

Hosea

The prophet Hosea in the 8th century BCE protested violently against Israelite religious practices.

An inspiring quote

“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6).

The Book of Hosea

Hosea came from the north and preached at the same time as Amos. He discovered the tenderness of God through personal experience. He loved his wife, although she behaved badly towards him; through his love he succeeded in restoring to her the feelings she had had when she was young. This is how God loves us: not because we are good, but so that we can become good (Hosea 1-3).

The book begins with God’s command to Hosea to marry an unfaithful wife who he loved passionately and the first few chapters describe what happened when he did so. Chapter 4 onwards contains a range of messages from God via Hosea, first to the people of Israel (chapters 4-11) and then to the people of Israel and Judah (chapters 11-14), about the anger God felt because of their betrayal of him through injustice, corruption and their worship of other gods. Woven between these messages of doom are some messages of hope, pointing to what God’s people can look forward to beyond the times of trouble.

Who wrote this book?

The author is announced as Hosea in verses 1:1-2. He was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Hosea, in Hebrew, means salvation but Hosea is popularly termed “the prophet of doom”.

What kind of book is it?

This book is made up of prophecies from God to his people. Where the book is unusual – though not unique – are its symbolic prophecies. Hosea’s marriage to Gomer in Hosea 1-3 symbolizes the relationship between God and his people – her infidelity is seen as Israel’s infidelity; Hosea’s hurt and anger at this to be God’s hurt and anger.

The themes of the book

The themes of this book include:

(1) *the horror of faithlessness to God*. The importance of remaining steadfastly loyal to the Lord is not a regional concern; all God’s people in all parts of the world are constantly tempted to compromise or even abandon faithfulness to God.

(2) *God's deep compassion for his people.* Despite his people's utter faithlessness over many generations, God cannot forsake them once and for all. "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender" (Hosea 11:8). God speaks to his wayward people in terms of deep affection. He has bound himself to them, and while he must discipline them, even the pain of discipline will serve to restore them (Hosea 1:6–7; 2:14–23; 3:1–5; 11:8–11; 14:4–5).

(3) *Divine sovereignty and rule.* Almost one hundred times throughout Hosea, God speaks in the first person: "I . . ." It is the Lord who will judge his people; it is the Lord who will bring punishments on his people; and yet it is the Lord who will have mercy on his people. The affairs of his covenant people, and the affairs of the nations of the world, are in God's hand.

During the Church year, we hear readings from

Hosea's message of God's passionate love for his people and his call for renewed fidelity have lost none of their relevance for today. At Mass, Hosea is read on a semi-continuous basis in July on weekdays Monday-Friday of Week 14 (Year II).

Hosea was the inspiration for the hymn, "Come back to me with all your heart" (Hosea 14:1). (You can listen to it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=84Z5pBxtUuk)

How is the book structured?

1:1	Introduction
1:2-3:5	Hosea's marriage as a metaphor for the covenant between God and his people
4:1-11:11	God's lawsuit against Israel, ending with a prophecy of hope
11:12-14:19	God's lawsuit against Israel and Judah ending with a prophecy of hope

Something for today

Believers today can be confident that as they trust him wholeheartedly, they cannot finally be separated from the Lord's love for them, even amid suffering, persecution, sickness, and economic hardship. This is great encouragement for believers around the world today.

Joel

The book of Joel is a difficult book to classify. It seems to be as much a liturgy of penance as a collection of prophetic oracles.

An inspiring quote

“Yet, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (Joel 2:12-13).

The Book of Joel

The opening section of the book of Joel focuses on a plague of locusts that descends on the land and causes famine. Joel sees this as a call to repentance. The second half of the book sees God responding and promising to remove the locust plague.

We don't know when this 'ecological' prophet preached. The pollution everywhere seemed to him to be a sign of the coming of the day of the Lord, the day when God would lay bare people's sins. However, God would put his spirit into those who had been stripped in this way and those who call upon the Lord shall be delivered and saved (Joel 2:32).

The book ends with a speculation about what the final day of the Lord will be like (as opposed to this temporary one): that day, Joel says, will see God's justice fully enacted in the world. The nations who have opposed God will be punished and Israel will be blessed. Ultimately, all the nations will recognise Yahweh in that day (Joel 3:17).

Who wrote this book?

Joel, son of Pethuel, is said to be the author of the book; but we know nothing about him.

What kind of book is it?

The Book of Joel is the second of the 12 Minor Prophets. The striking feature of this book is that it is very like the Psalms of Lament. It begins with a problem, something to grieve for, states with confidence that God will act and ends in praise of the God who saves.

The theme of the book

The theme of judgement runs all the way through this book. The locust plague is seen as God's judgement on his people and Joel looks forward to a greater day of judgement in the future. It is hard not to feel uncomfortable as you read this.

Liturgical note

The Church follows Peter's speech at Pentecost in taking up the emphasis in Joel (3:1) on the coming of the Spirit at the last times, and on the threatening nature of the final judgement. So Joel provides the first reading for Ash Wednesday, and for the Vigil of Pentecost. At Mass, two passages from Joel are also read on Friday and Saturday in October on weekdays of Week 27 (Year I). Joel is telling the priests to put on sackcloth and lament; it is a day of darkness and gloom.

How is the book structured?

1:1	introduction
1:2-2:17	the locust plague
2:18-27	God hears the people's cry and responds
2:18-3:21	what will happen on the day of the Lord

Something for today

The point is that it is in God's time — not ours — that justice will come.

Amos

The basic message of Amos stresses God's moral rule over the entire world and the divine demands for justice and concern for the outcast or oppressed. Amos has a surprising universalism in his outlook: God cares for every nation.

An inspiring quote

"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11).

The Book of Amos

Amos was a shepherd and a prophet from Tekoa, near Bethlehem on the edge of the Judean desert. He was one of the first, perhaps the first of the prophets whose work was written down, though the book as we have it now has been slightly elaborated.

On two occasions, Amos speaks of his call. He describes it (Amos 7:10-17) and he tries to make sense of it (Amos 3:3-8). A prophet is someone who is taken into the council of God and thereafter sees everything in the light of it, trying to decipher God's plan in his life and in the events of his time. His social teaching is based on the covenant; it is not an assurance which allows people to live in any way they like. It is a responsibility. "You alone, of all the families of the earth have I acknowledged" God declared "therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:1-2).

If God punishes people, it is to bring about their conversion. His warning that the punishment would be "a famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11) was a token of God's highest displeasure. At any time, and mostly in a time of trouble, a famine of the word of God was the heaviest judgment, for when they find themselves besieged by the enemy, they will find no prophet, no one to lighten their distress.

Who wrote this book?

As with many of the prophetic books, these are thought to be the words of Amos, though they may have been collected and written down by someone else.

What kind of book is it?

This is a book of prophecy. Amos is a collection of Amos' prophecies, which also contains a biographical account of conflict between Amos and Jeroboam, the king of Israel at the time, and a few fragments of psalms.

The themes of the book

The major themes in the book of Amos – judgment, injustice, lament, the sin of God's people, repentance – are not easy subjects. Reading them today we may well be tempted to downplay the force of the message and dilute the challenge; but, this

message lands on the Church today with as much force and necessity as it landed on the people of God 2,700 years ago.

Liturgical notes

The insistence of Amos on social justice and the care of the needy echoes powerfully in our day. In July, on the 15th Sunday (Year B), his mission is compared to that of Jesus' disciples. In September, on the 25th Sunday (Year C), his warning against fraud introduces the parable of the Crafty Steward; and, on the following Sunday, his warning against luxurious living introduces the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In June, on weekdays, this prophecy is read during Week 13 (Year II).

How is the book structured?

1:1-2	opening introduction
2:3-2:16	judgements against nations surrounding Israel
3:1-6:14	judgements against Israel
7:1-9:10	five visions of judgement including a confrontation between Amos and Jeroboam
9:11-15	hope for the future

Something for today

The prophecy of Amos carries an important message for the Church today. In light of massive worldwide needs such as poverty, lack of clean water, malnutrition, and inadequate medical care, climate change, some believers must go out to those parts of the world where help is needed.

Obadiah

The small book of Obadiah, whose 21 verses make it the shortest book in the Old Testament, gives us another picture of the terrible conditions in Judah during the period of exile.

An inspiring quote

"The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head" (Obadiah 1:15).

The Book of Obadiah

This Book of Obadiah, the shortest of all the prophetic books, is named after the prophet Obadiah, a native of Judah. In it, judgement is uttered against the kingdom of Edom because of how it treated Judah and Jerusalem. It is set at the time of the exile and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE and criticises Edom for looting Jerusalem when the city was at its lowest ebb. The book holds up as a vision of a time when Judah's enemies will be defeated and Judah will be restored once more. It is an unusual prophecy in that it defends Judah entirely and is not interested in anything that Judah might have done wrong in the run up to the exile.

Obadiah is one of the angry books of the Bible, and, as with a number of the psalms, challenges us to think deeply about how we express our more negative emotions to God. Having said that, the message of Obadiah is that despite Israel's sin, God will judge those who afflict his people (Obadiah 1–15) and he will restore his people (Obadiah 16–18), who then will be an everlasting blessing to the whole world (Obadiah 19–21).

Who wrote this book?

The prophet Obadiah wrote this book; although there is little evidence about him either in this book or elsewhere. All we know is that he lived at the time of the exile – though probably had not been taken to Babylon as he was there to see the aftermath – and protested at what the Edomites had done.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a very short book of prophecy, revealing the anger and resentment felt by the people of Judah that the Edomites, their near neighbours were prepared to cash in on their time of devastation.

The themes of the book

The danger of pride. Throughout the Bible we are taught that God opposes pride and is drawn to humility. Pride was precisely Edom's problem: "Your pride of heart has led you astray, you whose home is in the holes in the rocks in your lofty dwelling, who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?' ...

though you soared like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, I would still fling you down again – it is the Lord who speaks” (Obadiah 3–4).

Divine retribution. “As you have done,” says the Lord, “it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head” (Obadiah 15).

The universal kingdom of God. The closing verses of Obadiah ring with the glorious promise of a spreading international kingdom under the people of God, “and the kingdom shall be the Lord’s” (Obadiah. 21).

Liturgical note

The Book of Obadiah is not used at Mass nor in the Liturgy of the Hours.

How is the book structured?

vv 1-4	introduction
vv 5-9	judgement on Edom is pronounced
vv 10-14	how Edom sinned against Judah
vv 15-18	the punishment that will happen on the day of the Lord
vv19-21	a vision of the restoration of Israel

Something for today

Our God is a God of unswerving justice who will do only what is right and just. This is a severe and sober caution for those who oppose the people of God, yet it also gives great hope to God’s people as they experience affliction of various kinds around the world. Whatever is done to them by those hostile to the gospel will one day be repaid by God himself.

Jonah

Jonah is found among the prophetic books; but it is totally unlike any other prophetic book. It is the story about a prophet; and, right from the beginning, we are warned to take this prophet with a grain of salt.

An inspiring quote

“In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me” (Jonah 2:2).

The Book of Jonah

This entertaining tale of the disobedient prophet and the responsive people of Nineveh is a satire on Israel’s self-righteousness. It is one of the best-loved stories of the Old Testament. God called Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) and call them to repentance. Jonah was, to say the least, reluctant and fled in the opposite direction (Jonah 1:3).

Jonah found a ship going to Tarshish; he paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the word of the Lord. But the Lord hurled a mighty wind upon the sea, and such a great storm came upon the sea that the ship was in danger of breaking up (Jonah 1:4). The men cast lots to find out just who might be responsible for this disaster – and the lot fell on Jonah; and the men realised that Jonah had fled from the Lord’s presence (Jonah 1:7, 10). The storm was growing worse and worse – so Jonah told them to throw him overboard into the sea (Jonah 1:11-12), whereupon the sea ceased its raging (Jonah 1:15). Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah up and he remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17).

Jonah prayed to God for help. The fish regurgitated Jonah (Jonah 2:10); and he continued on to Nineveh where he called the people to repentance. They repented and Jonah was upset with God. Outside the city, he sat down and waited for God to wreak vengeance on the city, which didn’t happen. Because of their repentance, God changed his mind (Jonah 3:10). Jonah was angry and remonstrated with God. God caused a plant to grow to shadow him from the sun and then killed it. Jonah was upset again. The book ends with a question from God to Jonah about whether he was right to be merciful or not.

Who wrote this book?

No one knows anything about the author of this book; but it must have been someone with a great sense of humour.

What kind of book is it?

This book is prophecy with a twist. Jonah was a terrible prophet – reluctant, grumpy and easily upset. In contrast, the people (all non-Israelites) with whom he engaged, behave impeccably.

The themes of the book

The compassion of God is the key theme of Jonah. It is the note on which the book ends, as the Lord asks a despondent Jonah, “Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11). God’s merciful compassion is not restricted to insiders. His mercy is for all who repent. Divine compassion is shown not to those who think they deserve such compassion but to those who receive it with repentance and humility—as the Ninevites did.

Other themes include God’s sovereign purposes and the universal need for grace. God does whatever it takes—from a storm at sea to a great fish to the miraculous response of repentance by the Ninevites—to bring his boundless compassion to the nations. The Ninevites needed grace for their wickedness. But Jonah, the insider, the prophet, also needed grace. He was shown grace in the belly of the fish, and yet his heart remained stubborn even at the end of the story. He is resentful, refusing to feel the same pity for Nineveh that he felt for a small plant (Jonah 4:5–10). In short, he is a sinner—a hard-hearted man who is in need of mercy, the same mercy that God extended to the Ninevites.

Liturgical Note

The message of Jonah who satirises the professionally religious, remains valuable (and uncomfortable) even in the Church today. Jonah is read in January on the 3rd Sunday (Year B) to prepare for John the Baptist’s message of repentance to the self-righteous. On weekdays, Jonah is read in October from Monday to Wednesday in Week 27 (Year 1).

How is the book structured?

1:1-17	Jonah’s call and flight
2:1-10	Jonah’s prayer from the belly of a fish
3:1-10	Jonah’s reluctant message of repentance
4:1-11	Jonah’s lesson about the goodness of God

What is God conveying in this story?

The message of Jonah is an urgent call for the global church to extend to others the compassion they themselves have received. One way we can do this today is through tangible acts of love such as financial generosity, hospitality, sharing of resources and personal possessions, and advocacy on behalf of those in need politically or socially.

Micah

If Isaiah seemed to be totally concerned with the behaviour and life of Jerusalem the capital city, and with the presence of the holy God that dwelt in its midst, Micah seems nearly the opposite.

An inspiring quote

“What does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

The Book of Micah

The prophet Micah prophesied at a similar time to the prophets First Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. Much of his prophecy pronounces disaster for Samaria if they will not mend their ways, a disaster realised at the Sack of Samaria in 721BCE. He uses the imagery of the countryside, owls, jackals and especially sheep and shepherding, as well as the imagery of arable harvest, gleaning, vines and figs.

Whereas Hosea and Amos prophesied in the northern Kingdom of Israel, Micah and First Isaiah prophesied in the southern Kingdom of Judah, though their messages were addressed to both nations. Like the other three prophets, Micah condemned the attitude of the wealthy, particularly the way in which they oppressed the poor with their actions, for insincere worship and venal priests, for its corrupt judges and cheating traders.

God acknowledges repentance. A most memorable text is Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”.

Who wrote this book?

The prophet Micah probably spoke most of the words contained in this book although considerable parts of it reflect post-exilic times and must be credited to some who cherished the words of the prophet and added to them.

What kind of book is it?

This is a book of prophecy. An unusual feature of Micah is that its subject matter changes abruptly from judgement to hope and back again, which makes it hard to read in one go.

The theme of the book

The theme of the book is being God’s chosen people and – despite their sin – God will restore humanity from all the nations of the earth as anticipated in Micah 4:15. This restoration is beautifully expressed in the words of worship that close Micah’s prophecy: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he

delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot” (Mic. 7:18–19).

Liturgical notes

On the final Sunday of Advent in Year C, Micah’s promise of the Messiah prepares for Elizabeth’s greeting of Jesus in Mary’s womb. His prophecy is read at Mass also in July on some weekdays of Week 16 (Year II).

How is the book structured?

1:1-2:11	the looming disaster for both Israel and Judah
2:12-13	a short word of hope
3:1-12	messages of condemnation against corrupt leaders
4:1-5:15	mixed messages but with a strong strand of hope
6:1-7:7	God’s lawsuit against Israel
7:8-20	a liturgy of repentance

God Speaks to us today

Micah’s major criticisms of the leaders were clear. Do you think, through Micah, that God is saying that today’s leaders are risking the same criticism?

Nahum

Zephaniah had lived before Josiah's reform and focused his zeal mostly against the evils of idolatry and faithlessness in Judah itself. Nahum provides a different view taken from within the time of reform and directed mostly against the evil in Assyria.

An inspiring quote

“The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him, even in a rushing flood” (Nahum 1:7-8a).

The Book of Nahum

The Book of Nahum is a vivid psalm on the wrath of the Lord (Nahum 1:1-8), and a short interchange about the unexpected delivery of Judah (1:9-2:1), precedes the main subject of the prophecy, pitiless exultation at the destruction of Nineveh. Nahum has visions of chariots fighting at the overthrow of Nineveh long before it happened and he sees the ruin of the Assyrian capital. It is a vengeful poem and it shows the violent hatred felt for Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which had sacked Samaria in 721 BCE. It was, in turn, sacked by the Babylonians in 612 BCE.

The book reflects the joy which greeted the news that Nineveh, the capital of hated Assyria, was destroyed. Nahum is a vengeful celebration of an enemy's defeat. It was written to the southern kingdom of Judah after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, prophesying the demise of the Assyrian empire. The promise of hope was designed to give Judah encouragement to persevere in the face of the tyranny and oppression that they were experiencing from the Assyrian empire. The prophecies appear to be addressed to Assyria but the real audience is Judah.

Who wrote this book?

This book is named after the Galilean prophet Nahum the Elkoshite, who wrote it.

What kind of book is it?

It is a book of Prophecy. Nahum takes the form of a series of prophecies depicting God's anger which, as the book unfolds, is clearly directed towards the Assyrians.

The theme of the book

Nahum's prophecy resounds with one key theme above all others: the horrifying experience of being judged by God when he is one's enemy. Listen to the way Nahum describes the punitive action of the Lord: “The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. . . . His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him (Nahum 1:5-6).

The prophet is searching for language that will communicate the awful terror awaiting those who reject God and abuse God's people. For those who “take refuge in him,” God “is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble” (Nahum 1:7).

Liturgical notes

Despite Nahum's daunting message of the violent destruction of those who use violence on the People of God, this prophecy is only read once at Mass in August, week 18 (Year II) telling the listeners "woe to the city soaked in blood, full of lies, stuffed with booty, whose plunderers know no end!" (Nahum 2:1, 3: 3:1-3, 6-7).

How is the book structured?

- 1:1 introduction
- 1:2-8 an acrostic poem laying out God's anger
- 1:9-15 a prophecy of the destruction of God's enemies and the restoration of God's people.
- 2:1-3:19 the future destruction of Assyria

Something for today

God is just and God is committed to justice and will not allow any arrogant, violent or evil nation to endure forever. However, while God defeats evil, He is also good and cares for the innocent. He will provide a refuge on the day of distress for anyone who humbles himself before God, believes in God's justice and trusts that in his time he will bring down oppressors in every time and place.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk lived shortly after Nahum and describes a time when Babylon was taking over the Near East from the fallen Assyrians. Habakkuk describes Babylon as the scourge of God causing terror everywhere.

An inspiring quote

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).

The Book of Habakkuk

The Book of Habakkuk consists of a conversation between Habakkuk and God about the injustice of the world. It falls crisply into three parts. First, a dialogue between the prophet and the Lord about unjust suffering (Habakkuk 1:1-2:4): the prophet twice complains at the triumph of the unjust oppressor and the Lord replies, saying that he was sending the Chaldeans or Babylonians to punish the wicked.

In the second part (Habakkuk 2:5-20), Habakkuk protested that this was using wickedness to punish wickedness; God responded again by promising that all the perpetrators of violence would eventually be punished.

The third part is an epic psalm celebrating the Lord’s control over the powers of nature and with an expectation that God would act again.

Who wrote this book?

The prophet Habakkuk is mentioned twice in the book (Habakkuk 1:1 and 3:1) so it makes sense to think that he wrote it. Some point out that the name Habakkuk means “embrace” or “wrestle” and this seems to be what he is doing in the book.

What kind of book is it?

It is a book of prophecy and, as such, it is unusual since it is largely made up of a conversation between Habakkuk and God, rather than messages from God to God’s people, about Habakkuk’s fears for the world around him.

The theme of the book

The major theme of Habakkuk is trying to grow from a faith of perplexity and doubt to the height of absolute trust in God. Habakkuk addresses his concerns over the fact that God will use the Babylonian empire to execute judgment on Judah for their sins. Habakkuk openly questions the wisdom of God.

Liturgical notes

The readings from Habakkuk at Mass in October (27th Sunday (Year C) and in August on Saturday in the 18th Week (Year 2) stress the need for endurance in faith. On both occasions the same reading is used from the beginning of the book about

how “the upright man will live by his faithfulness” (Habakkuk 2:4) – a phrase repeatedly quoted by St. Paul in Romans.

How is the book structured?

1:1	introduction
1:2-4	Habakkuk’s first lament
1:5-11	God’s first reply
1:12-2:1	Habakkuk’s second lament
2:2-20	God’s second reply
3:1-19	Habakkuk’s prayer of praise to God

Something for today

We are called to trust in the Lord – even though it is often difficult to see the hand of God when we are confused and surrounded by natural disasters, poor stewardship of the earth’s resources, political corruption, hunger, economic instability, and a thousand other frustrations and disappointments.

Zephaniah

About the time of Josiah's crowning, the book of Zephaniah records for us the voice of reaction against the idolatry practiced in Manasseh's years. Zephaniah was a fiery preacher whose wrath against pagan practices and hatred of Assyria were matched only by his devotion to Yahweh.

An inspiring quote

"The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

The Book of Zephaniah

The first verse of the book dates Zephaniah's ministry to the reign of Josiah. It opens with a description of the day of the Lord which is characterised as bringing destruction upon the world. It itemises the human beings as well as the animals, who will be swept away before the wrath of God. This prophecy seems to promise destruction for everyone – in Judah and in the nations around – and there is very little hope on offer at all to the recipients of its message.

This is one of the more bleak of the prophetic books. The first part of the book (Zephaniah 1:1-3:8) is a tragic recognition of the situation. The only potential glimmer of hope talks of the importance of seeking the Lord, though no deliverance is promised to those who do (Zephaniah 2:1-3). The same Hebrew word keeps recurring, though in English, it is translated by a longer phrase: draw near. . . . Zephaniah is dismayed; however hard he looks, in the midst of the people, there is no one who is righteous, save God: but he stands alone. Jerusalem does not draw near to her God (Zephaniah 3:2). And, the great day of the Lord's wrath is near.

Since powerful men, kings, prophets and priests have gone wrong, the prophet turns to those who are poor in heart, those who do not pride themselves in their own strength, but put their trust in God (Zephaniah 2:3). In this way Zephaniah is the pioneer of a theme – that of spiritual poverty – which will develop further in the New Testament. However the love of the Lord is strongest of all. God finally sees when he will be able to be in the midst of his people and the people come to a renewed relationship with God.

Who wrote this book?

The opening verse attributes the book to Zephaniah, who is said to be a distant descendant of Hezekiah: "The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah, son of Amon of Judah (Zephaniah 1:1).

What kind of book is it?

This book is the ninth of the 12 Minor Prophets. It is a prophecy almost entirely focused on the day of the Lord.

The theme of the book

The dominant theme of the book is the “day of the Lord,” which the prophet sees approaching as a consequence of the sins of Judah. A remnant will be saved (the “humble and lowly”) through purification by judgment.

Liturgical note

Zephaniah’s messianic promises are taken up for three readings in Advent. On the 3rd Sunday of Advent (Year C), and on weekdays during that week (in both Years 1 and 2), we read about how Messianic salvation is promised to all the poor in spirit. His message of lowliness is read on the 4th Sunday (Year A) as a preparation for the Gospel reading of the Beatitudes.

How is the book structured?

1:1	introduction
1:2-18	destruction is proclaimed
2:1-3	seek the Lord even though it does not guarantee salvation
2:4-15	messages of judgement against the nations
3:1-13	further messages of judgement
3:14-20	God will bring hope and restoration to the remnant

Something for today

The message of Zephaniah to the global church of the 21st century is the certainty of the coming “day of the Lord” (Zephaniah 1:7). On that day, punishment will be executed on all God’s enemies from many nations (Zephaniah 2:11; 3:8) and salvation will be granted to all God’s people, also from many nations (Zephaniah 3:9–10).

Haggai

Haggai is one of the shortest books among the Old Testament prophets - only two chapters, containing four oracles, all dated between August and December 520BCE.

An inspiring quote

“What God is preparing for your future is greater than anything you could ever imagine” (Haggai 2:9).

The Book of Haggai

Haggai is the first of the post-Exilic prophets. It encourages those who have recently returned from exile in Babylon to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Haggai was upset that people were living in fine houses while God’s Temple remained in ruins and argued that the people’s lack of prosperity was attributable to the Temple being in ruins. Haggai declared that God would make the second Temple greater and more glorious than the first. It is similar in some parts of its message to its companion book Zechariah.

There are four short passages dated from August to December 520 BCE, shortly after the first group of exiles returned from Babylon. Haggai stresses that the rebuilding of the Temple is of primary importance, a pre-condition of the Lord’s blessing. Prosperity will only come when God’s house is at the heart of restoration programmes.

Who wrote this book?

Haggai was the author of this book. He was probably one of the first to return from Babylon. His grave and Nahum’s grave are venerated on the Mount of Olives to this day.

What kind of book is it?

This is a book of prophecy with a clear aim and, indeed, outcome. Haggai argued strongly for the rebuilding of the Temple and the book recounts that he was successful in this. As a result, the book is a mix of prophecies and narratives.

The themes of the book

The restoration of God’s house is a key theme. A decaying Temple signifies a decaying relationship with the Lord; it brings weakness rather than holiness to the people (Haggai 2:14). The prophecy is delivered by the hand of Haggai; but it is God’s word that is spoken. The phrase, “Lord of hosts” occurs 14 times in the 38 verses of this short book.

The Lord gives the divine word, controls the fortunes of his people and nations; the Lord directs nature and motivates his people to action. But the people must work. A restored house will bring glory to God and blessing to the people (Haggai 2:19) but physical and hard work is needed.

Liturgical notes

There are two readings at Mass in Week 25 (Year 1) one on Thursday (Haggai 1:1-8) and one on Friday (Haggai 1:15-2:9). The first one is about Haggai's promises of the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem; and, in the second one, the Lord promises that he will fill the Temple with glory and guarantees God's presence among his people.

How is the book structured?

1:1-11	prophetic call to rebuild the Temple
1:12-15	the people obey and begin to build it
2:1-9	God promised that the second Temple would be glorious
2:10-19	Haggai asks the priests to declare what is clean or unclean
2:20-23	Zerubbabel is identified as the chosen one

The Lord declared:

The Lord declared, "I am with you" (Haggai 1:13, 2:4). In a fallen world, in which it is often difficult to feel God's presence amid trials of various kinds, the message of Haggai to the global church is the promise of the presence of God.

Zechariah

Zechariah preached in the same period as did Haggai; but the present book of Zechariah combines Zechariah's own words with a series of later oracles.

An inspiring quote

“Not by my strength but his” (Zechariah 4:6)

The Book of Zechariah

The 14 chapters which make up the book as we now have it bring together the preaching of two prophets. The first eight chapters of Zechariah takes up the preaching of Haggai, but he does so in a language of his own which is already that of the apocalypses.

The book is named after the prophet Zechariah, contemporary and near neighbour of Haggai. It was almost 70 years after the exile, the Israelites were experiencing hardships and wondered if prophetic promises of a New Jerusalem would ever be fulfilled. The first part (Zechariah 1-8) consists of eight visions which foretell the rebuilding of the Temple, the reestablishment of the authority of the High Priest (Joshua) and the re-emergence of the kingship (Branch).

Scholars say that the second part (Zechariah 9-14) were written by a prophet from the time of Alexander. The arrival of this young king, who overthrew the powerful Persians, raised people's hopes: it castigates ancient oppressors (Egypt; Assyria) and the newly arrived Greeks. Zechariah looks to a time when the yoke will be lifted. Early Christians saw many prophecies of the Messiah in these chapters.

Who wrote this book?

The first eight chapters come from Zechariah and the remainder from the days following the takeover of Palestine by Alexander the Great (336-323 BCE) and his Greek cohorts.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a book of prophecy.

The themes of the book

One of the themes of this book is worldwide salvation. “Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. . . . And he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9:9–10).

Another theme we see throughout Zechariah is the joy that comes with God's merciful redemption of his people. The feasts that will be celebrated at the time of Zion's coming restoration will be “seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts” (Zechariah 8:19).

Throughout Zechariah, we also see the metaphor of “shepherd” applied to those who lead God’s people—more often than in any other prophet (Zechariah 10:2; 11:4, 7, 9, 15, 16, 17; 13:7).

Liturgical note

The best-known use of Zechariah in the liturgy is the quotation on Palm Sunday, “Behold your king comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). This passage is also used on the 14th Sunday (Year A) to underline the Gospel passage about Jesus “gentle and humble in heart”. On the 12th Sunday (Year C) we have a foretaste of the mourning for the death of an only-begotten son (Zechariah 12:11-12). Zechariah is read three times on the Saturday of Week 25 and weekdays during Week 26 (Year I) to show the high degree of estimation in which Jerusalem and the Jews would hereafter be held, by foreign nations, when those among them, who were piously disposed to worship Jehovah the true God, would come to worship him at Jerusalem, as a place of peculiar sanctity.

How is the book structured?

1:1-6	the first part: a summons to conversion
1:7-7:14	the visions
8:1-23	the prospect of messianic salvation
9:1-11:17	the second part: the new Promised Land
12:1-14:23	the deliverance and restoration of Jerusalem

Something for today

Zechariah’s prophecy presents a vision of a globally minded God on a mission to restore the world to the way it was originally created to be.

Malachi

The prophet Malachi is the last book in the canon of the Old Testament. It is not dated and the author is unknown.

An inspiring quote

“You will be my treasured possession . . .” (Malachi 3:17).

The Book of Malachi

When Malachi was preaching, the Temple had been rebuilt. Worship had begun again; but so had the bad pre-exilic habits. Rites were performed, but without great care and people were being unjust and unfaithful.

Malachi reacted vigorously, and his message had great influence. His book takes the form of six dialogues between God and his people, a prelude to the definitive dialogue to the gospel, “I was hungry . . . When, Lord, did we see you hungry? . . .” (Matthew 25:31-40). I love you, says God. And you say, “In what way do you love us?” This refrain, “And you say” occurs eight times, directed against a nation of arguers. It is repeated to lay bare the sin which is carefully tucked away: the sin of those who offer their left-overs to God (Malachi 1:6ff), of priests who do not preach the word of God (Malachi 2:1ff), of those who repudiate their wives (Malachi 2:10ff) and of those who cannot even distinguish between good and evil (Malachi (2:17ff).

The Book of Malachi was written at a time, after the return from exile, when many of the people had stopped obeying the law or listening to God at all. Malachi calls people to repentance and promises that God would send another messenger to the people of Israel in the future.

Who wrote this book?

The book is named after Malachi; but nothing is known of Malachi. Indeed, since the name means “my messenger” (Malachi 3:1), the author may be hiding in anonymity.

What kind of book is it?

This is another book of prophecy. Malachi is a prophecy of challenge and of hope, encouraging people back to full following of the law but also pointing to another messenger who would come and show them the way.

The themes of the book

The theme is of the messenger – Malachi is a messenger but he points to another one. Notice too, the theme of covenant to Malachi – and, in particular, what he expects people to do in order to follow the covenant fully.

Liturgical note

On the 31st Sunday of the year (Year A) Malachi's warning to the corrupt Temple priests prepares for Jesus' warning to the Pharisees. On the 33rd Sunday (Year C), his eschatological warning of purifying fire prepares for Jesus' eschatological threats against the Temple (Malachi 3:19-20). On the Feast of the Presentation (2nd February), the prophecy "I am sending my messenger to prepare a way before me" (Malachi 3:1) is applied to Jesus. That same passage is read on 23rd December, and Malachi is read once more in Week 27 (Year I).

How is the book structured?

1:1-5	the destruction of Edom
1:6-2:9	a corrupt priesthood
2:9-17	the importance of the covenant
3:1-7	the messenger that is coming
3:8-18	giving God everything that he deserves
4:1-6	the day of the Lord

Something for today

Malachi focuses on being faithful. We should reflect on what being faithful means for us as Christians today.