. 6:1–5 ), which not only allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem but specified that financial help should be given from the royal treasury ( v 4 ) and that the temple gold and silver should be returned ( v 5 ). So it was that Darius himself encouraged the Jews, complying with the earlier decree, paying for the rebuilding, providing animals for sacrifice ( vs 8–10 ), and discouraging others from hindering their work ( v 11 ).

Zechariah puts great stress on the completion of the temple under Zerubbabel’s direction ( 4:9–10 ; 6:12 ). It will be a sign that God has returned to dwell in the midst of his people ( 2:10 ; 8:8 ; cf. 1:17 ; 2:12 ). There was, therefore, great rejoicing when, in 516 BC , the temple was actually completed ( Ezr. 6:14–16 ). The people renewed their dedication to God and looked forward to a time of blessing. Unfortunately, their expectations were not satisfied. They assumed that life would be wonderful, but it turned out to be very hard. No golden age dawned, and many began to ask whether God was really with them after all.

Our knowledge of the history of the post-exilic period is patchy. Some of the few sources of knowledge that we have cannot be dated accurately. Nevertheless, we can be sure that right through the period when Judah was part of the Medo-Persian Empire they remained an outwardly insignificant and powerless people, facing opposition from their neighbours ( e.g. Ezr. 4:6–24 ). This continued when the Greek Empire was established through Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great.

Add to this uncertainty the fact that we cannot be sure of the date of chs. 9–14 , and it is clear that we cannot specify very precisely the historical background for these later chapters. We must be satisfied with rather general knowledge of the whole period, and remember that there may have been many variations in the situation, and many events of which we have no record.

*From the New Bible Commentary*

# Malachi

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As you go through the book, take notice of these things:

- List out what the priests and or the people say and how God answers.
- What types of covenants are mentioned? Study the idea of covenant in the rest of the Bible.
- Make a list of what you learn about God.
- Note the use of questions. How is this effective?

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**Conclusion**

How is God speaking to you? Write out how these truths apply to you personally and what specific action steps you will take.

## **INTRODUCTION TO MALACHI**

### **Author**

The Hebrew name Malachi means ‘my messenger’ or, if Malachi is a shortened form of ‘Malachiah’, perhaps ‘messenger of [the LORD]’. Based on the LXX some scholars have argued that Malachi in 1:1 ought to be understood as a title, ‘my messenger’, rather than as a proper name. It appears more likely, however, that it is a man’s name, as it is interpreted as such in other ancient sources. If this is so, the book of Malachi follows the pattern of each of the other fourteen writing prophets, where the author is introduced by name at the beginning, using language similar to that employed in 1:1 (especially Hg. 1:1). Accordingly, 3:1 offers an important word-play on the prophet’s name: ‘See, I will send *my messenger*, who will prepare the way before me’. The implication of this word-play is that Malachi’s own ministry was intended to foreshadow that of the coming messenger, who is identified in the NT as John the Baptist (see on 3:1 and 4:5–6). See the chart ‘The prophets’ in Song of Songs.

### **Date**

In contrast to most of the other prophetic books of the OT, Malachi offers no clear pointer to the date of its composition. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that Malachi was probably a contemporary of Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century BC. The implied existence of the temple in 1:10; 3:1, 8, requiring a date after its reconstruction in 515 BC, supports this. The most compelling evidence for dating Malachi, however, is the substantial parallel which exists between the sins reported by Malachi and those addressed by Ezra and Nehemiah. There are shared concerns with the corruption of the priesthood (1:6–2:9; Ne. 13:4–9, 29–30); interfaith marriage (2:10–12; Ezr. 9–10; Ne. 10:30; 13:1–3, 23–27); abuse of the disadvantaged (3:5; Ne. 5:1–13); and the failure to pay tithes (3:8–10; Ne. 10:32–39; 13:10–13).

### **Setting**

Malachi’s ministry took place nearly one hundred years after the end of the Babylonian captivity and the inspired decree of Cyrus in 538 BC, which allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild the temple (2 Ch. 36:23). This was nearly eighty years after the prophets Haggai and Zechariah had encouraged the rebuilding of that temple with glorious promises of God’s blessing, the engrafting of the nations, prosperity, expansion, peace and the return of God’s own glorious presence (cf. e.g. Hg. 2: Zc. 1:16–17; 2:8; 9). To Malachi’s disillusioned contemporaries, however, these misunderstood predictions must have seemed a cruel mockery. In contrast to the glowing promises, the harsh reality was one of economic privation, crop failure, prolonged drought and pestilence (3:10–11).

After the return from exile Judah remained an almost insignificant territory of about 20 x 25 miles (30 x 40 km) inhabited by a population of perhaps 150,000. Although they enjoyed the benefits of Persia’s enlightened policy of religious toleration and limited political self-determination, the people felt acutely their subjugation to a foreign power (Ne. 1:3; 9:36–37), and they suffered persistent opposition and harassment from their neighbours (Ezr. 4:23; Dn. 9:25). Judah was no longer an independent nation, and more importantly it was no longer ruled by an anointed king from David’s line.

Perhaps worst of all, in spite of the promises of the coming Messiah and God’s own glorious presence (e.g. Zc. 1:16–17; 2:4–5, 10–13; 8:3–17, 23; 9:9–13), Israel experienced only spiritual destitution. Unlike the historical records of earlier periods, Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah are frank in their description of post-exilic Judah as lacking miraculous evidences of God’s presence. In contrast to both Solomon’s temple and the prophetic promise of the restored temple (as in Ezk. 40–43), the actual post-exilic temple was physically and spiritually inferior. As 3:1 reveals, the holy of holies in this second temple had no

visible manifestation of the glory of God. Though God was certainly alive and well, as revealed, *e.g.* by his remarkable providences in the book of Esther, it was definitely a period of life ‘after the fireworks’ ( *cf.* also Mi. 5:3 ). In other words, it was a period very much like our own, in which God’s people have to live more by faith than by sight ( Jn. 20:29 ; 2 Cor. 5:7 ; 1 Pet. 1:8 ; 2 Pet. 3:3–13 ).

From the *New Bible Commentary*

# Small Group Leaders Preparation Sheet

## Key things to cover in getting ready for your group

### Personal Study (or the 10 C's)

- Read through several times and then make list of the following
- Historical Setting: date, recipients, where it fits in history
- Observations
  - Characteristics of the author
  - Make a simple outline the book
  - Key themes with corresponding texts
  - What we learn about God
- Study further
  - Cross references to themes listed
  - Tough questions you would like to answer
  - Foreshadowing of Christ
- Summary and meaning
  - Pick a key verse or two
  - Summarize the message of the book
  - Big idea
- Application
  - How do we see these themes today
  - What is God calling you to apply

### Preparation

- Write out objective for study
- Starter Question
- Paint the Historical Picture
- Key texts of book to read together
- Questions for Observation
- Questions for Interpretation and Summary
- Questions for Application
- Potential theological questions raised with follow-up Scriptures
- Key themes with cross references
- Other circumstances and people in the Bible where a similar theme is expressed
- Brainstorm on possible creative ideas to be implemented
- Prayer time ideas

### Evaluation

- Did I meet my objective?
- How did the group member's understanding of the Bible increase?
- How were the Scriptures applied specifically?
- Anything I can improve on for next time?