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A MAGAZINE FOR THE STUDENT WORLD

Michaelmas Term, 1948

SIXPENCE

# STUDYING THE MINOR PROPHETS

By The Rev. J. STAFFORD WRIGHT, M.A.

THE term *Minor* is not used in any derogatory sense. The adjective here means "less in quantity," not in quality. It is likely that for each prophet we have no more than a brief selection from a large number of inspired utterances. The serious Bible student cannot believe that this selection is due to chance. It is by the deliberate will of God that we have been given these books as part of our Bible. This section of the Old Testament must therefore be of permanent value and we cannot afford to neglect it.

In studying these books, the following are some of the more important points to look for:

(a) *The divine interpretation of historical events.* These prophets are inspired commentators on contemporary history. Often they are raised up at some crisis (Amos iii, 7), and where the people see only a natural event, the prophets show how the hand of God is at work.

(b) *Social righteousness and unrighteousness.* The nature of man is still fundamentally the same. There is still the tendency to luxury and extravagance, where this is possible (Amos vi, 4-6. Why shouldn't I spend my money on having a good time?), and to accumulating possessions at the expense of others (e.g. Micah ii, 2. Get, not give.). The prophets stand for justice between man and man. (e.g. Amos ii, 6. viii, 5, 6).

(c) *Recall to repentance and faith.* People still put their faith in plans and pacts (e.g. Hosea vii, 11), and shirk the real issue, which is spiritual (e.g. Amos v, 4. Joel ii, 12-14).

(d) *God substitutes.* Idolatry and superstitions are easy substitutes for vital religion. Their effect is degrading (e.g. Hosea i-iii. Zechariah x, 2).

(e) *The character of God.* This emerges continually. All the New Testament revelation of God's character and activity is obvious or latent in the writings of the prophets.

(f) *The purpose of God.* This is the blessing of all mankind through His own people. He punishes His own people for their sins, so that the heathen may not think that He condones sin (e.g. Amos iii, 2). He blesses them that they may be a blessing to all mankind (Zechariah viii, 23). What about God's people and the heathen to-day?

(g) *The coming of the Messiah.* All God's purposes are ultimately summed up in Christ. Hence Messianic promises and allusions keep breaking through, and the last prophet, Malachi, leaves us ready to open the pages of the N.T.

In this and the the next two issues it is proposed to introduce outline studies of several of the Minor Prophets.

## I. AMOS

Amos, probably the second of the prophets whose writings we possess, started his ministry about 760-750 B.C., approximately 100 years after Jonah. In his book we note the age-long struggle between the man who truly knows God and those who profess to know Him, but in reality do not.

Study the background of Amos's day. There had been great building schemes (iii, 15), luxury and indulgence (vi, 4-6). Those who held high positions misused their power and influence to their own advantage, often being egged on by their womenfolk (iv, 1, ii, 6, 7).

The religious position is significant. The "churches" were packed at Bethel, Gilgal, and elsewhere (iv, 4; v, 5). Bethel was something of a cathedral (vii, 13), with a proper temple (ix, 1). But the worship was idolatrous, and Amos and Hosea continually denounce it. In spite of sacrifices and tithes (iv, 4; v, 22) and beautiful music (v, 23), the zeal of the worshippers counted for nothing. The worship was probably a mixture of Jehovah-worship and nature-worship.

In so far as the worshippers intended to worship Jehovah, there was little sincerity. Amos describes the sabbath in viii, 4, 5. Traders groaned at having to shut up their shops; their minds were on money. In other places we find the popular idea that if God was well supplied with sacrifices, He would require nothing more (v, 21-23). If anyone was too "keen" they knew how to stop him (ii, 11, 12). The cheering thought was that there was a good time coming, and all would be well in the end. Was not God a God of love? All would be well when the Day of the Lord came (v, 18).

Now study the contrast. Amos lived in the highlands of Tekoa, 12 miles south of Jerusalem. His work was to look after sheep and sycamore trees (vii, 14). He was a countryman (note the metaphors that he uses).

He knew God, both from the Bible (ii, 4) and from experience. Thus he knew God in nature (iv, 13; v, 8), and could never suppose that this great God might be depicted as a golden calf, like the one at Bethel. But he did not divorce the God of nature from the God of holiness and of revelation.

God called him personally (vii, 15) to be a foreign missionary. As a member of the southern kingdom he was called to go to the northern. As a countryman he was called to go to the civilization of the towns. Think this out. God does not always send a man to witness to those among whom he has been brought up. Contrast Hosea, who was a member of the northern kingdom. But Amos's message was valid because he preached eternal principles, not temporary rules.

Amos responded to God's call. Probably he went to Bethel (vii, 13). He began his preaching by denouncing the surrounding nations, a sure way of getting an audience. Thus i, 3-ii, 3 is concerned with atrocities that shock the common conscience of mankind. Next Amos moved to the rival kingdom of Judah, which he denounced for rejecting the revealed word of God (ii, 4, 5). Finally he turned on the northern kingdom of Israel, and held it up with all its sins to the light of God's righteousness, denouncing its social cruelties and injustices, and its gross immorality (ii, 6-16).

For the sake of convenience chapters iii-iv may be read as answers to objections thrown at Amos.

(a) We are God's own people. Then your responsibility is all the greater (iii, 1-8).

(b) We are better than our neighbours. No, God calls your neighbours to witness that your judgment is deserved (iii, 9-iv, 3).

(c) We pay our sacrifices. But yet you experience foretastes of the coming judgment. Cannot you see God's hand here? (iv, 4-v, 3).

(d) Look at our full churches. But what use is worship if it is not directed truly to Jehovah Himself? (v, 4-9).

(e) What about the Day of the Lord? All will be well then. The Day of the Lord is the Day when you meet Him and give account for your actions. Amend your ways and put things right. Spirituality is no alternative to righteousness (v, 10-27).

(f) But look how prosperous we are. You have used your prosperity in selfish luxury, and have forgotten the running sores of the national life (vi).

Chapters vii-ix culminate in five visions of mercy and judgment. The locusts and the drought (vii, 1-6) show God giving the warnings to bring His people to their senses. The plumb-line (7-9) is the final preparation for judgment, and this is repeated in the vision of the "fallen fruit," signifying the fall of Israel, in viii. In ix, 1-10 the judgment is depicted as the Lord bringing the temple of Bethel down on the heads of the worshippers and scattering the survivors.

The book closes with a picture of restoration when the King of David's line comes. Note from the New Testament application of these verses in Acts xv, 14-19 in what sense Israel's "possession" of the Gentiles is to be interpreted.

The judgment came in 721 B.C. because the people would not listen to the man who knew God. Note the three failures in their religion:

1. It was divorced from morality, and left the life untouched.
2. It had a form of ritual that never brought people into personal touch with the living God.
3. It was not guided by the Word of God. One of the most tragic prophecies is viii, 11-13. For one fulfilment see 2 Kings xvii, 24-29.