

THE NEXT-TO-LAST WORD

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Service, Hope, and Revival
in the Postexilic Prophets

Michael P. V. Barrett



Grand Rapids, Michigan

The Next-to-Last Word

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To Rev. Richard Eugene Crawford

More my brother than brother-in-law
and my lifelong friend

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Preface

I am not writing this little book for the academy. It is not intended to be a scholarly treatment. (Plenty of those types of books are available, and some are very good.) Therefore, I've not engaged in any interchange or conversation with other works and ideas, which is such a crucial part of scholarly writing but tends to be distracting to those in the wider audience who are not versed or expert in the technical jargon. I do make some references to a few other works, particularly some of my own and especially to the *Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, which I had the privilege of working on. The thoughts that I expressed in my contributions to the Bible are the same as those I want to express here. Even when I feel it necessary to address critical or differing views from my own, I try to do it in a way that does not distract from the relevant message.

My passion in ministry both in the classroom and from the pulpit has been to open up the Old Testament Scripture to God's people—to take what on the surface seems to be complicated or obscure and to expound its message and demonstrate its relevance to life. In fact, much of what you will read in this book is adaptations of sermons I've

preached over the years from these prophets. I can't help but introduce some grammatical terminology or refer to some literary devices in a few places, but I hope these discussions will not be intrusive. My concern is to sum up the messages of these three prophets and to point to the applications that address the same kind of issues in the modern church that existed in their postexilic congregations.

Admittedly, I'm responsible for the content, but I owe a word of thanks to many who have helped along the way. Not the least is my wife, Sandra, who has been, as with every other book I've written, the first to read every chapter as it is completed. She is sometimes too quick to say "nice job," but then returns the chapter to me with all the needed corrections circled.

I want to express my thanks as well to the staff of Reformation Heritage Books for all they have done in making the book a reality. Special thanks goes to Jay Collier for his prodding me to submit a manuscript and to Annette Gysen for her outstanding editorial work. Good editors are priceless. This is the first time we have worked together, but she knows how to make me sound like me—only better. I give my thanks to my boss, Joel Beeke, and Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary for including projects like this as part of my job description. Above all I thank the Lord for His amazing kindness in allowing me the privilege of sharing His Word with others. It is humbling.

—Michael P. V. Barrett

Introduction

Creed and custom often conflict. What is confessed to be truth does not always translate into practice. This is true for all too many Christians and regarding all too many aspects of Christian faith. Tragically, it is true at the most foundational level of Christianity, the Bible, which is the bedrock for faith. There is frequently a disconnect between what Christians believe about the Bible and what Christians do with the Bible. Orthodox theology declares that the Bible is the only rule for faith (what is to be believed) and practice (what is to be done). The Westminster Shorter Catechism explains that, apart from the Scripture, it is impossible to meet our chief end of glorifying and enjoying God: “The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him” (Q. 2). Even though they confess the importance of Scripture, Christians often relegate it to the fringes of life. Certainly conservative and confessing believers would be alarmed if Scripture reading and exposition were omitted from the liturgy of worship—and well they should be. Certainly evangelical Christians would be up in arms if the state confiscated personal copies

of the Scriptures—and well they should be. But the tragedy is that certain portions or even whole books of many of those personal copies could be excised surreptitiously, and many Christians would not miss them—and that would be a shame.

With some exceptions, the Old Testament suffers more from this neglect than the New. Some of the Old Testament narratives are well known and used frequently for moral lessons or warnings. Proverbs, with pithy advice touching on life's situations, is a favorite of many, and blessing comes easily from the Psalms. But much of the Old Testament is a closed book to so many. Admittedly, some surface issues account for this. How can something that was written so long ago to one group of people living in a relatively small bend of the globe address the needs and concerns of the modern world? Culture has changed; technology has advanced; the affairs of life must certainly be more complex. Some portions of the Old Testament seem to have no apparent value or purpose, such as the endless genealogies in Chronicles. Other passages seem to be completely outdated, such as the Levitical instructions concerning garments and grooming (Lev. 19:19, 27). Yet others appear to some to be outright offensive, such as the command to exterminate the Canaanites. The tension between the Old Testament's "then" and the current "now" has caused many, at least in practice, to adopt a hands-off policy regarding much of the Old Testament.

For various reasons, among the most ignored portions of the Old Testament are the Minor Prophets. Apart from Jonah's ordeal in the belly of the fish, some life-long

churchgoers admit that they have never heard a sermon from the Minor Prophets, at least one that contextually and systematically deals with the particular prophet's unique message. Never hearing from the Minor Prophets from the pulpit increases the temptation to skip them in private reading and study as well. Consequently, the Minor Prophets remain virtually unknown. As a preacher, I always love to hear the rustling of Bible pages as the congregation turns to the text for exposition. However, there have been times when I've announced a text from the Minor Prophets, and the rustling goes on far too long. On occasion I've had to direct people to go to Matthew and then back up from there, or I have referred them to the table of contents. I've never had to do that when preaching from Romans.

Acknowledging the relevance of the Old Testament, including the Minor Prophets, to modern Christianity and life hinges on the full acceptance of 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” That divinely inspired and infallible statement is all-inclusive regarding every book in the sacred canon, even the Minor Prophets. Of all the possible things the Lord could have said, He chose in His infinite wisdom to say what has been preserved for us in the Holy Scriptures. So rather than dismissing or ignoring these God-breathed-out words, every believer should approach the Scripture, including the Minor Prophets, with head and heart open to receive the profitable word.

Saying the message is relevant is one thing; discerning the message is another. How to discern and interpret the message is the question. Although the message of God's word is timelessly and universally relevant, it was nonetheless given at a point in time and to a particular people. The better we understand the historical circumstances, the better we can determine the significance of what God said then to extract the universal and timeless truth that applies to now. The application of a given truth may look different from time to time or from culture to culture, but truth is timelessly transcendent from any specific situation. So our not being physical descendants of Abraham living in the Middle East thousands of years ago does not diminish the relevance of the ancient message for modern man. The God of then, whether the then of the past or the future, is the God of now.

A key component of discovering the relevance of the Old Testament message to the church is to know something of Israel's history. It was a checkered history that moved through various stages: a huge extended family; a federation or confederation of tribes; a united monarchy; a divided monarchy; periods of exile and existence in the land under foreign sovereignty. Israel's national history began in the fifteenth century BC when the Lord redeemed the huge extended family of Abraham from Egyptian bondage and constituted them as a nation at Sinai. That initial federation or confederation of tribes ruled under theocracy and administered for a while under a series of judges transitioned to a united monarchy and then a divided monarchy with separate kingdoms in the north and south. The

parallel kingdoms existed independently until the northern kingdom suffered exile under the Assyrians in the eighth century BC, and then the southern kingdom under the Babylonians in the sixth century BC. At every stage, the Lord had a message for His people. The time of the writing prophets, both Major and Minor, spanned the years of Israel's divided kingdoms through the northern and southern exiles into the period when some of Judah returned to the Promised Land, roughly from the ninth to the fifth centuries BC.

The focus of this study is on the period after the Babylonian exile. Throughout the Old Testament era, God had revealed His word faithfully and consistently, but now there were three final voices that would declare His word before a four-hundred-year period of silence: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These would not be years of divine inactivity, as providence orchestrated every event toward the fullness of time, but there would be no other prophetic voice until John the Baptist declared, "Behold the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36). John was able to point his finger quite literally to the One that every other prophet before him could only speak of "as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). Although 1 and 2 Chronicles were the last books written in the Old Testament canon (finished in 425/4 BC, about ten years after Malachi), Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were the last of the old dispensation prophets. That God did not speak to another prophet for hundreds of years underscores the importance of what He said through these three. Last words are always important. Malachi prophesied that God would send His messenger to prepare the way

of the coming Christ (3:1), and all we have to do is turn the page to the New Testament, in Matthew 3, to find that messenger, John, in the process of preparing the way. The Old Testament was not the last word after all, but its last prophetic messages contribute significantly to our understanding of what God has spoken in these last days by His Son (Heb. 1:2). The next-to-last word—written and spoken by these postexilic prophets—sets the stage for hearing God’s final, ideal, and incomparable Word.

So in this little study, I want to consider the message and theology of these postexilic prophets and their particular contributions and advancements of God’s redemptive message. They are ancient voices with a remarkably modern message. Understanding any communication requires placing it in its proper context. In any conversation, misinterpretations are likely unless the whole conversation is heard. This basic principle certainly applies to biblical interpretation. Too often, readers of the Bible jump into their reading at a particular point without factoring in what had been said before or the contemporary circumstances that were being addressed. Apart from the temporal and circumstantial context, the prospect of misunderstanding or not understanding increases. Consequently, I want to approach this study in four parts. Part 1 will address just the facts: facts about the prophetic office, facts about the historical setting, and facts about the overall contribution these three prophets make to God’s overall redemptive message. Parts 2–4 will then sum up the specific messages of the prophets separately. Although Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were equally inspired by the Holy Spirit and

shared the same agenda to set things in order for the coming of the Christ in the fullness of time, they were unique personalities with unique approaches. Haggai was a realist whose message was short, to the point, and at times not so sweet. Zechariah was an idealist whose encouraging message focused on the Lord's ultimate and climactic triumph over all wickedness and over every agency hostile to His purpose and kingdom. Malachi was a logician whose message relentlessly, irrefutably, and precisely identified the hindrances to spiritual life and revival, the obstacles to divine blessing.

Ultimately, my desire is to show the relevance of these three postexilic Minor Prophets to modern life. Their length qualifies them to be listed with the Minor Prophets, but their messages, like the nine others lumped in this category, are as major as it gets; they are just as inspired and authoritative as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Perhaps we should call them the Shorter Prophets to remove the stigma and the temptation to ignore them. When Paul, under inspiration, said that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16–17), he included Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi in that assessment. It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will show this to be true in our experience as we reflect on this small portion of Scripture. If we find ourselves unable to see through the veil in the reading of the Old Testament, let us remember that the veil is "done

away in Christ” (2 Cor. 3:14). It is all about Him, even the postexilic Minor Prophets.

I would encourage you as you read what I have to say about Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi to have your Bible ready so you can read what they are saying. This will not be a verse-by-verse commentary, but this study will be based on the biblical text, and I will refer to specific references throughout. I don’t suppose this book will fall into the category of casual reading, but I trust it will be simple and clear enough to provide a supplement to your personal Bible study. I would really recommend having at ready *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*. I had the privilege of editing the Old Testament and composing the notes for various books, including the Minor Prophets. Consequently, some of what I say here, particularly concerning basic facts about each book’s dates, themes, and outlines, will parallel what I said there. The notes you find there will help you to see what I say here in the context of the actual text of Scripture.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does the Old Testament seem to be so difficult for many Bible readers? What portions give you the most difficulty?
2. Why is it important to know something about the historical context or setting of an Old Testament passage?
3. In what way are the postexilic prophets the next-to-last word? What is the last word?
4. What is a fundamental error Bible readers sometimes make in interpreting any portion of the Bible?
5. Why is the designation *Minor Prophets* misleading?