

Bible Study # 70
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Minor Prophets Series—Introduction

This evening we **are getting into a new Bible study series, a series on the Minor Prophets.** The Minor Prophets play a very important role in the understanding of the Bible and the understanding of God's plan. There are many, many things that come out.

The Minor Prophets are minor, but not in the sense of importance. They are referred to as Minor Prophets to distinguish them from what are called the Major Prophets. The difference in them has nothing to do with importance. It is reflective of the length or size of the books.

The Jews traditionally recognized three divisions of Scripture: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. These divisions would refer to what we term the Old Testament.

The **Law** was the most basic revelation of God. It consisted of the five books of Moses called in Hebrew, the Torah. The word "Torah" simply means "Law." The books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy form the most basic revelation of God. This is the starting point. God introduces Himself to us in Genesis as the Creator and He begins the process of teaching and instructing with His basic law.

Some of this sets a stage. What we **are going into this evening is introduction and background as far as the Minor Prophets are concerned.** But the term "Law" or "Torah" is a lot more inclusive than what we sometimes think. We tend to think of law where everything is spelled out. Our concept of law is more akin to rules. We think of "do this, that or something else," or "don't do this, that, etc." We think that's what law is. Those kinds of statements are law, but law consists of much more than simply "thou shall" and "thou shall not."

The entire first five books of the Bible are called "the Law," "the Book of the Law," "the Law of Moses" or "the Torah." We find that the law consists of testimonies as well as commandments, statutes, ordinances and judgments. It consists of all these things. Much of God's law is given by way of example or illustration—by what the Bible terms testimonies. Testimonies are simply a witness or a testified account of God's working that has transpired. One of the main ways we gain insight into the will of God is through the examples and illustrations that God records.

God introduces Himself to us at the creation. He gives us the basis for understanding who He is and the right that He has to establish commandments. God introduces us to Him and to His most fundamental revelation in the first five books of the Bible. Everything else in the Bible is based and built upon the five books of the Law. That is the starting point.

After the Law came the Prophets and then the Writings. The **Prophets** consist of what are termed the Former and Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets were the books that we term historical: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. The Latter Prophets are the books we think of as prophetic: the Major and Minor Prophets. The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets are the Twelve, beginning with Hosea through Malachi.

Prophecy and history are the same thing seen from different directions. We look back on history and we look forward on prophecy. It is simply where you are in the continuum of time that makes the distinction between history and prophecy. Much of what we study today is prophecy. In the Millennium, we will study it as history; it is already there. Some of the things prophesied in the Old Testament were fulfilled with the first coming of the Messiah. Those things we study as a matter of history. They were given as prophecy; now, they are history. There are events that relate prophetically, but as these things come to pass, they then fall in the category of what we call history. It is a continuum of time and depending on our perspective (the point where we are), we look backward on certain things and forward on certain things.

Since God inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57:15), there is not the same distinction we would make. That is sort of mind boggling when you consider it because God exists outside the realm of time. Time exists for human beings. Time was created and established for human beings. Time is regulated by the workings of the interaction of the heavenly bodies and the cycles that God established. Before God created the physical universe, there was no such thing as time.

The Prophets build upon the law. The Prophets show you the results and the consequences when the law is obeyed and when it is disobeyed. The law is the basis for all the prophets. Everything in the prophets is simply an expansion of the blessings and curses that are contained in the law.

Remember when Moses gave the law in Deuteronomy? We have the account before

Israel went into the Promised Land. He gathered them together, put them on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim and gave them the blessings and curses (Deuteronomy 11:26-29). You are blessed for obedience and cursed for disobedience. That ultimately sums up the prophets. *The message of the prophets is the consequences of either obedience or disobedience to the law.* That's what gives predictability because when you obey the law, there are results; when you disobey the law, there are results. God's law carries consequences, both good and bad.

From what we term the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings), we see the way God responded and dealt with Israel. We see the historical account of what happened when Israel obeyed and disobeyed. We see the distinction that comes in.

In the Latter Prophets, both the Major ones (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) as well as the Minor Prophets (the Twelve), we look forward and anticipate the consequences and results. We see the curses of Israel's disobedience that ultimately resulted in their captivity. We see the blessings that are going to occur when Jesus Christ returns and the government of God is set up on this earth. The Millennium is going to be a wonderful time. The earth will be a wonderful place during the one thousand-year reign of the Messiah. The reason is because "a King will reign in righteousness and princes will rule with justice" (Isaiah 32:1). God's law is righteousness.

Psalm 119:172, "...for all Your commandments are righteousness." The Millennium will be a wonderful time and place because the law of God will be the basis by which society will conduct itself, and there will be results and consequences.

The **Writings** are the poetic books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the five Festival Scrolls (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther), and then conclude with the books that were written after the exile: Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. For the most part, most of the Writings serve as a poetic amplification of the law as well as including the wrap-up, the concluding accounts that were written after the exile to sort of finish off the Old Testament—God's revelation in the Hebrew language. Again, it represents an amplification of the law. It all gets back to the law.

The Minor Prophets that we are focusing on over the next number of Bible studies are the 12 books. In fact, sometimes in Hebrew, they are simply referred to as "the Twelve." They were

normally in one long scroll because they were short, and if you put them all together, they would be no longer than many of the longer books of the Bible.

They consist of several things. There are several different periods during which these books are grouped. There is dispute as to why they are arranged as they are. There are various theories developed on it. However, if we look at the pattern of the Major Prophets and at the pattern of the Minor Prophets that are dated, there is a pattern that establishes itself. If we look at Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel as something to establish a pattern, why are they arranged as they are?

Isaiah 1:1, we are told, "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." The period of Isaiah was a period that had its beginnings considerably before the captivity of Northern Israel.

Isaiah 6:1, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple." He began his writings in the last year of King Uzziah, which was about 732 B.C. We would reference that in Isaiah 6:1 when Isaiah dates his vision to the year that King Uzziah died. We would date Isaiah beginning his ministry about 732 B.C. and continuing on down to the end of the lifetime of King Hezekiah in 686 B.C.

Jeremiah 1:1-2, when we come down to Jeremiah, it says, "The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign."

Jeremiah, according to verse 2, had his beginning in 625 B.C., which was the 13th year of Josiah. It continued on down until after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.

We notice that Isaiah began his ministry considerably before Jeremiah did. In fact, Isaiah's ministry had ended almost 60 years before Jeremiah's began.

We come down to Ezekiel a little later.

Ezekiel 1:1-2, "Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month, which was in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity..." We would date this to 591 B.C. because the year of King

Jehoiachin's captivity was the second invasion of Nebuchadnezzar in 596 B.C. Therefore, we would date this to 591 B.C. when Ezekiel began his prophesy and it continued until 569 B.C.

We notice that Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are clearly arranged in chronological order. We know the Major Prophets were arranged in chronological order because they are clearly dated. This gives us a little bit of a pattern. The pattern is not quite as easily established in the Minor Prophets as they are in the Major Prophets, but it gives us some insight and ideas.

You can read commentaries and find that different ones say different things. They will argue about the dates of the Minor Prophets. Most of them have no idea why they are arranged as they are. Clearly, at least in a general sense, *they are arranged in chronological order.*

We know that the first seven of the Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah and Nahum) are all books that date to what we would term the "Assyrian period." It is called that because Assyria came to an end as a world power in 612 B.C. with the fall of Nineveh. The Medes teamed up with some other nations and sacked Nineveh, and it was destroyed in 612 B.C. This set the stage for the rise of Babylon. The first seven Minor Prophets clearly fall within that range. Most of those can be dated.

The books of Habakkuk and Zephaniah fall in what we would term the "Chaldean period." They date to a time of Babylonian ascendancy and their warnings have to do with Babylon. Babylon is the emerging power.

The last three books, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, are what are termed "post-exilic," that is, after the exile, after the Jews returned with Zerubbabel from Babylonian captivity. Clearly, we find at least a general chronological order. I can demonstrate that.

Hosea 1:1, "The word of the Lord that came to Hosea the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel." We find that Hosea would have been approximately contemporary with at least the early part of Isaiah's prophecies. His period ends with Hezekiah, King of Judah. The prophetic career of Hosea lists kings of Israel and Judah, and if you overlap them together, you will find that his prophetic career began about 770 B.C. during the reign of Jeroboam II, King of Israel and came on down to around 710 B.C., which was after the captivity of the ten tribes. Hosea is clearly an early prophet during the Assyrian

domination. We would date Hosea to that early period.

When we come to Joel, Joel does not start off by giving us a date. There is not a clear internal date in the book of Joel.

Joel 1:1, it just starts off, "The word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel." It goes through and gives the prophetic message. It goes through the things that are going to occur, but it is not clearly dated.

Amos is the third of the Minor Prophets.

Amos 1:1, "The words of Amos, who was among the herdsmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake." Amos would clearly date as contemporary with the very early part of Hosea's prophecies. We can clearly date Hosea and Amos. Joel doesn't say.

Jonah is not clearly dated except in a couple of ways. One, Jonah went to warn Nineveh of impending destruction and Nineveh was spared. We know from this that we are talking about a period earlier than 612 B.C. because Nineveh was destroyed in 612 B.C.

If we go back to 2 Kings 14, we will notice something. Sometimes people are unaware of this.

2 Kings 14:23-25, "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hopher."

Jonah 1:1, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, ..." Clearly we are talking about the same Jonah. We can date the book of Jonah to the latter part of the reign of King Jeroboam II. We can date Hosea, Amos and Jonah. All three of those are clearly dated as beginning at the same general time.

We can put a question mark by Joel and Obadiah. Micah clearly dates a little later (around 740-690 B.C.) based on the kings whose reigns he overlapped and based on the other dates. Hosea we would date about 770-710 B.C.; Amos, 760 B.C.; Jonah, 750 B.C.; and Micah, about 740-690 B.C. This is based on internal

dating. We would put a question mark by Joel and Obadiah because you can't date them internally in the same way you can the others.

Nahum does not date itself in the same way. Nahum is a prophecy against Nineveh. We can date it prior to 612 B.C. because Nineveh was destroyed in 612 B.C. and there wasn't any point in prophesying against Nineveh after 612 B.C. Nahum doesn't date internally except that we could say that Nahum was prior to 612 B.C., a time when Assyria was the enemy. His prophecy is against Assyria.

Habakkuk prophesied against the Chaldeans. We can date Habakkuk generally but not specifically. It doesn't date itself exactly. There's not an internal date, but he is dealing with the Chaldeans. They began to arise about 620 B.C. They came into dominance and achieved world status after the fall of Nineveh.

We can date Zephaniah to about 620 B.C., to the time of Josiah's reign.

Zephaniah 1:1, "The word of the Lord which came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah." Josiah began to be king about 620 B.C. Zephaniah would clearly be contemporary with the early part of Jeremiah's ministry. It might be helpful to have a list of the Minor Prophets because I am going to keep jumping back and forth, giving you some overview. You may want to write some of these dates down and line them up so you can visually see it.

Haggai 1:1, "In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozakak, the high priest, ..." The second year of Darius would be 520 B.C. Haggai is dated to the sixth month of 520 B.C., which would be the month before the Feast of Tabernacles. He started prophesying in 520 B.C., the month before the Feast.

If you turn to Zechariah, he starts prophesying in the eighth month of the second year of Darius.

Zechariah 1:1, "In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, ..." He prophesied the same year. Notice there is a two-month difference. Haggai prophesied in the sixth month; Zechariah prophesied in the month after the Feast. The arrangement of Haggai and Zechariah is interesting because clearly it is chronological,

even if it was only a distinction of two months. The one that was dated first came first.

Malachi is not clearly internally dated, though by all tradition, it is considered the very last book to have been written. Malachi is, at least from a traditional standpoint, considered to tie in with the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

What do we find? We find that Joel, Obadiah, Nahum and Habakkuk cannot be clearly dated in terms of internal evidence. From all the ones that are clearly dated, we see that they all run in a chronological order. Based on the fact that the Major Prophets are clearly chronological and based on the fact that every one of the Minor Prophets that we can date are in chronological order, we see that God does things in a logical way. He doesn't just throw them in hodgepodge and just kind of stick them in any old way. God does things in a purposeful way. He is not the author of confusion, so undoubtedly, there was a reason as to why the books were arranged the way they are.

The most logical reason, that I am aware of, is that the Minor Prophets were probably arranged and preserved for us in the Canon in chronological order. That way we would date Hosea 770-710 B.C. Hosea is clearly dated internally by the scriptures. Joel we would date to about 770 B.C. We would date Joel about the same time of Hosea. Amos is internally dated. The date that it gives for itself, internally, is about 760 B.C. Obadiah is not clearly dated. Jonah is dated to about 750 B.C. We would date Obadiah about the same, 750 B.C. This would run 770, 770, 760, 750 and 750. Micah is dated from 740-690 B.C., so Micah would come next. We would date Nahum about 650 B.C. Nahum clearly comes after Jonah when Assyria's repentance hadn't lasted so God is really going to "put it to them" this time. We would date these seven prophets to a period of Assyrian ascendancy.

Most of the commentators will agree on that part of it, but then they want to come up with some other dating method for the books that aren't dated. They seem to have a problem concluding that the books are chronological. But when you look at the way they are laid out, I think that's the most logical way. Habakkuk and Zephaniah, clearly date to the Chaldean period. Zephaniah we date to about 620 B.C., Habakkuk about the same, coming a little before Zephaniah. Haggai was written a couple of months earlier than Zechariah. Last of all, Malachi, we would probably date in the vicinity of 420-400 B.C.—something like that.

We would date the Minor Prophets or figure their arrangement primarily on a chronological basis. We see that slightly over half of them (seven out of the twelve) can be internally dated very clearly. Malachi is a very probable date attested to by tradition. That leaves us only four, and they fall in this sequence that would lend itself logically to what we are saying here.

Let's understand a little bit about prophecy. When we think of prophecy, we tend to limit it to strictly a prediction of the future. But prophecy is really an oral or written disclosure in words through a human mouthpiece, transmitting the revelation of God and setting forth God's will to man. Prophecy, used in the term that is used in the Bible, does not necessarily have to be predictive, though we normally think of it that way. The Hebrew word for prophet is "*nabi*." It comes from a word that means "to summon" or "announce" or "to call." It means one who has been called or appointed to proclaim, as a herald, the message of God. It is someone that God has appointed to announce or proclaim His message. In that sense, a prophet of God was not necessarily predicting the future.

Elijah is considered the greatest of the prophets, and, yet, we don't find that his main mission seems to have concerned itself with a whole lot of prediction as we think of it. There were certainly predictive aspects. In fact, Elijah's life and ministry was predictive because Malachi tells us that prior to the coming of the Messiah, God would first send Elijah the prophet to "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4: 5-6).

Jesus Christ clearly identifies the fact that prior to His first coming, John the Baptist was raised up 'in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way and to make ready a people prepared for the Lord' (Luke 1:16-17). John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy of coming in the spirit and power of Elijah in terms of Christ's first coming. But when you read the context of the prophecy in Malachi, it is clear that what we would term the second coming of the Messiah is even more directly referred to.

I think it has been our understanding over the years in the Church that Mr. Herbert Armstrong was raised up by God to fulfill a similar mission—a mission to prepare a people made ready for the Lord, to carry out the work of Elijah and to do an Elijah work. Certainly, Mr. Armstrong referred to that many times himself and, certainly, he felt and understood that God was using him in that way. I think that the vast

overwhelming majority of us in the Church certainly felt the same way—that he was established in that way.

You can say that Elijah's work and ministry was itself predictive and prophetic because it set the stage. Elijah came when the nation of Israel had lost sight of the true God and had gotten off into other things. Elijah was called to restore the knowledge of the true religion in Israel. John the Baptist came and did something similar to that.

God raised up Mr. Herbert Armstrong back in the 1920s at a time during the fifth era of God's Church, the Sardis era. The Sardis era is described as a dying remnant that had a name and that it was alive, but for all practical purposes, it was spiritually dead (Revelation 3: 1-6). It was certainly not in a position to proclaim God's message to the nation or to the world. Mr. Armstrong was raised up in the context of restoring the knowledge of the true religion in Israel. That was a part of the way that God used him.

I think we have to understand that God has used His different servants in different ways. Every messenger and servant of God has not had exactly the same mission. God has used different ones to warn different groups. He has used His servants in the overall scheme of performing His work, but He has used them differently.

We have to understand and recognize that God worked through each of the Minor Prophets in different ways. If you go through each of the Minor Prophets, you find that God worked through these individuals in different ways. They were all God's servants, but He worked through them over a period of time in different ways. Some were utilized and did a work in a certain context. God used others to focus on a different aspect of His work or message. The point is that prophecy is not simply prediction; it is the announcement or proclamation of God's will. There is often a predictive element to prophecy.

One of the things to recognize is the distinction between the prophets and the Levites. The Levites were professionals. They didn't receive their office directly by divine call. They received their office by a hereditary succession in the Levitical priesthood. If you were a Levite, then obviously your father was a Levite. It was a tribal distinction, and the priesthood was a subdivision of the Levites through the descendants of the family of Aaron.

The prophets differed from the Levites. They were not automatic successors to an office. They did not inherit their prophetic office. The emphasis of a prophet was that he was one who

was called to go out and announce or proclaim God's message. He was not someone who appointed himself to the job. He was not someone who inherited the job. You weren't a prophet simply because your father or your grandfather had been a prophet. The prophets were raised up by God.

God used individuals from a variety of walks of life. Some, evidently, were and could have been of Levitical background. Elijah, evidently, was a Levite. But that seems to have been the exception rather than the rule. Most of them who are recorded were not of Levitical ancestry at all.

Amos was a herdsman (farmer). He describes himself as a gatherer of sycamore fruit. He said he wasn't a prophet nor was he a prophet's son (Amos 7:14). He said he was not a professional; he was not in the prophet business. That was not his profession or his business, but rather, God called him and gave him a job to do. God thrust him into that. Over and over when we find God's servants used in that way, and particularly for a special mission or job, we see that God thrusts them into that job. It was not something they sought or sort of orchestrated or brought about and ensconced themselves into.

There are two kinds of prophets: oral and written prophets or oral and written prophecy. There are prophecies to which reference is made in the Scriptures that we have no record of. There is no book of Elijah or Elisha. We are told about Nathan the prophet, but there is no book of Nathan. There are many prophets to whom reference is made in the Scriptures of whom we have no record in terms of what they said. Or, we have what they said summarized in two or three verses and that is the entirety of what we know about their message.

Oral prophecies were announcements or proclamations from God that had significance for their day and time. The primary significance of the prophecies that were simply delivered orally was that they were not messages that were particularly relevant for all time. They were messages that zeroed in on a specific time and place. They were things that had significance at that time, but they really don't have a whole lot of implication for us today. God used many of the prophets as His representatives primarily in their own day, and their mission was pretty well limited to that point in time.

However, there are a number of prophets whom God used (15 specifically) whose works are recorded in the Scriptures (in books that carry their names), whose works were not primarily

for their day. They were written down for our admonition. One of the important things to understand about these scriptures is that the prophets were writing messages that had implications far beyond their day. They were not simply social reformers as some of the modern commentaries like to think. They were not out leading marches and crusades, trying to campaign for this or that fellow to get elected in order to bring about some social reform for their day.

Jeremiah 10:23, as Jeremiah put it, they understood, "O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps." We are not going to reform the world or nation or bring about social justice simply by the hand of man. If man could establish government the way it should be, then why does Jesus Christ have to come back and set it up? The whole point of Biblical prophecy is the fact that "it is not in man who walks to direct his steps." The only solution to the problems that exist in this world is the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ came with the announcement, the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Daniel expressed it when he had gone through the succession of the world ruling empires in Daniel 2 and 7.

Daniel 2:44, he said, speaking of the final ten kings, "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever."

The Minor Prophets have a message that relates to the establishment of that Kingdom. It also relates to other nations and other powers.

One of the most important keys to understanding Bible prophecy, and perhaps the single most important key, is to understand the truth of the identity of Israel. That is crucial in importance because if you don't understand the identity of where Israel is, then you don't understand to whom reference is being made in the Minor and Major Prophets or any of the prophecies of the Old Testament.

If you don't know who Israel is, then you are in the same category as Jimmy Swaggart, Billy Graham and all the rest of the worldly ministers. They like to throw in a little bit about prophecy now and then, but they don't understand it. Why don't they understand it? Primarily because every time they read the word "Israel" in a

scripture (and you read it an awful lot when you read the Bible because it is mentioned quite a bit), they assume that it is talking about a nation in the Middle East today by the name Israel. They assume it is talking about the nation of the Jews. If that's what you think, then all of the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and all the way down through Malachi only relate to the Jews and that nation that calls itself Israel.

Mr. Herbert Armstrong used to raise this point years ago: 'Isn't it amazing that the Bible, in prophecies about the end time, would go into great detail about little nations such as Egypt (which you read of prophetically) and various other nations that exist in the world, and, yet, no mention is made of the United States, Great Britain and the western European powers—the great world powers that have dominated the last two centuries.'

When the Napoleonic wars ended in 1814, Britain stood absolutely supreme on the world scene from 1814 to 1914. The British Navy was larger than the navies of the next two powerful nations combined. Britain stood unchallenged throughout the 19th century. In the aftermath of World War I, the United States emerged, having been gradually moving up. Between the world wars, the United States and Britain together were clearly the dominant and most powerful nations on earth. In the aftermath of World War II, Britain's decline became very rapid. The United States had a period of dominance though it was, in terms of actual time, a much shorter period.

The point is: Where are our nations mentioned? Where does it talk about the United States? All the various ones—Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*—none of them know where we are identified. They can't tell you what's going to happen to the United States (to our nation) because they don't know where we are talked about in the Scriptures. And as a result, they don't have the key.

In *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy* booklet, Mr. Herbert Armstrong called that knowledge the key that unlocks Bible prophecy. It's sort of interesting. In Revelation 3:7, (the prophecy of the Philadelphia era), it talks about this era as having the key of David because the key that unlocks Bible prophecy is the knowledge of where the throne of David is. It is the key to understand where Israel is. The understanding of Israel unlocks the Minor Prophets. That's why we have an insight into what these 12 prophets are talking about.

An understanding of Bible prophecy is not necessary for salvation. The vast majority (even the prophets who wrote it) didn't understand it. So, is it necessary to understand where Israel is in prophecy in order to get into the Kingdom of God? No. Probably, all through the centuries, the vast majority of God's people lived and died, never understanding some of these things. Daniel didn't understand the book of Daniel. He wrote it and didn't understand it.

Daniel 12:8, he said, "... 'My lord, what shall be the end of these things?' " 'What's all this "stuff" talking about?'

Verse 9, he was told, "And he said, 'Go your way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end.' "

Verse 13, " "But you, go your way till the end; for you shall rest, and will arise to your inheritance at the end of the days." " 'You are going to die and sleep in the ground. You will arise to your inheritance at the end of the days, but these things are closed up until the time of the end.' It didn't say they were closed up forever; it said they were closed up until the time of the end.

Verse 4, knowledge would be increased; knowledge of the Bible would be increased. There is knowledge of things that have relevance for us today that simply did not have relevance in the same way for generations and centuries past. Those things were understood only in a very generalized way. Now, we don't understand everything. The closer we get to the end, the more details will be understood.

Peter compared that to the dawning of a new day.

2 Peter 1:19, "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star [which is the sun] rises in your hearts..." The point is: How does daylight come? When it is still pitch black, you can't see anything. Then as the day star begins to dawn (the sun begins to come up), a little light appears in the eastern horizon and you begin to see shadowy outlines. Maybe you see clouds in the sky or trees, houses or barns. You can't make out any details like color of a horse or deer, etc., but as the dawn gets a little lighter, you begin to pick out a few details and recognize things for what they are. Finally, when the sun actually comes up, there is quite a bit of light coming through the sky from east to west, and as the light gets brighter, you can pick out and discern more and more detail. You see distinctions that you couldn't determine earlier.

That's the way prophecy is understood. The further we are from the return of Christ, the more pitch-black things occurred. This was the state of things at the time most of the prophets wrote. It was pretty pitch-black. The closer we come from a prophetic standpoint, the more a dim outline begins to appear. You see the dim outline that must be a house or barn. You think you know what it is. Maybe you're right and maybe you're not. As it gets a little closer and the light gets a little brighter, you say, 'No, that's not what I thought it was. That's something else.' You can see it more clearly. The closer we get, the more details unfold. Finally, when Christ returns, everything is totally clear and light. This is an important aspect to understand.

The understanding of the identity of Israel is very important to understand the implications of Bible prophecy. Without that knowledge, we have no basis of understanding what applies to us and where our nations are going to fit in. God obviously takes up quite a bit of space dealing with these matters.

There are four basic elements of Hebrew prophecy. There are four principle elements that are involved as to why prophecies were given and the purpose that prophecy serves.

First, the prophets had the responsibility of encouraging God's people to trust only in God's power and not in allies. The prophets made plain that it was futile to trust in other nations as deliverer. One message that runs through the prophetic writing of all the prophets is Jeremiah 17.

Jeremiah 17:5, "Thus says the Lord: 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the Lord.'"

Verse 7, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord." If you trust in man and make flesh your strength, then what you trust will fail you. If our only confidence—and the thing we have to support us—is other nations or other human governments, then we are heading for problems and trouble. The prophets all encouraged God's people to look to God for deliverance and for protection, not to put their trust in other nations.

That is a message that applies to our people today. It's a message that our people have not taken seriously. We think that we can ensure our protection. We're looking to all these nations that are our "friends," and we think that they will be there to back us up. We are very vulnerable in some areas. The great sophisticated technology that we were able to show off during the Gulf War—do you realize the little most necessary

electronic components that make those things work are made in Japan? The Pentagon buys them from Japan. There are some of them that are no longer even made in the United States. We are dependant upon Japan for about one-third of those things. It hasn't been all that long ago that the last American company that made some of those things went bankrupt. We said, 'Why the Japanese are our friends; we can depend on them. Surely, they would never refuse to sell us those things. The Germans and Russians are our friends. Right? They would never take advantage of us.' We have a false confidence.

The prophecy focused in on the importance of God's people looking to God, trusting God and not trusting in allies.

Second, prophecy serves to remind people that safety was conditioned upon faithful adherence to the covenant. The prophets stressed a sincere, heartfelt, moral religion. Safety, blessings and prosperity were conditioned upon Israel's faithful adherence to the covenant. You couldn't go out and do whatever you wanted to do. They couldn't feel like they had some sort of special dispensation—that they could live any way they wanted to live and it would never come back to haunt them.

The prophets certainly illustrated the fact that the blessings and benefits that God's people enjoyed were conditional upon obedience. God was not after a religion that simply involved going through the motions which involved outward show and conformity. It was a matter of putting God's way into practice. The prophecies served, therefore, to warn nations of the consequences of disobedience.

Third, they also served to encourage Israel with respect to the future. One of the great roles of prophecy is encouragement. Remember back in one of the dark times (in 1979) when we were having a lot of difficulty? Mr. Herbert Armstrong, in one of his sermons that he sent out, made the point in encouraging us. He said to the effect, 'Brethren, I've read the book. I've read the end of the story and the end of the story is we win. We win! That's the way the book ends.'

One of the purposes of prophecy is to encourage the people of God in the midst of adversity and difficulty. When it looks like everything is going the wrong way, prophecy is there to remind us that the God of heaven is working out a great plan and purpose, and we have something we can look forward to. We have a reality that we can look forward to that goes beyond the things that can be seen, touched, felt and measured—the

things that can be physically discerned. If the only source you have for knowledge of the future is looking at the television news or weekly news magazines, you don't have a whole lot of encouragement. Things can look like they are going one way when they are not.

It was only a couple of years ago that the idea that the Soviet Union would lose its domination of Eastern Europe and slide from being the major world power offsetting the United States was viewed as something so remote and so far off that it really didn't have any particular application for us. There was no indication of the idea that the nations of Eastern Europe would be free to choose their own government. Nobody had any reason to think that would ever come about. In fact, all the experts had all kinds of reasons why it would certainly never be within the lifetime of any of us. It didn't work out that way.

The point is that in the midst of circumstances, God declares, as He says in Isaiah, the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). There is encouragement. As we see our nation headed down, we read in the prophets about a future regathering after Christ returns and a restoration of benefits and blessings that will result from national repentance. There is encouragement with respect to the future that the prophets provide.

Fourth, prophesy also served to seal the authoritativeness of God's message by the verification of fulfilled prophecy. One of the roles is that certain prophecies preserved in the Bible have already been fulfilled. Those prophecies serve to seal the authoritativeness of God's message. They make plain that one of the proofs of the Bible is fulfilled prophecy. Certainly, many prophecies that relate to the Messiah have been fulfilled.

And there are places you can go in Ezekiel, for instance, that prophesied that Egypt would be conquered by Babylon and never again be ruled by a native prince (Ezekiel 30:10,13). People can quibble about when the book of Ezekiel was written if they want to, but any amount of quibbling doesn't do away with the fact that it's certainly been around for about 2,500 years. The point is that prophecy is still being fulfilled. Regardless of quibbling about the exact date, Ezekiel said a native prince would never again rule Egypt.

You have to understand that Egypt had been one of the primary nations that had existed. Egypt, at the time Ezekiel wrote, had existed as a major world power ruled by native princes for 2,500

years. It passed into obscurity in a matter of years and it never again, from then until now, emerged as a major power and has never again been ruled by a native prince. Outsiders and foreigners have ruled it for decades and centuries, all the way to our time.

We see that there are many prophecies that certainly testify to the authoritativeness of the Word of God. There are prophecies of cities that would be destroyed and never rebuilt and prophecies of other cities that would endure and continue to endure. Prophecy serves as a sign and a proof of the authority of God. It serves to verify the authoritativeness of God's message. It serves to encourage His people with respect to the future. It serves to remind His people that safety and blessings are dependent upon faithful adherence and obedience to God. It encourages God's people to look to and trust God and not to depend on the physical allies and other things of the around. We have in the Minor Prophets things that very directly focus in on these things.

Some of the Minor Prophets are very short. Hosea is a little longer; there are 14 chapters in Hosea. Joel is pretty short. We are going to lump some of the prophets together and cover them in the same Bible study because we are looking for a sort of overview, and I think we will have time to adequately go into it.

The next Bible study we will cover the books of Hosea and Joel. The book of Hosea is a very important prophecy. It has very detailed prophecy about Israel, things that are going to occur with God's people, Israel, and the way that God views them. Joel focuses in on the Day of the Lord and on the events surrounding the return of Jesus Christ. Clearly, the setting of it is not ancient.

Joel 2:1-2, "Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the Day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand: a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, like the morning clouds spread over the mountains. A people come, great and strong, the like of whom has never been; nor will there ever be any such after them, even for many successive generations."

Verse 11, "The Lord gives voice before His army, for His camp is very great; for strong is the One who executes His word. For the Day of the Lord is great and very terrible; who can endure it?"

Joel 3:17, and ultimately, "So you shall know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion

My holy mountain. Then Jerusalem shall be holy, and no aliens shall ever pass through her again.”

Verse 20 describes a time when Judah will dwell forever in Jerusalem from generation to generation. It is clearly a time on into the future. The primary implication of these prophecies has to do with the future. Some of them, and some of the messages, will focus in as more contemporary. We will see that as we go through it.

There's a lot in the book of Hosea. There's a lot of detailed prophecy about the fall and captivity of Israel. There's a lot of insight into some of the specific things that are going to happen and take place.

Hosea 1:11, notice, “Then the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and appoint for themselves one head; and they shall come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel!” Here is a time when Israel and Judah are going to be gathered together. That is a time yet future. There are many things that we will see as we go through Hosea that clearly focus in on what God is going to do, and we will see the obvious proof that Israel and Judah are not synonymous. Hosea is a detailed prophecy of many of the things relating to Israel and Ephraim. If you don't know who Israel and Ephraim are, then you can't understand Hosea.

Joel focuses on the Day of the Lord. It is, in some ways, a more general prophecy in terms of identifying specific nations. We will go into that next Bible study.