

Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah

In the last chapter of the Bible, Jesus' last living disciple, John, writes (Rev. 22: 18-19): *"I, John, solemnly warn everyone who hears the prophetic words of this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to his punishment the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes anything away from the prophetic words of this book, God will take away from him his share of the fruit of the tree of life and of the Holy City, which are described in this book."*

God *had* to put a lid on what He would reveal to the 40 authors who, over some 1,600 years, drafted the Bible's 66 books. God doesn't answer *all* of humanity's questions in the Bible (the most influential and widely read book ever), just the biggies like:

- Does God exist?
- What's He like?
- How can people be so noble yet so sinful? And, hey, what's the remedy for sin anyway?
- How should people live?
- Where did we come from, and where are we going?
- Is there any ultimate meaning to life?

The first man, Adam, and lady Eve waste no time, opting to eat the one fruit God told them was taboo. That "original sin" impacted them and *all* their progeny, establishing a template which you and I still follow today.

Expelled from the Garden of Eden, the first couple transmitted their sin sexually, by having children, infecting the earth with the virus of human suffering. God was so bummed that He flooded the planet. Only good-guy Noah survived with his kin, kine and assorted pets.

The Bible is the history of the Hebrews (dba Israelites or Jews). Though they were neither the biggest or strongest, God chose the Jews to be the nation through whom He'd deal with all creation. The 39 books of the Old Testament are their national literature, archiving their ups and downs.

They swing between being righteous giants to moral midgets. Like a tough-loving dad, God would discipline them to get their attention. Then, like the prodigal, they'd return to wallow in His love and blessings again for a time.

Now, thanks to archaeology, we zero in on 2,000 B.C. -- just before Hammurabi authored his famous code of laws -- about 1,000 years into Egyptian civilization. Abraham, the first Jew, is told by God to leave Ur, Mesopotamia's capital, on the River Euphrates. 100 miles south of Ur

the Euphrates joins the Tigris to flow into the Persian Gulf. This valley is believed to be where the Garden of Eden was, some 500 miles east of Jerusalem in today's Iraq.

Abraham starts the long process of migration. And the Jews land in Egypt where centuries later they become Pharaoh's slaves. Moses leads them out across the Red Sea (as Pat Boone croons the Theme from Exodus) on a 40-year hike through the Arabian Desert -- where God Fed Exes in the 10 Commandments. At last they hit Canaan, Promised Land, today's Israel.

There the Jews are ruled first by judges, then kings starting with Saul, David, then Solomon. When he dies, his kids split the nation into ten tribes (the Northern Kingdom, Israel) and two tribes (the Southern Kingdom, Judah). Next, a seesaw era of good and bad kings, whiplashing the Jews from spiritual harmony to grungy idolatry, sexual perversion and mayhem. If God had wanted a good-guy image, no way would He have included these gory accounts in the biblical record of His dealings with man.

The 27 books of The New Testament are where we find the fulfillment of many of the predictions of Old Testament prophets, the most prime-time of which is this: in the 1st century A.D. the long-awaited Messiah -- God's only Son, Jesus Christ -- is born to a virgin Hebrew teen named Mary.

Jesus' countrymen were looking for a Messiah to boot the Romans out of their borders. But Jesus talked love and peace: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Nobody gets to (God) the Father unless they come through Me." Like He said, the sole option to forever-with-God-in-heaven is separated-from-Him in a flaming, water-free inferno the Bible calls *hell*.

Jesus claimed to be God. "Blasphemy!" His enemies cried. To muzzle Him permanently, Pontius Pilate, the puppet/wimp put in power by Rome, crucified the Messiah. His death -- and return to life that weekend -- satisfied God's demand for justice -- which means that Christ's death picked up the tab for *all* our sins -- past, present and future. God has literally *forgiven* us and won't hold our sins against us. Ever. That's why they call it the *Good News!* The only catch is: we must buy into this simple proposition BY FAITH.

What Jesus' foes neglected to consider was what every honest seeker must weigh, i.e., *Jesus just might have been right*.

Meanwhile, back to the Old Testament.

The "Minor Prophets" are referred to as "minor" not due to *importance*, but because they're *shorter*.

They wrote from about 835 B.C.-430 B.C. during three periods.

- Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah wrote while Assyria was in power.
- Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah wrote during Assyria's decline.
- Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi wrote after the Jews returned to Jerusalem from exile.

Prophets were God's often reluctant voices, announcing during a dark stretch of Jewish antiquity what He wants us to know about Himself and His plans for us. During this bleak period the Jews were dragged into exile by two power-hungry nations, Assyria and Babylon. Jewish prophets were to tell their own kings that God's patience with their sins would run out, and terrible, divine punishment would follow if they didn't obey God's first commandment, "You will have no other gods but Me."

God remains touchy about this, so today we're still locked into paying the price -- during our lifetime -- for our sins. But that's just while we're on earth. What Christ did for us on the cross wiped out the *eternal* consequences of our sin. We pick up the receipt for God's incredible forgiveness by just believing it and making it the foundation of our lives.

HOSEA

It's the 8th century B.C. Rome and Carthage are both founded about this time. Phoenician ships sail from Carthage to Tarshish in southern Spain and north to the tin mines of Cornwall. Gautama introduces a religious reformation in India that births Buddhism. For an awakening world, this is a time of great stirring.

Hosea was a layman tapped by God to tell the ten northern tribes that God loved them, knowing full well they'd blow off his message and suffer the consequences -- which in their case would mean being taken captive by the nation of Assyria.

During his career many Jews are hauled off by the Assyrians, and the kingdom of Israel comes to an end with the fall of Samaria. Hosea lives to see his forecasts come true.

This gentle, affectionate man, one of the great lovers of all literature, drew a nasty assignment from His Boss. God told him to go marry beneath him. Not only was his wife a prostitute; her name *had* to be Gomer!

Hosea's faithfulness to his unfaithful wife is here to demonstrate that God loved the Jews even in their sinful, rebellious, repulsive state, proving His willingness to love, protect and lavish good gifts on an unworthy people who continually broke His laws and worshipped false gods.

Through Hosea God tells Israel that one day their divided land will be reunited under one leader. Still today Jews look for their Messiah to come be that ruler. Let's read chs 1 and 3, describing the Jews' glorious future.

JOEL

Thought to be the earliest of all the recorded prophets, Joel was called by God to be a prophet to Judah. We first see Joel speaking out after a macabre locust plague has devoured every green thing in the land, leaving only devastation, drought and death. He tells the beleaguered people that this is God's answer to their sins, comparing it to a still-yet-to-come Day of Judgment when God will judge all people. Assuring them that God is eager to forgive, he pleads with the Jews to

repent to be spared further divine judgment. With repentance would come both environmental and spiritual restoration.

One of Joel's most quoted oracles (2:28-32) is his prophecy about the arrival on earth of God's Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. This event occurred on the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus was crucified, buried, resurrected and ascended back into heaven. Let's read Joel 2:1-3:2, 14-21.

AMOS

God hand-picked this educated herdsman/fruitpicker while he was in the fields. Amos is a good example of serving Him on the job.

This working stiff prophesied in the northern kingdom of Judah during its zenith of its power under King Jeroboam II. Assyria had not yet made its lunge for world supremacy, so it -- and weaker surrounding nations -- appeared to be no threat to Israel. So, Israel kicked back, sucking up the good life with no thought of impending danger. (Who knows, they probably even cut their defense budget!)

To these deafened ears, this wise, humble, fearless, rawboned prophet spoke. Amos had such a healthy fear of God that he feared no one else. So he strode right up to Jeroboam who had led Israel into its salad days. Amos had enough holy chutzpah to warn His Smugness of the inevitable consequences of his nation's idolatry, shabby treatment of the poor and their hypocritical show of worship. Famous Amos knew that even world powers can't hide from the judgments of our righteous God who sets up kingdoms and tears them down, as He pleases. Think of the mighty Pharaohs who ruled the Egyptian dynasties. Think of Alexander the Great, Napoleon, the Kaiser, Hitler, Stalin. Down through history crazed tyrants have fantasized about offing God's chosen people, but all have met their Waterloos, mowed down by God's inviolable plan as revealed to us through the prophets and writers of Scripture.

God says, 'though scattered across the globe today, the Jews will one day return to their land of promise where they'll enjoy national prosperity, be safe in their capital city of Jerusalem and will realize that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is just who He said He was -- their Messiah. Let's read Amos 9.

OBADIAH

A mere one chapter long, this shortest book in the Old Testament packs a wallop. Obadiah served in the household of wicked King Ahab and infamous Queen Jezebel who ruled Judah during an era of spiritual degeneracy. Obadiah remained faithful to God, yet respected by Ahab. (Wouldn't *that* be a nice reputation to have?)

Obie addresses Edom and Zion. Edom was a nation descended from Esau who, after he sold his birthright from their father Isaac to his brother Jacob, settled there between the Dead Sea on the north and the Red Sea's Gulf of Aqaba on the south. The ancient mountain fortress city of Petra, one of the wonders of the world, was Edom's impregnable capital.

Since the brothers' historic feud, Esau's descendants (Edomites) and Jacob's (Jews) had hated each other in a non-bipartisan way. So savage was their animus for Jacob's people that the Edomites never failed to assist any army that attacked the Jews. When Christ was on earth, the Edomites, thanks to evil King Herod, took control of Judea. But when Rome destroyed its capital, Jerusalem, in 70 A.D., Edom suddenly disappears from the pages of history. Mighty Petra, with its 1,000 temples atop 700-foot high cliffs, is now called "the silent city of the forgotten past."

When Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian marauders plunder Judah, sweeping the Jews into captivity in what's now Iraq, Edom is there to lend Babylon a hand. Ironically, just five years later, en route to battle the Egyptians, Nebuchadnezzar roars through Edom, driving its inhabitants from their rocky home.

Obadiah's words to Edom, after they aided and abetted Babylon in terrorizing the Jews, was -- God will doom the proud and rebellious. His message to Zion (the Jews) -- God will deliver the meek and humble. Doomed if you do; delivered if you don't.

God promises His chosen people that one day they will repossess the Holy Land. This prediction of the coming Day of the Lord and the establishment of the Messiah's kingdom has a direct bearing on today's "peace process" in the Middle East which will one day reach its climax as painted here by this prescient prophet. Let's read Obadiah

More fun and games with more of the Minor Prophets next month. Stay tuned. But take heart: sin's gloom and doom will one day vanish from the earth, cast forever into what the Bible calls "the lake of fire." From that point on only God's love and light and peace will prevail in "the new heavens and the new earth," occupied by those who have, by faith, allowed Christ to sit on the throne of their lives.

Ask any pilot about the clear, brilliant skies up above the dark clouds.

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