

Learning to Read
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Joel 4:16a (BHS)

וַיִּהְיֶה מִצִּיּוֹן יְשׁוּעָה
וּמִירוּשָׁלַם יִתֵּן קוֹלוֹ
וַרְעִשׂוּ שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ

Joel 3:16a (NASB)

The LORD roars from Zion
And utters His voice from Jerusalem,
And the heavens and the earth tremble.

You may readily recognize Yahweh and Zion in line 1 and Jerusalem in line 2. Note the preposition מִ, “from.” From context NASB glosses *natan* as “utters,” although it has the basic meaning, “give.” Note that Hebrew Joel has 4 chapters; English has only 3.

While I was musing in the cafeteria about how to teach a new course on the Minor Prophets, a student approached me to say that he was planning to register. I asked him to pray for me, since I was uncertain of how to read them. He was confused by that. So I told him, “Well, are they twelve books? Or only one?” This essay draws on the work of scholars such as Paul House (1990).

Our verse begins the last stanza of Joel with a rare phrase in the Bible, “Yahweh roars from Zion and from Jerusalem gives his voice.” It stands out, being memorable and vibrant. But in all of Scripture, this phrase is found only one other place—Amos 1:2. So the verse that winds down Joel starts up Amos. Hmmmm. Coincidence?

Some scholars today think this is a result of the Twelve Prophets being edited as one book. So Amos and Joel were intentionally linked; Amos picks up where Joel leaves off and continues its story in a new direction. Another editing example is Amos 9:12, “that they may possess the remnant of Edom.” Greek Amos reads as if the translator worked from a text that had *'adam* (“humanity”)

instead of *'edom*. It seems that sometime in the intertestamental period, Amos 9:12 was altered to read “Edom.” Amos’ original words, “that the remnant of mankind may seek,” are preserved in the Old Greek (and Acts 15:17), but the Hebrew has been slightly changed.

Why? To anticipate and give a heads up to the following book, Obadiah, which is all about Edom! Obadiah condemns Edom for wishing harm on another people (Israel). And then, immediately after this attitude is explored and condemned, comes Jonah—who embodies that attitude toward Nineveh. So Jews also are guilty of that sin. The Twelve’s exact middle verse (highlighted in Jer 26:18) makes Judah’s culpability clear, “Therefore because of you shall Zion be plowed as a field” (Micah 3:12). Nahum and Habakkuk arguably are mirror images of each other, forming a chiasmus with “the just shall live by faith” roughly in the center. Book after book link up to tell a single story. And Hosea’s marital theme that opens the Twelve resumes in Malachi. There, the problem isn’t a faithless wife, but rather faithless husbands (Mal 2:14). So the end of the *Dodekapropheton* has gone full circle to its start.

Anyway, that is how I teach the Minor Prophets. By this analysis, one dimension of meaning is the overall story arc, the narrative that they convey as a whole. Jonah has significance not only on its own, but also in the fact that it follows Obadiah and precedes Micah.

Through Hosea and Malachi, God’s love frames the Book of the Twelve. Thus deep feeling holds the whole collection together. Because God didn’t leave his people and Hosea didn’t leave Gomer, husbands in Malachi shouldn’t leave their wives. Yahweh has stuck with them all through their history,

encouraging, fighting for them against their oppressors, using oppressors to chastise them, allowing the whole northern kingdom to perish but continuing with the south, shaping and molding, and finally reestablishing. He has been consistent and persistent with them. Although everything else in the world has changed, he had not. “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal 3:6). They lost everything else, but never lost Yahweh.

What an amazing literary achievement! Think of the scope of it, the breadth of it. God and his people through the sweep of time, through the rise and fall of civilizations—in one composite scroll. I don’t know about you, but I find this approach uplifting. And to think that Jesus stands at the heart of it. The judgment the Twelve explores, he took on himself. The grace the Twelve discovers, he secured for his people. He restored David’s fallen tent, was born in Bethlehem, and even rode lowly on a donkey. And so on.

So—no matter what is going on in your life right now, remember that God is always with us. He never fails. He does keep his promises. Hold on to that truth when circumstances tempt you to doubt.

And believe!