Outline:

Thesis Statement: The Minor Prophets are a rich part of the Scriptures that are best understood through the grid of the hermeneutical triad of history, literature, and theology.

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Introduction

I. Studying the Minor Prophets
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Conclusion
The Minor Prophets

Of all sections of Scripture the twelve books of the Old Testament which are collectively known as “the Minor Prophets” are among the most neglected and (correspondingly) least known in the church today. At first glance the reason for this is not hard to understand. The Minor Prophets contain an often disorienting number of references to names, places, and events with which the average Christian is far from familiar. The language is both poetic and prophetic and these books abound with thorny issues of textual interpretation and biblical application. Indeed, even the theology found in these books can seem far from the theology of the New Testament Apostles. However, a closer look at the Minor Prophets reveals a very different story. The Minor Prophets are a rich part of the Scriptures that are best understood through the grid of the hermeneutical triad of history, literature, and theology. If the church is to profit from this wonderful part of God's Word we must take care to, “rightly handle the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Before we look more specifically at the hermeneutical triad and its relation to the study of the Minor Prophets, we must first gain a working knowledge of the Minor Prophets as a whole. The sixteen prophetic books of the Old Testament are commonly divided into two sections: 1) the Major Prophets (which include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and often Daniel) and, 2) the Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). The only thing that distinguishes between these two categories is length. By way of illustration, the one book of Isaiah has almost as many chapters as all twelve Minor Prophets put together! However, the historical setting, literary features, and theological themes of the Major and the Minor Prophets are indistinguishable, and it would be a grave mistake to think that the Minor Prophets are in any way inferior to the Major Prophets. Augustine was the first to use the term “Minor Prophets” to refer to these twelve prophetic books, and in the Hebrew Bible they were grouped together as one book and
simply designated as “the Twelve” (Savelle). Because of this fundamental unity, while we are unable
to present even the most brief overview of each book individually, the material covered in this paper
should give the reader the basic tools necessary to understand any of the twelve Minor Prophets.

These “tools” can be summarized as “the hermeneutical triad”. What is the hermeneutical triad?
Andreas J. Kostenberger and Richard D. Patterson put it this way in their book Invitation to Biblical
Interpretation, “The hermeneutical triad [...] consists of the three elements interpreters must address in
studying any given biblical passage regardless of its genre: a book's historical setting, literary
dimensions, and its theological message” (Kostenberger and Patterson 66). The interpreter of Scripture
must approach the text (in this case, the text of the Minor Prophets) with an awareness of the history,
the literature, and from that the theology of the passage. While a general awareness of the rules of
good biblical interpretation, the broad storyline of the Scriptures, and the different books can help us in
many ways, it is also necessary to dig beneath the surface and understand the unique historical, literary,
and theological features of the Minor Prophets if we are to study them with the greatest profit.

Let us begin then with the history of the Minor Prophets. While it can be difficult to date some of the
books (both Joel and Obadiah are particularly difficult) we can say with some certainty that all twelve
books were written between the 9th and 5th centuries B.C. (Savelle). The history of this period can be
summarized by a brief survey of the history of two periods: 1) the time of the former prophets, and 2)
the exilic period and the restoration. The former prophets (as they were called in the Hebrew canon)
include the books of Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings. These books (particularly the
books of I and II Kings) provide the historical backdrop for the Minor Prophets as they recount the
history of God's people from the time of Solomon (in the 900's B.C.), through the divided monarchy
and the collapse of the northern and southern kingdoms in 722 B.C. And 586 B.C, respectively.
The two kingdoms faced increased pressure from surrounding powers which led to, “Israel and Judah's breaking of the covenant and her spiritual apostasy and worship of other gods. Breaking the covenant, in turn, means that Israel and Judah incur the curse of the Mosaic covenant – exile from the promised land (586-516 B.C.)” (Kostenberger & Patterson 101). The account of the exile and the restoration is told in the latter chapters of II Kings, in narrative portions of the prophetic books themselves, and in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and parts of Chronicles. The Reformation Study Bible sums up the history of the prophetic era well with these words,

“The prophets during this period appear to cluster around two great crises: the fall of Israel to the Assyrians (Amos and Hosea in Israel, Isaiah and Micah in Judah), and the fall of Judah to the Babylonians (Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah). Finally the “exilic and postexilic” prophets spoke God's word to the people during the dark years of the Babylonian exile (Ezekiel and Daniel) and the period of Judah's restoration in Palestine (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi)” (The Reformation Study Bible 946).

This history spans almost 500 years of God's dealings with His people and each of the prophets needs to be understood in their unique historical background within this broader story.

As we move to look at the literature of the Minor Prophets it is important to keep several things in mind. First, prophecy is its own genre which is in turn divided into many subgenres. As such we must not approach the prophetic books in the same way in which we approach other parts of Scripture (such as the historical books or the Pauline epistles). The prophetic corpus contains examples of historical narratives (as in the book of Jeremiah), of apocalyptic literature (as in Zechariah), and of rich poetic imagery (as in the book of Joel). The key to understanding the literature of the Minor Prophets then, is to understand the broad subgenres that the prophets use to communicate God's message to His people. While there are many subgenres used in the prophetic books, “Most scholars, however, have agreed
that the two most prominent subgenres of prophecy are those dealing with judgment and salvation” (Kostenberger and Patterson 321).

Kostenberger and Patterson use the terms “announcements of judgment” and “salvation oracles” to identify these two broad subgenres. Because the twin themes of judgment and salvation are the most prominent literary features of the prophetic books they provide us with a wonderful entry into the literature of the Minor Prophets. The first task of the interpreter (from a literary perspective) should be to identify which of these two subgenres (judgment or salvation) the text falls into. This can be a challenge at times as the prophets will often mix announcements of judgment with oracles of salvation (cf. Joel 3). Generally however, announcements of judgment form the bulk of Old Testament prophecy and usually contains two main elements: 1) an accusation stating the Lord's charges for which judgment must come, and 2) the announcement of a specific judgment to be levied (Kostenberger and Patterson 321). The salvation oracles, however, “customarily deal with God's deliverance after a time of experiencing his judgment. Frequently, you will detect a pattern of sin, judgment, repentance, and restoration” (Kostenberger and Patterson 326). While there are many subgenres within these two broad themes (such as as woe oracles, laments, covenant lawsuits, kingdom oracles, apocalyptic literature, wisdom sayings, satire, etc...) the identification of announcements of judgment and oracles of salvation often helps to orient us to the distinct literature of the Minor Prophets. O. Palmer Robertson connects the historical setting and the literary context of the prophets well when he says, “In the concept of the covenant presented in scripture, judgment is regularly accompanied by the anticipation of restoration and deliverance. Accordingly, the “heart of the prophetic message” is to be found in the threat of judgment together with the hope of subsequent restoration” (Robertson 196). It is from this foundation that we can begin to understand the theology of the Minor Prophets. Our task here is to connect the historical background with the literary features of these books to develop sound biblical theology.
Before we can understand the theology of the Minor Prophets we must first understand the theology behind the Minor Prophets; that is the theology of the prophetic office. At the root of this issue is the question of when the prophetic office came into being. Robertson addresses this question thoroughly in his book *The Christ of the Prophets* when he says that,

“According to scripture's self-testimony, prophetism's origins go back much further than the time of the monarchy in the history of God's redemptive activity among Israel [...] it affirms that the formal establishment of the ongoing office of prophet occurred in connection with the events of Sinai. At that time, the people themselves requested a mediator (Exod. 20:18-21; Deut. 5:22-27). Because they were terrified by the manifestations of God's presence on the mountain, they asked Moses to go up and meet the Lord on their behalf. This request of the people became the occasion for the establishment of the office of prophet in Israel” (Robertson 24-25).

Deuteronomy 18:9-22 records the institution of the prophetic office. Verses 9-17 describe the false prophets of the nations while verses 18-22 describe the characteristics of a true prophet. This contrast is noted throughout the prophetic works. As Jack Scott says in relation to the prophet Jeremiah's ministry, “In contrast to the prophecies of Jeremiah, the false prophets gave the people a false comfort which gave the people a false trust” (Scott). Verses 18-22 speak specifically about four things: 1) the nature of the prophetic word (vs. 18), 2) the responsibility of the hearer (vs. 19), 3) the responsibility of the speaker (vs. 20), and 4) the standard for the prophetic word (vs. 21-22). While a full discussion of the prophetic office is beyond the scope of this paper we can turn to the helpful summary of its features and duties which Louis Berkhof provides for us in his book *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, “It was the duty of the prophets to reveal the will of God to the people, to interpret the law in its moral and spiritual aspects, to protest against formalism and sin, calling the people back to the glorious promise of God for the future” (Berkhof 201).
This sets the stage for our final point, the apex of the hermeneutical triad, which is the theology of the Minor Prophets. While the priests were man's representative before God, the prophets served as God's representative before men. Because of this, their fundamental goal is to, “reveal to us [...] the will of God for our salvation” (Westminster Divines). The themes of the Minor Prophets are many. As William Hendrickson describes it, “To Amos, Jehovah is the God of unflinching, universal justice; to Jonah, of tender, ocean-wide compassion; to Hosea, of sovereign, reclaiming love...” (Hendriksen 241). As the quote above demonstrates, far from simply being the angry judgments of a vindictive God the Minor Prophets present to us the will of God for our salvation in powerful ways. At its core, the theology of the Minor Prophets is the same as the theology of the Apostles of the New Testament; for both point us to Christ and the beautiful message of the gospel. As the Apostle Peter said, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look” (1 Peter 1:10-12).
Works Cited


