

# HOSEA, JOEL, AMOS, JONAH

**The Four Major Prophets:** Isaiah, Jeremiah/Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel

**The Twelve Minor Prophets:** Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

The terms *Major Prophets* and *Minor Prophets* divide the Old Testament prophetic books. The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

The Major Prophets are “major” because their books are longer and their content has far-reaching implications. The Minor Prophets are “minor” because their books are shorter and their content is more narrowly focused. That does not mean the Minor Prophets are any less inspired than the Major Prophets. It is simply a matter of God choosing to reveal more to the Major Prophets than He did to the Minor Prophets.

Both the Major and Minor Prophets are usually among the least popular books of the Bible for Christians to read. This is understandable with the often unusual prophetic language and the seemingly constant warnings and condemnations recorded in the prophecies.

Within these books we learn of God’s holiness, wrath, grace, and mercy. We also learn of Christ’s birth and atoning death in Isaiah and Micah. We also read of Christ’s return in Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah.

## HOSEA

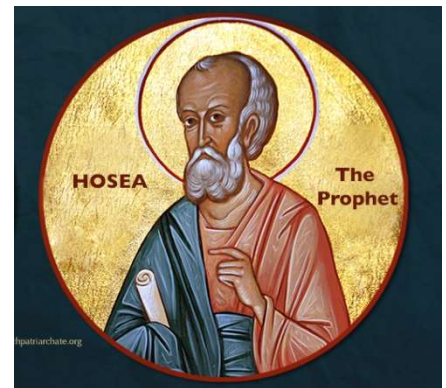
The prophet Hosea was a citizen of the northern kingdom of Israel, who began his prophetic mission during the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel (783-743 B.C.), until the fall of its capital, Samaria, in 721.

Hosea plainly describes life then as morally corrupt. Despite God’s generous and passionate love for His Chosen People, Israel’s response is ingratitude and indifference. Hosea decries such religious infidelity—the worshiping of false gods—and calls it adultery and prostitution.

The entire 8<sup>th</sup> chapter is a denunciation of Israel for breaking her Covenant with God (Deuteronomy 29:1-29); for enthroning illegitimate kings who disregard God’s will; and for making foreign alliances rather than trusting in God. All of this, Hosea says, led to Israel’s enslavement in a foreign land (Deuteronomy 26:68).

Hosea further describes God as a kind of wounded spouse Who had entered a marital covenant with Israel. Yet despite Israel’s infidelity God still loves her. And even though God does at times punish her, always His purpose is to draw her back to Himself. For God is merciful and wants nothing more than for Israel to repent and return to His loving embrace.

In short, God wants His love reciprocated; for love is the very foundation of man’s relationship with God. Moreover love is the sole measure of man’s spiritual life: **“For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, knowledge of God rather than**



**burnt offerings”** (Hosea 6:6). Such love means a personal, interior relationship with God based on love of Him, and a genuine faith that leads to moral uprightness. Jesus Himself uses the marital image to describe God’s relationship with Israel which will acquire its full meaning in the New Testament (Ephesians 5:23-33).

In the Book of Hosea, despite Israel’s continual turning to false gods, God’s steadfast love is portrayed as the long-suffering husband of an unfaithful wife. While Hosea warns those who would turn their backs on God’s love, Hosea reminds the Israelites that God is a loving God Whose loyalty to His covenant-people is unwavering.

## JOEL

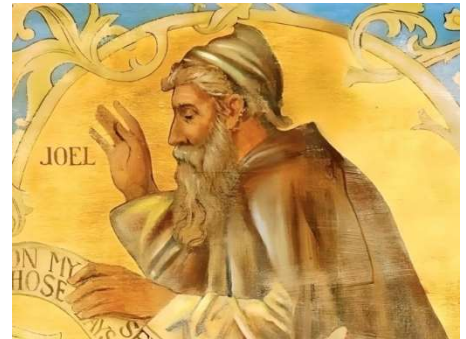
The name Joel means “Yahweh is God” in Hebrew. Written between 450-400 B.C., after the Jerusalem Temple had been rebuilt, we know nothing of the life and ministry of the prophet except that he was the son of an unknown man named Pethu’el.

Joel prophesied in Judah, and Jerusalem. Most biblical scholars think that he was active around the year 500, after the return from exile.

In the first section, the message is a call to repentance in the face of the coming judgment, which the prophet refers to ominously as “the day of the Lord” (2:1-2).

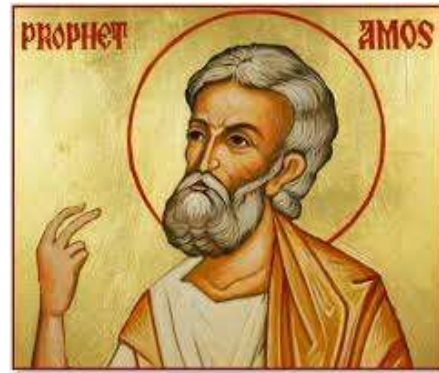
The prophet uses the devastation of a plague of locusts upon Judah to call Israel to repent of her sins. This image would have been both terrifying and economically devastating to any near Eastern people. Is this merely a symbol or something which will actually happen? Even if it is a real event, it is also a symbol of invasion from the north by enemy pagan foreigners as punishment for Israel’s unfaithfulness. Thus Joel calls for national repentance in the form of fasting, weeping, and mourning, in which the people rend their hearts and not their garments—that is, are truly contrite (2:12-17). Finally there is an oracle of salvation and restoration in which the Lord accepts Israel’s repentance.

Then Joel describes God’s judgment upon the nations as the final victory of Israel. The “day of Yahweh” refers to the messianic era at the end of time, prior to the Last Judgment, which will, Joel says, be accompanied by a cosmic disaster. However, since the book is *apocalyptic* (forecasting the end of the world), its teaching can only be understood in the light of the New Testament; that is, the prophecy that the outpouring of the Spirit will descend on all the people of God in the messianic era (3:1-5). St. Peter actually quotes this text on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21), claiming that this prophecy has come true in the Church. The Book of Joel concludes with reference to the final judgment which will take place in the valley of Jehoshaphat (a desert valley 11 miles from Jerusalem), an eschatological or end-time vision yet one filled with hope.



## AMOS

Amos was the earliest of the writing prophets. Born in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century near Bethlehem, Amos was tending his flock when he was called by God to be His prophet to the northern kingdom. In his book Amos makes clear that God's choice of him was completely unmerited because he was neither "a prophet nor the son of a prophet" (7:14). Amos insists that he is not among the "professional" prophets who learned it from their fathers as a kind of family trade (7:12-14).



Amos prophesies mainly during the reign of King Jeroboam (783-773 B.C.), the high point of Israel's power when she was wealthy, arrogant, and oppressive toward her southern neighbors. Although Israel was prosperous, there were sharp contrasts between the rich and the poor. Amos, a deeply religious man and zealous for God's glory, condemned Israel's decadent city lifestyle, her indifference to social justice, and her lack of sincere religious worship (5:21-22). He exposed those who exploited the poor (8:6) and condemned judges for their corruption (5:10-15).

The Book of Amos gives praise to God's omnipotence and to the permanence of God's covenant with Israel. Its imagery and parables come from the rural life with which Amos was so familiar. Amos lays stress on the theme, "**The Lord roars from Zion**" (1:2; Joel 4: 16). This "roaring" is meant to defend and vindicate the covenant God made with King David, and upon which the Chosen People were established.

Although Amos speaks God's message to the people, they do not change their ways. Amos warns them they will soon be punished, and the kingdom will collapse and its inhabitants will be sent into exile. Despite all this, the Book of Amos ends on a note of hope: after the judgment, the Lord will once more reign over the nations gathered together that comprise the kingdom of David (9:11-12). Even more, the peace and fertility characteristic of the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis will be restored to the land of Israel (9:13-15).

Because Amos is mainly concerned about the social evils of his time, he is called the "prophet of social justice." The Israelites had a unique relationship with God, and so obedience to His will ought to have been their first response. Their mistake was to think that mere fulfillment of formal religious obligations was enough. In truth, the moral element was the most important; for worship without morality has no value in the eyes of God. Therefore Amos exhorted the people to repent sincerely and return to God. If they do not, the "Day of the Lord" would be a day of severe judgment. In this way Amos was preparing Israel for the terrible Assyrian invasions (730s and 720s B.C.), which would indeed be the form that God's judgment would take, when finally in 721 Assyrian invaders deported many of the Israelites and replaced them with people from elsewhere in the empire, transforming her into a province of the Assyria empire.

## JONAH

The Book of Jonah (5th century) starts with Yahweh's command that Jonah go to Nineveh to preach repentance. Why preach repentance? Because Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, the "capital of bloodshed" (Nahum 3:1), which was infamous for its pagan decadence and cruelty toward captured Jews during its frequent wars with Israel. Jonah does not want to preach repentance to the Ninevites for fear that they would indeed repent and escape God's punishment. So instead Jonah boards a ship for Tarshish (across the sea from Lebanon), which is in the opposite direction.

Soon a raging storm ensues and the crew throw Jonah overboard—at Jonah's suggestion!—so that the "sea will quiet down for you" (1:12). Jonah is then swallowed by a great fish; in its belly for three days and three nights, Jonah repents of his sin and is vomited safe and sound on the coast of Palestine.

Yahweh repeats his command and this time Jonah obeys, traveling five hundred miles to Nineveh to lead the city in a great revival. The Ninevites repent and God in His mercy forgives them. Jonah is extremely angry of this result because God granted repentance to the Ninevites. However Jonah learns his lesson when God uses a gourd, a worm, and an east wind to teach him that He is merciful (4:6-8).

The Book of Jonah announces that God's plan for salvation is for everyone, Gentiles as well as Jews. Thus Jonah is sent to a "foreign" city to show that God loves everyone without exception. God's love even extends to infants (among ancient Israelites personhood was not based on chronological age or simple "being," but on one's social role and physical maturity); that is, persons "who do not know their right hand from the left" (4:11).

In the end God takes pity on Jonah and on the people of Nineveh, but only when both do penance. Essentially the story of Jonah and the whale is a death-and-resurrection story. In ancient near Eastern literature outside the Bible, the descent into the "realm of the dead" was often depicted as a three-day journey. This interpretation would explain why Jesus in the Gospels uses Jonah's "3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the whale" as a prefiguration of His own death, burial, and Resurrection (Matthew 12:40). The message is about the fidelity to God's mission, and the mercy of God to those who cry out to Him in prayer and distress.

