



Born to Win

The Minor Prophets #1

by: **Ronald L. Dart**

I can't help wondering why Christians don't read the Old Testament more than they do; of course I guess I could raise the same question regarding the New Testament. Some Christians just don't read their Bible enough, period.

I realize well enough there are parts of the Bible that are hard to understand but we can't neglect a task just because it's hard. I've always taken the approach with the Bible that when I find something that's difficult to understand, something obscure or something that doesn't read right, I consider it like a stake in the ground that says dig here. Oftentimes those are the very places where I get a breakthrough in understanding the Bible, if you just take the time to dig a little deeper.

It's the things that we have to work for, that often turn out to be of the greatest value. There are parts of the Bible that are hardly ever studied in any detail, like the minor prophets, as an example. The reason they are so poorly understood may be that no one has taken the time to explain where they fit in the overall scheme of things and what it is they're talking about.

Unfortunately many people pick up the Bible and read prophecy to find out what's going to happen.

They think of prophets in terms of someone like Nostradamus and that misses the point of the Biblical prophets completely. If you study the prophets to ask why things happen then you will be far closer to the prophet's intent. The difference between prophecy and just telling the future, as seers and fortunetellers, is that prophecies contain moral content.

One commentator's remark was that it was in the 8th century BC that appeared the most potent moral force the world has ever known, the writing prophets. Now that's a high accolade when you think about it, that the writing prophets in the Bible, as opposed to the former prophets who never wrote a thing, these are the men who really provided moral impetus and a moral force. One really wonders why it took so long for prophets to start writing things down.

There's no greater prophet than Elijah but as far as we know he never wrote a word. I presume, that the earlier prophets' messages, were deemed to be germane to the world in which they lived and worked and had little reference beyond their world.

Funny thing about that though, when you get down to the very end of the Old Testament, to the book of Malachi, chapter 4 verses 5 and 6. God says to the prophet, "Look, I am going to send, at the time of the end, Elijah the prophet to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."

So Elijah's influence is going to reach way out beyond his own day, but he never wrote a word.

Never the less, we come to the eighth century, and one prophet decided to write. I don't know if we can divine a reason for that but I do know, that if we are to understand him at all, we must start where he was. His name was Amos, and he was not a professional prophet. He makes quite a point of that. He wasn't a prophet, wasn't the son of a prophet, and had nothing to do with prophets, until God spoke to him. He was a breeder of sheep and tender of trees. Some people called him a sheep herder and a fruit picker and that may be an accurate description of what Amos was before God talked to him.

In truth, credentials just don't mean very much when it come to a prophet of God.

The point Amos makes is that being a prophet was not his idea. He didn't set out to build a ministry around his own prophecies of this or that or the other thing. God went out and found him, jerked him away from his chosen profession and turned him into a prophet.

Now it was Isaiah who told us a fundamental principle of prophetic studies. It came in a challenge to Israel's idols; you will find it in Chapter 41 verses 21 and 22, of Isaiah, "Produce your cause, says the LORD; make your best case. Let them make their case, and show us what shall happen." Now that's what we all want. That's why we pick up the prophets in the first place, it's why we puzzle and scratch our heads over the book of Revelation. We want to know what's going to happen? When it's going to happen? And how it's going to happen?

Then there's a fundamental principle that follows: "Let them show the former things, what they be, that we may consider them and know the latter end of them; or declare us things for to come. {23} Show us the things that are to come hereafter." Now that is what everyone wants to know but you can't get there without considering the former things.

This is what lies at the root of an idea called the duality of prophecy. Prophecies are often fulfilled more than once, the first fulfillment is called the 'type', from a Greek word which simply means a model. The second is the 'antitype' or the opposite type or the after type, if you will, the secondary fulfillment. Sometimes there are even more than two fulfillments.

So in the interest of understanding what Amos is about, we need to take a look at the former things. We need to know about history. We need to know some ancient geography. If you don't know any of those things you're not going to have a clue about what he's talking about when he speaks of some of the nations and people that he speaks of.

The story of Israel divides neatly into parts, there is the period after the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan that is commonly called 'the period of the Judges.' This really appears, oddly enough, to be the closest to the life God wanted them to have. Someone once said, "He is governed best who is governed least." Well, that's precisely where Israel was after the conquest when they settled the land by lot, and every man sat under his own vine, and his own fig tree and farmed his own farm land. They had children, grandchildren and patterned their own life.

Unfortunately, it didn't work that long, not because of a failure in the plan, but because the people just kept forgetting God and they lost Him as their protector.

Finally they decided, well we had better have a king, like the nations around us in order to fight our battles for us (1 Samuel 8).

It was a sad day. They didn't want to fight any more. They wanted a king to do it for them. They

didn't understand, I guess, that the king couldn't do it by himself and this is why Samuel, who was the judge, and the prophet of the day, told them what it was going to be like. The king would start a draft, take your sons and your daughters from you involuntarily, instead of taking voluntarily, to staff his fields, to staff his palace and of course to arm his army. The period of the judges is followed by the monarchy.

The period of the kings is divided into two eras, the United Kingdom under King Saul, the first king of Israel, then David and then King Solomon.

The second division was the divided kingdom, where the House of Israel and the House of Judah became separated from one another, with the House of Israel existing in the north, headquartered at Samaria. The fact being that they would be a separate kingdom entirely.

The House of Judah was in the south with Jerusalem at it's capital.

Now the division of the kingdom was of God.

Solomon had offended so much with the gods of his three hundred wives, which he had to please, that God could not allow his house to retain the power that he had enjoyed for so long. Solomon really was a force in his own world as David had been before him.

So God took ten tribes away from the house of David and gave them to Jeroboam, who was a servant of Solomon at Solomon's death. Now there was a serious danger of a civil war at this point, because Solomon's son, Rehoboam, said "I'm going to go up there and put a stop to all this I'm going to bring the kingdom back together." He armed his men (1 Kings 12) and they set off marching toward the north but God spoke, he put a stop to it. He told Solomon's son, "Go home, this is something I have done." A really strange thing happens here in the Bible, the King listened to God. Rehoboam turned around and went home.

God left Jeroboam with a great opportunity to establish a powerful kingdom to rule within God's will but power as it will do, it corrupted him, and he made some fatal mistakes.

What Jeroboam did was to begin to consolidate his power in the tribe of Ephraim. He built Shechem, the city in Ephraim and lived there, he went out from there and built a town called Peniel but then he began to think, and sometimes when we think, that is when we get ourselves in trouble. He said, "What's going to happen to me here, the kingdom is going to return to the house of David. If the people continue going up to sacrifice in the house of Jehovah in Jerusalem, then their hearts are going to return back to their Lord even to Rehoboam the king of Judah and they will kill me and go back to him."

What Jeroboam is talking about here is the three annual pilgrimage festivals. The law said that three times in the year shall all the males appear before the Lord God in a place in which he shall choose (Deuteronomy 16:16), in the feast of Passover, the days of unleavened bread, the feast of Pentecost and the feast of Tabernacles. Jeroboam saw this as a major threat.

It's a shame he couldn't depend on God. If he would have just relaxed and said, "God put us up here, the people can go back down there and worship and then come home, and we'll still have a kingdom up here." But he was afraid and he took council of his fears. So he got some advice and he made two calves of gold. He said to the people, "It's too big a deal, it's too much to go up to Jerusalem, behold your gods oh Israel that brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:25-33). Here we go; here are the golden calves again.

Jeroboam set one of them up in Bethel which was really on the road to Jerusalem so you could actually stop short if you were a little tired. He put the other one up north in Dan so the people who lived in that direction wouldn't even go in the direction of Jerusalem.

The thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one in particular in Dan. He made a house of high places, then he made priests of the lowest of the people who were not of the sons of Levi.

What an incredible thing! He made priests of the lowest people. Why? The only thing I can think of is because they were more apt to be subservient to him. Then he ordained a feast in the eighth month on the fifteenth day of the month, like the feast that was in Judah.

Now what is going on here isn't entirely clear because the feast that was in Judah was on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, it was the feast of tabernacles. It was a long standing, much observed festival, among the Jewish people, but for some reason, either by using a different calendar or maybe because the harvest was a little too early in the year, maybe they needed a little more time, God only knows.

Jeroboam moved the feast to the eighth month on the fifteenth day and he "offered sacrifices to the calves on the alter he had made and was placed in Bethel. So he offered upon the alter he made in Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, even the month which he had devised out of his own heart" (1 Kings 12:25-33).

No instructions from God, nothing whatsoever to go on except his own imagination, and he ordained a feast to the children of Israel and offered burnt incense upon the alter.

This was also stepping into the office of a priest when he was not a priest, he was supposed to be a king.

The first step in idolatry is making a break from God and it comes about by breaking with divinely ordered worship. Remember the two great commandments in the law. "You shall love the LORD your GOD with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength, that's the first commandment and two, love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:27-40).

The problem is, it's the law of God that tells you how to do this, it's not something you devise out of your own heart as to how you're going to worship God. It's not a question, let's say, "Let's see, how are we going to change our worship service to attract more young people, we'll have more rock music in church." You can't devise these things out of your own heart; you have to rely to some extent on tradition but any time the law of GOD tells you what to do, that's where you ought to start.

God had specific requirements of the people for worship, that was a part of their covenant with Him. This included the Sabbath every week, and the annual festivals that occurred through the year.

Jeroboam simply did not believe God; he couldn't trust God to consolidate his kingdom even though the people went to Jerusalem three times a year to worship God as prescribed. So the Bible tells us he not only sinned but he made all Israel to sin by what he had done (2 Kings 16:26).

Once the break was made, once the God that they had known all their lives was removed, once the worship was stopped, it created a void and the gods of the land rushed in to fill that void.

It's almost impossible for the modern reader to grasp what these religions were like and the corruption they entailed. The same practices are in existence today, but they are just out of sight and out of mind, but understand this, God's reaction to Israel's idolatry was not merely a jealous fit. It wasn't because some poor ignorant person went to a pagan temple and put some incense up there and set it on fire and smelled the smoke and this made God mad. It is not like God saying, "You're going to worship that god instead of me and it makes me mad so I am going to punish you." No, it was not!

God was angry because they went to a pagan place of worship and abused a child! Temple prostitutes in the ancient world were not there as a matter of choice for the prostitutes. Those prostitute were sex slaves. Little girls and little boys were sold like so many animals and so much property and made into sex slaves in pagan temples.

The worse that we can imagine of the moral decay and the corruption does not match what these people actually did. In fact, if you want to really understand how depraved they were, you can see it when you evaluate the way God dealt with it. The level of punishment was severe and only by looking squarely at that level of punishment can we begin to understand the depths to which some societies and some people can sink, and don't think for a moment that this has gone away.

Traffic in sex slaves continues right here in good ole America, perhaps numbering in the tens of thousands of children. It goes on right under your nose.

I came across one article that describes a house of this kind. This was not a house of worship, it was just a house for sex slaves, that was in a neighborhood. Neighbors saw the children once in a while, they saw big expensive cars drive up to the place and spend a little time and then get back into their cars and go away. No one ever thought a thing in the world about what was going on. It turned out when the place was raided, there were four little children there who were being used as sex slaves.

There were two things that God abhorred in pagan cultures; they were violence and the sexual corruption of children. If you missed this, you may not understand what is often called the wrath of God.

The worship of Baal became the dominate religion of Israel through successive kings. Baal worship involved temple prostitution and not voluntary prostitutes, or women who just enjoyed the trade. They were children, boys and girls, that were sold into it and had no choice.

The decline in the house of Israel over their two hundred plus years of history was a one way street. There were two kinds of kings: bad and worse.

During those early years there were two powerful moral voices, Elijah and Elisha, but neither man ever wrote a word. Someone else had to tell us what they said and what they did.

About one hundred and fifty years after the establishment of the house of Israel, a second king named Jeroboam came to the throne. In his reign the first of the prophets began to write things down.

It was about one hundred and fifty years after the establishment of the house of Israel that a second king named Jeroboam came to the throne. He had a long reign, some 41 years, and there were some prosperous times. Unfortunately the scripture tells us that Jeroboam the second did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not reform any of the sins of Jeroboam who made Israel to sin, which means he continued rejecting Jerusalem as a spiritual center for the

people. He maintained alternate worship systems and allowed rank idolatry.

Jeroboam II did however restore all the coast of Israel from where they had been shoved out by invading armies from time to time and he took cities back. One of the reasons why this happened was that God saw the affliction of His people and that it was very bitter. God had long since said that He was not going to blot out the name of Israel, so He stepped in and saved them by the hand of Jeroboam II, this was something He felt He had to do.

Well late in Jeroboam II's reign and shortly after Azariah, otherwise known as Uzziah, began to reign in Jerusalem, the first of the writing prophets shows up on the scene, his name was Amos. If you have a Bible, you have the book of Amos right there on your own coffee table.

Amos begins by saying, "The words of Amos, who was among the sheep herders 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 1:1). So Amos gives us a very firm time for when he comes on the scene. The problem is, we don't know the date of this earthquake. The reigns of the kings we can settle. This must have been a fairly significant earthquake though because it is mentioned much later by Zechariah as well, so it's gone down into popular memory, so no one would forget it.

Amos continues: {2} "The LORD will roar from Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the habitations of the shepherds shall mourn, and the top of Carmel shall wither." Sounds like a period of drought.

Amos 1 verse 3: "Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four." Now this little for three and for four is a peculiar idiom of Hebrew, it simply mean for many transgressions of Damascus.

He said: "I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing instruments of iron." Basically what he means is that the Syrians, headquartered in Damascus, had come through Gilead, which was a part of Israel, and had just really trashed the place.

Because of this he said: {4} "I will send a fire into the house of Hazael, who was a leader of Damascus, who will devour the palaces of Benhadad. {5} I will break also the bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitant from the plain of Aven, and him that holds the scepter from the house of Eden, (which is another way of saying the ruler of Damascus): and the people of Syria shall go into captivity unto Kir, saith the LORD."

Now remember, I said earlier that one of the things that infuriated God was the ongoing violence and the religious corruption, particularly in the form of the sexual abuse of children.

Here God indicts the nation of Syria to Israel's north. Damascus of course is still there in Syria, it is said to be the oldest continuing city in the world. It was a power to be reckoned with at the time and their violence had spilled over into Israel's territories. It's not entirely different from the situation that prevails there yet today, but there's more.

"Thus says the LORD; {6} 'For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four,' [Now Gaza is a place that's in our news all the time. He says,] 'For three transgressions of Gaza and for four I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they carried away captive the whole captivity, to deliver them up to Edom: {7} I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, which shall devour the palaces thereof: {8} And I will cut off the inhabitant from Ashdod, and him that holds

the scepter from Ashkelon, and I will turn my hand against Ekron: and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, saith the Lord GOD.””

Gaza is constantly in the news. Most people don't know that the term Palestine is derived from Philistine. It was the remnant then of the Palestinians that would perish in Amos's day.

God not having changed, one would really wonder what would happen to them now. They are dominated today by a violent people, who know that they can't kill Israelis, are busy killing one another; things don't change much in the Middle East.

Christian Educational Ministries

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311
❖ www.borntowin.net ❖