



The Belgic Confession of Faith Article 4

Canonical Books of the Holy Scriptures — Major and Minor Prophets

Continuing with the Canonical Books of the Holy Scriptures, we come to the Prophetic Books, of which there are sixteen. But first some explanations as to who these prophets were. In the narrow sense of the word, they were servants of God. They have also been called seers and holy men of God, and were the teachers in religion to the children of Israel.

Israel had many more prophets than those who wrote these books of the Bible or whose names are given in the Bible. We know of Elijah and Elisha, who had such an important place among the people, but there are no known writings of them. That there were others whose names we do not know can be seen in Jeremiah 29:1, where we read, *"Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and to the prophets, etc."* We only know of Ezekiel and Daniel, but there must have been more also in Babylon.

The prophets were not from a single tribe, and were of various occupations or professions. Among them we find high priests, priests, Levites, princes, and simple shepherds. As prophets they did not receive wages as, for example, the priests and Levites did. Their service did not carry on from father to son, as did the service of the priests, but a special calling of the Lord was necessary. The word which they brought was not their own, but was the Word of God. False prophets brought their own message and their own words, but the true servants of God must bring His Word, even when the message was contrary to their desires. We read that Ezekiel had to eat a roll of a book filled with the judgments of the Lord against Israel. How dreadful this was for him, but he was not allowed to bring this message with aversion; it must be sweet in his mouth, even though it was bitter in his belly. Think also of the prophet Jonah who was sent to Nineveh.

Not only men were called to this office, but also women, among whom were Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Noandiah. The message brought by the prophets and prophetesses was given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and was therefore infallible.

Placing the prophetic books in chronological order, they would probably be as follows: Obadiah, Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Because of the extent of some of these books, we speak of the great, or major, and the minor prophets. The four great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel precede the others.

ISAIAH, whose name means "the Lord is the salvation", was the son of Amos. According to the Jewish tradition, Amos was a brother of King Amaziah. Isaiah spoke to the people for almost sixty years (from 760 to 700 B.C.). He lived in Jerusalem and died as a martyr in the days of Manasseh. It is said that when he was fleeing from this wicked king, he hid himself in the trunk of a hollow tree, but was found by the soldiers. At the king's command he was sawn in pieces while in the trunk of the tree. (Hebrews 11:37 could refer to this fact).

His whole life stood in the constellation of the honor of the living God. To the wicked he preached the coming judgments of the Lord, but the faithful are encouraged that the theocracy is coming. There is no one prophet who spoke so clearly about the coming Messiah as Isaiah did, and therefore he is called the evangelist of the Old Testament.

His book can be divided into three parts: chapters 1 through 5 are more or less an introduction; chapters 6 through 39 are an announcement of the judgments over Israel, but that a remnant will be saved; and chapters 40 through 66 speak of the deliverance of God's people and the exaltation of the theocracy to the glory of that Kingdom wherein God will be all and in all. The deliverance of the Jew out of Babylon is a type of the spiritual deliverance by Jesus Christ.

JEREMIAH was a son of Hilkiah, a priest who lived in Anathoth in the tribe of Benjamin. This city was about an hour's distance from Jerusalem. Jeremiah brought God's Word to the people for about 41 years (from 629 to 588 B.C.). After Jerusalem had been destroyed and Gedaliah had been murdered, the Jews fled to Tahpanhes, a city in Egypt, and took Jeremiah the prophet with them. Here, again according to tradition, he was stoned to death by his own people. However, others say that Nebuchadnezzar brought him from Egypt to Babylon; but we do not know this to be a fact. There is a great difference between Jeremiah and his predecessor. Isaiah had the courage of a young lion, but Jeremiah was melancholy and very downcast because of the judgments of the Lord. He was a man who saw much misery.

His book can be divided into two parts: chapters 1 through 45 are prophecies against the domestic enemies, and chapters 46 through 51 are against foreign nations.

The third great prophet, EZEKIEL, was the son of Buzi and was also of the family of priests. In the year 599 B.C. he was led into captivity, which was about eleven years before the destruction of Jerusalem. Other captives carried into captivity with him were King Jehoiachin, many of the princes, and nobles and priests. Although younger than Jeremiah, Ezekiel was his contemporary. The one was called in Jerusalem, the other in Babylon to speak in the Name of the Lord. Ezekiel had been in Babylon about five years when the Lord called him to the office of prophet, and he was active in this work for about twenty-two years. For Ezekiel, as it also was for Jeremiah, the main subject of his prophetic book was the destruction of Jerusalem and its consequences. In chapter 3, verse 21, he tells of his calling to the office of prophet.

In the first part of his book, Ezekiel announces God's punishments upon the Jews because of their idolatry; in chapters 25 through 32 he speaks of the punishments of the oppressors of his people; then in chapters 33 through 48 he describes the restoration of the Jews under the government of Prince Messiah. Because of the many allegoric presentations and symbolic acts which there are in parts of this book, they are quite difficult to understand. We always are in need of the light from on high to understand God's Word, but it is especially needed for Ezekiel's book.

We mentioned briefly about the first three of the prophetic books Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and now we come to the fourth and last of the great, or major, prophets, namely DANIEL. His name means "God is my judge". When Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel was led into captivity; he was in Babylon for some years before the prophet Ezekiel came there. Daniel was of noble ancestry and for three years he was instructed at the court of Babylon. The Lord gave him much wisdom, and he was a man who tenderly loved the Lord.

In process of time, Nebuchadnezzar made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and several times he was used by the Lord to solve seemingly insurmountable problems, such as the interpretation of the dreams and the writing on the wall. After describing how the Lord called him to his office, Daniel informs us how the development of the world powers in four kingdoms will take place and also how they will be destroyed by the Lord by the stone which was cut out of the mountain without hands.

In chapters eight to twelve, more is revealed about the enmity of the world and Satan against God and His church, but that it will end in the complete destruction of the enemies and the deliverance of the church at the last day, when Christ will come to judge the quick and the dead. The victory over the world, over sin, death and Satan is Christ's, and it will be a day of terror and gladness — terror for those who continued an enemy of God and free grace to the very end, and gladness for those who by Divine grace laid the weapons of enmity down and began to cry for mercy. Then will be seen the separation in this world, but also in the church itself between the foolish and wise virgins.

On which side will we stand? If the world continues to occupy the highest place in our hearts, even though we are religious, then we will stand on the left side with those who will be rejected. May the Lord give us true wisdom to see how worthless the world really is; it is only for a moment that we are on the earth and then it is eternity. The time which we receive is a time of preparation. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; then we may see the reality and begin to seek the Lord in His Word, in prayers, and in supplications, with the question within us, "How can I ever be saved?" I know that these become an unhappy people in themselves, but in reality they are happy, because the Lord cares for them. He cares for them in this time, in their death, and also on the last day, the day of judgment; without spot or wrinkle they will go into the glory which is prepared by Christ for all His people. That many of the readers may receive this true wisdom, or receive more instructions of the Lord in this matter.

The twelve writings which now follow are all independent books, but are often included under one title — the Minor Prophets. Minor, not because they are not important, but because of their size. The Jews always wrote them together on one roll and counted them as one book, which they named, The Twelve. In the apocryphal writing of Jesus Si-rah, chapter 49:12 (written about 180 B.C.) we find this name mentioned. They are not set in chronological order, but we have them in the same order in our Bible as they are in the Hebrew Bible.

The first of the minor prophets is HOSEA, whose name means "saving", or "the Lord has saved". He was the son of Beeri and was of the ten tribes (7:5); he labored during the reign of Jeroboam II and prophesied during a period of about 60 years (790-725 B.C.). Hosea also had a message for Judah, but most of his work was in Ephraim, where, at that time, there was great prosperity. The prophecy of Jonah had been fulfilled — the borders of Israel were as in the days of old. There was still some religion in Israel, but it was only external; the golden calves were served in Dan and Bethel. Because of their disobedience, the dynasty would be cut off, and after Jeroboam's death this was fulfilled. Six months after the death of his father, Zachariah, the son of Jeroboam, was killed by Shallum. Shortly thereafter, Menahem became king, but it was not long and this kingdom would come to an end (722 B.C.), never to be restored again.

Hosea speaks of the unfaithfulness of Israel against the faithfulness of the Lord. His well known example is of his wife, who was unfaithful in their married life, and this is a picture of the situation of Israel.

Next appears the book of JOEL, whose name means "the Lord is God". He is the son of Pethuel, and was one of the oldest prophets of whom we have a book in the Bible. It appears that he lived in the days of King Joash while the godly high priest Jehoiada was still alive. He mentions the terrible plague of locusts (grasshoppers), and also the great drought. Joel advises the people to return unto the Lord, and then the Lord will return unto them and the blessings will multiply. The rain is spoken of as a symbol of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and his prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), where the words of Joel are repeated by Peter.

Following is the book of AMOS, who also prophesied in the kingdom of the ten tribes. He lived a short time before Hosea among the shepherds of Tekoa, which is located in Judah. His calling to be a prophet came two years before the great earthquake. As Joel had seen the locusts as a sign of God's judgments, so Amos saw the earthquake as a sign of God's displeasure. In those days Judah was dependent upon and subjected to Israel, and they were very prosperous times, but destruction would come because of their sins. Amos has a very vivid style, using many examples out of the realm of nature.

The Lord willing, we hope to discuss the remaining minor prophets in our next article. In reading them, may we constantly be aware that they are also speaking to us in our days.

We briefly discussed the books of Hosea, Joel, and Amos, and thereupon follows the book of OBADIAH, whose name means "servant of the Lord". He is probably the oldest of the prophets whose writings we have, and during the reign of King Jehoshaphat he was also to instruct the people of Judah (see 2 Chronicles 17:7).

In the days of King Joram, Jerusalem was plundered by the Philistines and the Arabs, and the Edomites rejoiced because of this. Obadiah, in his book which consists of only one chapter, condemns the Edomites because they did not act as a brother nation. In the first nine verses he announces the downfall of Edom, giving the reasons why this will take place (in verses 10-16), namely, their enmity against the theocracy, and then describes the victory of the theocracy by King Messiah.

Next is the book of JONAH, the son of Amittai. His name means "dove" or "pigeon", and we find him mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as living during the reign of Jeroboam II among the ten tribes of Israel. In his book he describes his mission as prophet to Nineveh. Chapters 1 and 2 tell of his calling, his disobedience, and his punishment; chapters 3 and 4 relate his second mission and the effect of his preaching.

MICAH (meaning "who is equal to the Lord?") was a prophet both in Judah and Israel. He was a contemporary of Isaiah, and also was similar in nature. Both have spoken of the promised Messiah, although Micah points particularly to Bethlehem. He warned very severely against immorality; both countries at that time lived far from the Lord and the prophet knew that their destruction was coming. Samaria would fall and Assyria would become the most dangerous enemy for Israel, which was later fulfilled, as this was the nation where they were taken into exile and from where they never returned. In the days of Jeremiah, which was a century later, the people still remembered the statements of Micah. (See Jeremiah 26:18 in connection with Micah 3:12).

Then follows the book of NAHUM, which means "comforter". He was a native of Elkosh in Galilee, and brought the word of God during the invasion of the Assyrians in the days of Manasseh, when Jerusalem was saved by the wonders of the Lord. This did not mean the end of Assyria and its capital city, Nineveh, no, its power was growing and it seemed that no one nation was able to destroy them. But the prophet Nahum saw very clearly that their foundation was only sand. Fifty years before it was to take place, the Holy Spirit showed Nahum, as clearly as if he were an eye-witness of the event, how this city would come to an end. It was about 660 B.C. when he prophesied of it, and it happened in about 612 B.C. (Nahum 3:8-10). Nahum's book is called "The book of the vision", which might possibly be the fact that it was only written, and not spoken by Nahum.

The next in order is the book of the prophet HABAKKUK, whose name means "embracing" The time of his preaching is not mentioned, but from its contents we understand that it was shortly before the exile of Judah in Babylon (Habakkuk 1:5 reads, *"I will work a work in your days."*) His warnings are for the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah. He laments because of the sin of his people and reveals that the Chaldeans will be the rod in God's hand. The main object of Habakkuk is not to speak of the judgments over Judah, but to encourage them that a better time will come after those dark days. Then he speaks of the five-fold woe which will come upon the proud Chaldeans. Habakkuk urges his people to expect their deliverance only from the Lord; such people will not be ashamed.

The name of the prophet ZEPHANIAH means "the Lord hides". He was probably a great-grandson of King Hezekiah, and he was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. In his days the God-fearing King Josiah reigned in Jerusalem. Josiah was a great reformer; there was no place for the former idolatry in his kingdom, and Jerusalem was also cleansed from idols. He restored the temple and the service of the Lord, but the people followed him externally. For this reason the judgments of the Lord would not take place in the days of Josiah, but after his death. Zephaniah concludes his book with the promise of deliverance and prosperity for God's children under the government of King Messiah.

Thus far all the prophets had spoken before Judah went into exile; the last three which we have yet to discuss lived and prophesied after Judah had returned from Babylon. The first of these is HAGGAI, which places us in the second year of the Persian king, Darius (521-485 B.C.). Haggai's words are directed mainly to Zerubbabel and Joshua, reproving them because the people are not building the temple as the Lord required. The book contains four messages: (1) a stimulus to commence with the building, (2) a promise of the glory of the temple because the Messiah will enter it, (3) a warning against resting in external religion, and (4) a promise of glory for the spiritual seed of David.

Then follows ZECHARIAH, whose name means "the Lord remembered". He was called two months after Haggai, but his book is different than the others. After a short warning to turn from their evil ways and turn unto the Lord, he describes three visions, reminding what the Lord had done in the past and promising what He will be in the future. Zechariah closes with a symbolical crowning of the High Priest Joshua, and predicts the coming of Christ and the blessing connected with this fact.

The last prophet of the Old Testament is MALACHI (meaning "my angel, my messenger"), who spoke during the second visit of Nehemiah at Jerusalem. The temple was then finished and the religious ceremonies had been restored according to God's command. But it was still a sad time, as there was no true love for the Lord. Many had established relationships with the heathens, bringing them further and further from the service of the Lord. Malachi also closes with the promise of the coming Messiah and of His forerunner, John the Baptist.

We conclude our discussion of the Old Testament books with a few dates which should be remembered. They are not positively determined, but are generally accepted to be correct.

1050 B.C.

- David became king;

973 B.C.

- Division in the kingdom;

722 B.C.

- The end of the kingdom of the ten tribes;

586 B.C.

- The end of the kingdom of Judah;

605-535 B.C.

- The seventy years of exile in Babylon;

425 B.C.

- Malachi, the last prophet.

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