



## The Book of the Twelve Introduction

What is the Book of the Twelve?

What might at first be an unfamiliar term is really just another name for a collection of writings known more colloquially as “the 12 Minor Prophets”. This alternate name, “the Book of the Twelve,” reflects the fact that these distinct books were once copied onto a single scroll for both practical and thematic reasons, discussed in further detail later on.

This grouping of prophetic works is a diverse collection featuring different geographical locations, different ideological perspectives, and widely different social contexts, spanning around 400 years of history from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. In many ways, the Book of the Twelve is a microcosm for the rest of the Hebrew Bible, which also features a broad spectrum of worldviews, theological concerns, territorial realities, and temporal standpoints.

Clearly, these separate texts were gathered together at some point in time; it seems that they came to be read together, and were thought of as some kind of a linked collection that, while different from moment to moment, were all part of an ongoing conversation in the mid-1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE about the nature of God, God’s relationship with the people, and what happens when that relationship is tested.

Why these twelve?

These texts hardly form the most coherent collection of oracular speech. They differ in length, style, genre, and themes; they feature prophets from the northern kingdom of Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah, and prophets who spoke to both nation groups. The first evidence of an actual collection of these texts, the first extant example of a so-called “Book of the Twelve,” comes from documents found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, dated between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE, though of course there is no way to know if this Book of the Twelve was following an older tradition of association and collection.

Presumably, there must also have been many prophetic messages that did not survive to reach us from antiquity. These 12 books, despite their apparent ideological diversity, also show a “norming” perspective that show what kinds of communication from God the community deemed worthy of continued transmission. As with the rest of the Hebrew Bible, it’s also important to remember that these texts do not necessarily reflect popular practice at the time; they are often written by small

groups in order to critique, shift, or change something about society at large, or reflect highly idealized versions of expected behavior and realities.

What ties these texts together?

The scope of the Book of the Twelve ranges from the earliest written text, Amos, alongside Hosea and Micah from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, to the latest texts of Haggai, the end of Zechariah, and Malachi, all dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. These books not only span the northern and southern kingdoms, but they also span the pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic periods, a time of enormous upheaval in Israel's social, political, and theological history.

In popular culture, prophetic texts and prophecy itself is seen as having to do with "telling the future," but in biblical scholarship, prophecy as seen in the Hebrew Bible is more about how the prophet's oracular speech is connected to the people's situation in the present, most often their wrongdoings and a systemic lack of social justice. The predictions found in these texts are the direct consequences of the peoples' action or inaction, but crucially, with an impetus to change in order to avoid the future judgement or disaster. Biblical prophecy, on the whole, seeks to use the imagining of future events in order to enact change in the present; they are all concerned with how God's relationship with the people will continue to manifest, for better or worse.

The earliest texts in this collection take up this formula exactly as we might expect. These pre-exilic, 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE texts are concerned with a lack of social justice, and function as a calling-to-account of the people, especially the elite and the wealthy. They usually foretell an imminent future judgement on the "Day of the Lord" if the people do not get back on the right track. However, later texts from the exilic and post-exilic periods face a more complicated historical reality – after the mass deportation of the exile, the loss of political sovereignty, the experience of God's anger, what good are the future threats of God's judgement when they have already gone through it?

Yet, the earlier texts are not thrown out simply because they are no longer relevant. Rather, in the later texts, we see a taking up of older ideas such as the Day of Judgement; we see the books adjusted, added to, edited, in order to make them relevant to the contemporary community of readers, alongside the new original work of later prophets such as Haggai and Malachi. The questions asked by these post-exilic prophets shift from preoccupations of judgement to a longing for restoration. When will God restore us? When will our relationship with God be like it was before?

Ultimately, this collection of prophetic books as a whole asks the question – why were the old texts not good enough? Why do we need continuous, new, prophetic intervention? In the end, that is a large part of why these works seem to be tied together. The Book of the Twelve points to the degree to which the community reading these texts as scripture continue to find great value in the traditional older works, but how they also needed to be reframed, and how those same texts became the starting point for the development of new ideas.