

TYNDALE



CORNERSTONE

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

MINOR PROPHETS

Hosea-Malachi

Richard D. Patterson
Andrew E. Hill

GENERAL EDITOR
Philip W. Comfort

WITH THE ENTIRE TEXT OF THE
 New Living
Translation

CORNERSTONE
B I B L I C A L
COMMENTARY

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* is based on the second edition of the New Living Translation (2004). Nearly 100 scholars from various church backgrounds and from several countries (United States, Canada, England, and Australia) participated in the creation of the NLT. Many of these same scholars are contributors to this commentary series. All the commentators, whether participants in the NLT or not, believe that the Bible is God's inspired word and have a desire to make God's word clear and accessible to his people.

This Bible commentary is the natural extension of our vision for the New Living Translation, which we believe is both exegetically accurate and idiomatically powerful. The NLT attempts to communicate God's inspired word in a lucid English translation of the original languages so that English readers can understand and appreciate the thought of the original writers. In the same way, the *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* aims at helping teachers, pastors, students, and laypeople understand every thought contained in the Bible. As such, the commentary focuses first on the words of Scripture, then on the theological truths of Scripture—inasmuch as the words express the truths.

The commentary itself has been structured in such a way as to help readers get at the meaning of Scripture, passage by passage, through the entire Bible. Each Bible book is prefaced by a substantial book introduction that gives general historical background important for understanding. Then the reader is taken through the Bible text, passage by passage, starting with the New Living Translation text printed in full. This is followed by a section called "Notes," wherein the commentator helps the reader understand the Hebrew or Greek behind the English of the NLT, interacts with other scholars on important interpretive issues, and points the reader to significant textual and contextual matters. The "Notes" are followed by the "Commentary," wherein each scholar presents a lucid interpretation of the passage, giving special attention to context and major theological themes.

The commentators represent a wide spectrum of theological positions within the evangelical community. We believe this is good because it reflects the rich variety in Christ's church. All the commentators uphold the authority of God's word and believe it is essential to heed the old adage: "Wholly apply yourself to the Scriptures and apply them wholly to you." May this commentary help you know the truths of Scripture, and may this knowledge help you "grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord" (2 Pet 1:2, NLT).

PHILIP W. COMFORT
GENERAL EDITOR

A B B R E V I A T I O N S

GENERAL ABBREVIATIONS

b.	Babylonian Gemara	Heb.	Hebrew	NT	New Testament
bar.	baraita	ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place	OL	Old Latin
c.	<i>circa</i> , around, approximately	i.e.	<i>id est</i> , the same	OS	Old Syriac
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	in loc.	<i>in loco</i> , in the place cited	OT	Old Testament
ch, chs	chapter, chapters	lit.	literally	p., pp.	page, pages
contra	in contrast to	LXX	Septuagint	pl.	plural
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls	Ⲛ	Majority Text	Q	Quelle ("Sayings" as Gospel source)
ed.	edition, editor	m.	Mishnah	rev.	revision
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	masc.	masculine	sg.	singular
et al.	<i>et alli</i> , and others	mg	margin	t.	Tosefta
fem.	feminine	ms	manuscript	TR	Textus Receptus
ff	following (verses, pages)	mss	manuscripts	v., vv.	verse, verses
fl.	flourished	MT	Masoretic Text	vid.	<i>videur</i> , it seems
Gr.	Greek	n.d.	no date	viz.	<i>videlicet</i> , namely
		neut.	neuter	vol.	volume
		no.	number	γ.	Jerusalem Gemara

ABBREVIATIONS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

ASV	American Standard Version	NCV	New Century Version	NKJV	New King James Version
CEV	Contemporary English Version	NEB	New English Bible	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
ESV	English Standard Version	NET	The NET Bible	NLT	New Living Translation
GW	God's Word	NIV	New International Version	REB	Revised English Bible
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible	NIRV	New International Reader's Version	RSV	Revised Standard Version
JB	Jerusalem Bible	NJB	New Jerusalem Bible	TEV	Today's English Version
KJV	King James Version	NJPS	The New Jewish Publication Society Translation	TLB	The Living Bible
NAB	New American Bible				
NASB	New American Standard Bible				

ABBREVIATIONS FOR DICTIONARIES, LEXICONS, COLLECTIONS OF TEXTS, ORIGINAL LANGUAGE EDITIONS

ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> (6 vols., Freedman) [1992]	BAGD	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 2nd ed. (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker) [1979]	BDB	<i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Brown, Driver, Briggs) [1907]
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures</i> (Pritchard) [1965]	BDAG	<i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed. (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich) [2000]	BDF	<i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Blass, Debrunner, Funk) [1961]
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> (Pritchard) [1969]				

- BHS *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Elliger and Rudolph) [1983]
- CAD *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* [1956]
- COS *The Context of Scripture* (3 vols., Hallo and Younger) [1997–2002]
- DBI *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman) [1998]
- DBT *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (2nd ed., Leon-Dufour) [1972]
- DCH *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (5 vols., D. Clines) [2000]
- DJD *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* [1955–]
- DJG *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Green, McKnight, Marshall) [1992]
- DOTP *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. (T. Alexander, D.W. Baker) [2003]
- DPL *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Hawthorne, Martin, Reid) [1993]
- EDNT *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (3 vols., H. Balz, G. Schneider. ET) [1990–1993]
- HALOT *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, J. Stamm; trans. M. Richardson) [1994–1999]
- IBD *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (3 vols., Douglas, Wiseman) [1980]
- IDB *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (4 vols., Buttrick) [1962]
- ISBE *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols., Bromiley) [1979–1988]
- KBL *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* (Koehler, Baumgartner) [1958]
- LCL Loeb Classical Library
- L&N *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (Louw and Nida) [1989]
- LSJ *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed., Liddell, Scott, Jones) [1996]
- MM *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Moulton and Milligan) [1930; 1997]
- NA²⁶ *Novum Testamentum Graece* (26th ed., Nestle-Aland) [1979]
- NA²⁷ *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed., Nestle-Aland) [1993]
- NBD *New Bible Dictionary* (2nd ed., Douglas, Hillyer) [1982]
- NIDB *New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Douglas, Tenney) [1987]
- NIDBA *New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Blaiklock and Harrison) [1983]
- NIDNTT *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (4 vols., C. Brown) [1975–1985]
- NIDOTTE *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (5 vols., W. A. VanGemeren) [1997]
- PGM *Papyri graecae magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*. (Preisendanz) [1928]
- PG *Patrologia Graecae* (J. P. Migne) [1857–1886]
- TBD *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Elwell, Comfort) [2001]
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols., Kittel, Friedrich; trans. Bromiley) [1964–1976]
- TDOT *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (8 vols., Botterweck, Ringgren; trans. Willis, Bromiley, Green) [1974–]
- TLNT *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (3 vols., C. Spicq) [1994]
- TLOT *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (3 vols., E. Jenni) [1997]
- TWOT *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (2 vols., Harris, Archer) [1980]
- UBS³ *United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (3rd ed., Metzger et al.) [1975]
- UBS⁴ *United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (4th corrected ed., Metzger et al.) [1993]
- WH *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (Westcott and Hort) [1882]

ABBREVIATIONS FOR BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	1 Sam	1 Samuel	Esth	Esther
Exod	Exodus	2 Sam	2 Samuel	Ps, Pss	Psalms, Psalms
Lev	Leviticus	1 Kgs	1 Kings	Prov	Proverbs
Num	Numbers	2 Kgs	2 Kings	Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Deut	Deuteronomy	1 Chr	1 Chronicles	Song	Song of Songs
Josh	Joshua	2 Chr	2 Chronicles	Isa	Isaiah
Judg	Judges	Ezra	Ezra	Jer	Jeremiah
Ruth	Ruth	Neh	Nehemiah	Lam	Lamentations

Ezek	Ezekiel	Obad	Obadiah	Zeph	Zephaniah
Dan	Daniel	Jonah	Jonah	Hag	Haggai
Hos	Hosea	Mic	Micah	Zech	Zechariah
Joel	Joel	Nah	Nahum	Mal	Malachi
Amos	Amos	Hab	Habakkuk		

New Testament

Matt	Matthew	Eph	Ephesians	Heb	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil	Philippians	Jas	James
Luke	Luke	Col	Colossians	1 Pet	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom	Romans	1 Tim	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor	1 Corinthians	2 Tim	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal	Galatians	Phlm	Philemon	Rev	Revelation

Deuterocanonical

Bar	Baruch	1–2 Esdr	1–2 Esdras	Pr Man	Prayer of Manasseh
Add Dan	Additions to Daniel	Add Esth	Additions to Esther	Ps 151	Psalms 151
Pr Azar	Prayer of Azariah	Ep Jer	Epistle of Jeremiah	Sir	Sirach
Bel	Bel and the Dragon	Jdt	Judith	Tob	Tobit
Sg Three	Song of the Three Children	1–2 Macc	1–2 Maccabees	Wis	Wisdom of Solomon
Sus	Susanna	3–4 Macc	3–4 Maccabees		

MANUSCRIPTS AND LITERATURE FROM QUMRAN

Initial numerals followed by "Q" indicate particular caves at Qumran. For example, the notation 4Q267 indicates text 267 from cave 4 at Qumran. Further, 1QS 4:9-10 indicates column 4, lines 9-10 of the *Rule of the Community*; and 4Q166 1 ii 2 indicates fragment 1, column ii, line 2 of text 166 from cave 4. More examples of common abbreviations are listed below.

CD	Cairo Geniza copy of the <i>Damascus Document</i>	1QIsa ^b	Isaiah copy ^b	4QLam ^a	Lamentations
		1QM	<i>War Scroll</i>	11QP ^s ^a	Psalms
1QH	<i>Thanksgiving Hymns</i>	1QpHab	<i>Pesher Habakkuk</i>	11QTemple ^{a,b}	<i>Temple Scroll</i>
1QIsa ^a	Isaiah copy ^a	1QS	<i>Rule of the Community</i>	11QtgJob	<i>Targum of Job</i>

IMPORTANT NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

(all dates given are AD; ordinal numbers refer to centuries)

Significant Papyri (P = Papyrus)

P1 Matt 1; early 3rd	P20 James 2-3; 3rd	P39 John 8; first half of 3rd
P4+P64+P67 Matt 3, 5, 26; Luke 1-6; late 2nd	P22 John 15-16; mid 3rd	P40 Rom 1-4, 6, 9; 3rd
P5 John 1, 16, 20; early 3rd	P23 James 1; c. 200	P45 Gospels and Acts; early 3rd
P13 Heb 2-5, 10-12; early 3rd	P27 Rom 8-9; 3rd	P46 Paul's Major Epistles (less Pastorals); late 2nd
P15+P16 (probably part of same codex) 1 Cor 7-8, Phil 3-4; late 3rd	P30 1 Thess 4-5; 2 Thess 1; early 3rd	P47 Rev 9-17; 3rd
	P32 Titus 1-2; late 2nd	
	P37 Matt 26; late 3rd	

P49+P65 Eph 4-5; 1 Thess
 1-2; 3rd
 P52 John 18; c. 125
 P53 Matt 26, Acts 9-10;
 middle 3rd
 P66 John; late 2nd
 P70 Matt 2-3, 11-12, 24; 3rd
 P72 1-2 Peter, Jude; c. 300

P74 Acts, General Epistles; 7th
 P75 Luke and John; c. 200
 P77+P103 (probably part of
 same codex) Matt 13-14, 23;
 late 2nd
 P87 Phlm; late 2nd
 P90 John 18-19; late 2nd
 P91 Acts 2-3; 3rd

P92 Eph 1, 2 Thess 1; c. 300
 P98 Rev 1:13-20; late 2nd
 P100 James 3-5; c. 300
 P101 Matt 3-4; 3rd
 P104 Matt 21; 2nd
 P106 John 1; 3rd
 P115 Rev 2-3, 5-6, 8-15; 3rd

Significant Uncials

Ⲙ (Sinaiticus) most of NT; 4th
 A (Alexandrinus) most of NT;
 5th
 B (Vaticanus) most of NT; 4th
 C (Ephraemi Rescriptus) most
 of NT with many lacunae;
 5th
 D (Bezae) Gospels, Acts; 5th
 D (Claromontanus), Paul's
 Epistles; 6th (different MS
 than Bezae)
 E (Laudianus 35) Acts; 6th
 F (Augensis) Paul's Epistles; 9th
 G (Boernerianus) Paul's
 Epistles; 9th

H (Coislinianus) Paul's
 Epistles; 6th
 I (Freerianus or Washington)
 Paul's Epistles; 5th
 L (Regius) Gospels; 8th
 Q (Guelferbytanus B) Luke,
 John; 5th
 P (Porphyrrianus) Acts—
 Revelation; 9th
 T (Borgianus) Luke, John; 5th
 W (Washingtonianus or the
 Freer Gospels) Gospels; 5th
 Z (Dublinensis) Matthew; 6th
 037 (Δ; Sangallensis) Gospels;
 9th

038 (Θ; Koridethi) Gospels;
 9th
 040 (Ξ; Zacynthius) Luke; 6th
 043 (Φ; Beratinus) Matt,
 Mark; 6th
 044 (Ψ; Athous Laurae)
 Gospels, Acts, Paul's
 Epistles; 9th
 048 Acts, Paul's Epistles,
 General Epistles; 5th
 0171 Matt 10, Luke 22;
 c. 300
 0189 Acts 5; c. 200

Significant Minuscules

1 Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles;
 12th
 33 All NT except Rev; 9th
 81 Acts, Paul's Epistles,
 General Epistles; 1044
 565 Gospels; 9th
 700 Gospels; 11th

1424 (or Family 1424—a
 group of 29 manuscripts
 sharing nearly the same
 text) most of NT; 9th-10th
 1739 Acts, Paul's Epistles; 10th
 2053 Rev; 13th
 2344 Rev; 11th

f¹ (a family of manuscripts
 including 1, 118, 131, 209)
 Gospels; 12th-14th
 f¹³ (a family of manuscripts
 including 13, 69, 124, 174,
 230, 346, 543, 788, 826,
 828, 983, 1689, 1709—
 known as the Ferrar group)
 Gospels; 11th-15th

Significant Ancient Versions

SYRIAC (SYR)
 syr^c (Syriac Curetonian)
 Gospels; 5th
 syr^s (Syriac Sinaiticus)
 Gospels; 4th
 syr^h (Syriac Harklensis) Entire
 NT; 616

OLD LATIN (IT)
 it^a (Vercellenis) Gospels; 4th
 it^b (Veronensis) Gospels; 5th
 it^d (Cantabrigiensis—the Latin
 text of Bezae) Gospels, Acts,
 3 John; 5th
 it^e (Palantinus) Gospels; 5th
 it^k (Bobiensis) Matthew, Mark;
 c. 400

COPTIC (COP)
 cop^{bo} (Boharic—north Egypt)
 cop^{fav} (Fayyumic—central Egypt)
 cop^{sa} (Sahidic—southern Egypt)

OTHER VERSIONS
 arm (Armenian)
 eth (Ethiopic)
 geo (Georgian)

TRANSLITERATION AND NUMBERING SYSTEM

Note: For words and roots from non-biblical languages (e.g., Arabic, Ugaritic), only approximate transliterations are given.

HEBREW/ARAMAIC

Consonants

א	aleph	= '		מ, ם	mem	= m
ב, ן	beth	= b		נ, ן	nun	= n
ג, ן	gimel	= g		ס	samekh	= s
ד, ך	daleth	= d		ע	ayin	= '
ה	he	= h		פ, ן, ף	pe	= p
ו	waw	= w		צ, ץ	tsadhe	= ts
ז	zayin	= z		ק	qoph	= q
ח	heth	= kh		ר	resh	= r
ט	teth	= t		ש	shin	= sh
י	yodh	= y		שׁ	sin	= s
כ, ן, ך	kaph	= k		ת, ך	taw	= t, th (spirant)
ל	lamedh	= l				

Vowels

ַ	patakh	= a		ֿ	qamets khatuf	= o
ֿ	furtive patakh	= a		ֿ	holem	= o
ָ	qamets	= a		ֿ	full holem	= o
ֿ	final qamets he	= ah		ֿ	short qibbutz	= u
ֿ	segol	= e		ֿ	long qibbutz	= u
ֿ	tsere	= e		ֿ	shureq	= u
ֿ	tsere yod	= e		ֿ	khatuf patakh	= a
ֿ	short hireq	= i		ֿ	khatuf qamets	= o
ֿ	long hireq	= i		ֿ	vocalic shewa	= e
ֿ	hireq yod	= i		ֿ	patakh yodh	= a

GREEK

α	alpha	= a		ε	epsilon	= e
β	beta	= b		ζ	zeta	= z
γ	gamma	= g, n (before γ, κ, ξ, χ)		η	eta	= ē
δ	delta	= d		θ	theta	= th
				ι	iota	= i

κ	<i>kappa</i>	= k	τ	<i>tau</i>	= t
λ	<i>lamda</i>	= l	υ	<i>upsilon</i>	= u
μ	<i>mu</i>	= m	φ	<i>phi</i>	= ph
ν	<i>nu</i>	= n	χ	<i>chi</i>	= ch
ξ	<i>ksi</i>	= x	ψ	<i>psi</i>	= ps
ο	<i>omicron</i>	= o	ω	<i>omega</i>	= ō
π	<i>pi</i>	= p	·	<i>rough</i>	= h (with
ρ	<i>rho</i>	= r (ῥ = rh)		<i>breathing</i>	vowel or
σ, ς	<i>sigma</i>	= s		<i>mark</i>	diphthong)

THE TYNDALE-STRONG'S NUMBERING SYSTEM

The Cornerstone Biblical Commentary series uses a word-study numbering system to give both newer and more advanced Bible students alike quicker, more convenient access to helpful original-language tools (e.g., concordances, lexicons, and theological dictionaries). Those who are unfamiliar with the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek alphabets can quickly find information on a given word by looking up the appropriate index number. Advanced students will find the system helpful because it allows them to quickly find the lexical form of obscure conjugations and inflections.

There are two main numbering systems used for biblical words today. The one familiar to most people is the Strong's numbering system (made popular by the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance to the Bible*). Although the original Strong's system is still quite useful, the most up-to-date research has shed new light on the biblical languages and allows for more precision than is found in the original Strong's system. The Cornerstone Biblical Commentary series, therefore, features a newly revised version of the Strong's system, the Tyndale-Strong's numbering system. The Tyndale-Strong's system brings together the familiarity of the Strong's system and the best of modern scholarship. In most cases, the original Strong's numbers are preserved. In places where new research dictates, new or related numbers have been added.¹

The second major numbering system today is the Goodrick-Kohlenberger system used in a number of study tools published by Zondervan. In order to give students broad access to a number of helpful tools, the Commentary provides index numbers for the Zondervan system as well.

The different index systems are designated as follows:

TG	Tyndale-Strong's Greek number	ZH	Zondervan Hebrew number
ZG	Zondervan Greek number	TA	Tyndale-Strong's Aramaic number
TH	Tyndale-Strong's Hebrew number	ZA	Zondervan Aramaic number

So in the example, "love" *agapē* [T626, Z627], the first number is the one to use with Greek tools keyed to the Tyndale-Strong's system, and the second applies to tools that use the Zondervan system.

1. Generally, one may simply use the original four-digit Strong's number to identify words in tools using Strong's system. If a Tyndale-Strong's number is followed by a capital letter (e.g., T61692A), it generally indicates an added subdivision of meaning for the given term. Whenever a Tyndale-Strong's number has a number following a decimal point (e.g., T62013.1), it reflects an instance where new research has yielded a separate, new classification of use for a biblical word. Forthcoming tools from Tyndale House Publishers will include these entries, which were not part of the original Strong's system.



Hosea

RICHARD D. PATTERSON

INTRODUCTION TO *Hosea*

HOSEA PRESENTS A STUDY in God's love for his own. Despite the fact that God's people had become self-reliant, God maintained his love and concern for them. Although Hosea warned that God's judgment on Israel must come, sending them into exile, he assured the people that one day a redeemed and faithful remnant would know God's forgiveness, restoration, and blessings. Israel's spiritual journey provides a lesson for believers of all ages: God reserves his best for his faithful servants.

AUTHOR

Hosea prophesied during part of the reigns of several eighth-century BC kings of Judah (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah) and Israel (Jeroboam II). The son of a man named Beeri (1:1), he ministered to the people of the northern kingdom (see "Audience" below). Laetsch (1956:9-10) points out that early Jewish tradition identified his father with the tribe of Reuben, which was carried away into exile by Tiglath-pileser III (cf. 1 Chr 5:6, 26), and that another Jewish legend reports that Hosea died in Babylon but was buried at Safed, northwest of the Sea of Galilee. Laetsch also calls attention to an early Christian tradition which suggests that he came from the tribe of Issachar. All of this, of course, is mere speculation.

Hosea, God's prophet, was ordered to marry a harlot, a situation that would spiritually symbolize God's own relation with apostate Israel (Hos 1-3). From this union at least three children were born (Hos 1). Hosea was motivated by a genuine concern for God's person and will, and concern for Israel's besetting sinfulness. Thus, Wood remarks, "Hosea should be thought of as a hard-working prophet, fully dedicated to the will of God, ministering faithfully to the sinful people of his day in spite of the great sadness of his own marriage" (1985:281). A man of deep spiritual convictions, "Hosea was concerned primarily with moral, religious, and political abominations in the nation" (Harrison 1969:871).

While in the past critics have suggested that not all of the book was authored by Hosea, current scholarship tends to acknowledge that a great preponderance of the material stems from Hosea's messages. Many suggest, however, that the actual writing may have come from Hosea's disciples or that some of the messages may contain redactional interpolations, such as references to Judah (Emmerson 1984) and hopeful oracles of salvation (1:10-2:1; 2:14-23; 3:5; 11:8-11; 14:4, 7). Nevertheless, all such suggestions are basically *a priori* assumptions that reflect theological predisposition

rather than demonstrable proof. Dillard and Longman (1994:355) aptly observe, "It must be said that such critical conclusions restrict the future vision of the prophet (judgment and hope) as well as his concern for the whole people of God (north and south)." I concur with Garrett (1997:3), who said, "There is no reason to doubt that [all] the messages of Hosea came from the prophet himself."

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

Given the historical notices of the kings who reigned during his ministry (1:1), Hosea must have delivered his messages across a great deal of the eighth century BC. While it is difficult to pinpoint the various occasions of his messages with certainty, some of the prophecies appear to reflect particular historical circumstances in that era (see the Introduction to Joel). For example, the prediction of judgment concerning the house of Jehu (1:4) must have taken place in the reign of Jeroboam II (792–752 BC), for Jeroboam's son was assassinated a scant six months into his reign (2 Kgs 15:8-12). The rapid change of royalty in the following 30 years, which saw five kings elevated in accordance with changing political fortunes, appears to be considered in 8:4.

Moreover, one can sense the prophet's condemnation of the spiritual indolence and moral complacency of life in the northern kingdom in the early chapters (e.g., ch 2), giving way to growing crises in relations with the Neo-Assyrian empire (e.g., 5:8-13; 8:7-9; 12:1; 14:3; cf. 2 Kgs 15:19-31) and Egypt (7:11; 12:1; cf. 2 Kgs 17:3-4) and in relation to internal affairs (7:1-7; 10:1-4; 12:7; 13:10-11). Indeed, in his closing prophecies, the end of the northern kingdom seems assured (13:9-16; 14:1). Accordingly, Stuart (1987:9) appears to be correct in suggesting that Hosea's prophecies "proceed more or less chronologically," even though some portions of the latter part of the book appear to prove an exception to this rule of thumb (e.g., 12:7-8).

Since Hosea does not specifically mention the fall of Samaria, an event that would provide a natural setting for expanding on the sins that occasioned the fall of the northern kingdom (cf. 2 Kgs 17:7-18, 20-23), it would seem that the book was completed before 722 BC. Therefore, since the prophecies reflect the greater portion of the eighth century BC, a date of 760–725 BC for the oral delivery and collection of the messages would seem to be reasonable.¹

AUDIENCE

Hosea delivered his oracles primarily to the northern kingdom, although a few remarks for Judah are scattered throughout the book (e.g., 5:10-14; 6:4, 11; 8:14). At times, he addressed particular groups such as the priests (4:4-9; 5:1) and the royal house (5:1), all Israel/Ephraim (5:1; 9:1; 11:8) or Judah (6:4, 11), and even particular cities (8:5; 10:15). Whether or not Hosea delivered his oracles personally to these audiences, his words were obviously intended for them and no doubt ultimately reached them.

Hosea spoke to a people in need of a word from God. In the early years of his ministry, he addressed a society that had experienced outward success and renewed

prosperity under the long reign (792–752 BC) of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:23-29). Politically, the relative weakness of their traditional Assyrian enemies allowed the northern kingdom to extend its borders to nearly the same size as that enjoyed in the Solomonic era. Economically, it was a time of renewed commerce, building activities, and the amassing of personal wealth (8:14; 12:7-8). But unfortunately, such wealth was often accrued at the expense of common folk (12:7; cf. Amos 4:1-2; 8:4-6) and was a reflection of an immoral and unjust society that had been loosed from its spiritual moorings. Such conditions only worsened as political disintegration set in, first with the assassinations of Zechariah and Shallum in 752 BC and the bloody contests that followed in the days of Menahem, Pekahiah, and Pekah (2 Kgs 15:16-31).

The long history of prevailing sin that characterized Israel's history finally reached its climax during the reign of its last king, Hoshea (732–722 BC). When the spiritual degeneration of the northern kingdom had reached intolerable limits (2 Kgs 17:7-17, 20-23), God brought judgment upon his unfaithful people in the form of the defeat and deportation of its populace at the hands of the Assyrians (2 Kgs 17:1-6). Conditions at this time were not much better in the southern kingdom (2 Kgs 17:18-19); only the rising prominence of Hezekiah stemmed the tide of God's eventual judgment on Judah.

To such an era and such a people, God's prophet was sent with the message of God's undying love for them, as well as a declaration of his unwavering standards and conditions for spiritual success. No doubt it was too often a discouraging ministry. Yet through it all, Hosea, like God himself (11:1), loved his people and held out the consoling prospect of God's ultimate blessing to his repentant and restored people (14:4-7).

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

The canonicity of Hosea has never been in doubt. It appears as the first of the Minor Prophets in the listing of 2 Esdras 1:39-40 (c. second century AD). It was also accepted as Scripture earlier by the Qumran community, where Hosea was read and a commentary (or *peshet*) was written about it. Hosea was fully accepted by Jesus himself (Matt 9:13; 12:7) and is cited or alluded to by several of the New Testament writers (e.g., Matt 2:15; Luke 23:30; Rom 9:25-28; 1 Cor 15:55; 1 Pet 2:10; Rev 6:16). Its canonicity was also traditionally received by the Jewish and early Christian communities, being cited in Philo, Josephus, the Talmud (*b. Bava Batra* 14b), and such early Christian Fathers as Melito of Sardis, Origen, Jerome, and Athanasius.

The text of Hosea is another matter. Even so conservative a scholar as Stuart (1987:13) has said, "With the possible exception of the book of Job, no other OT book contains as high a proportion of textual problems as does Hosea." While Andersen and Freedman (1980:66-67) emphasize the many difficulties of the Masoretic Text versions of Hosea, they also note that the early versions are seldom of much help in establishing the text. They go on to point out that "the knowledge

subsection features an initial consideration of Ephraim (11:12–13:16) before ending with an exhortation to repentance (14:1-3) and God's concluding oracle, which in the Hebrew text contains a penetrating rhetorical question (14:4-8). Although no claim to finality can be made for this arrangement, verbal and thematic stitching links the individual segments, including the smaller units, and does at least suggest its workability.

Superscription (1:1)

- I. A Prophetic Portrayal of Unfaithful Israel (1:2–3:5)
 - A. Israel's Rejection—Symbolized by Hosea's Marriage (1:2–9)
 - B. Israel's Restoration on the Basis of the Covenant (1:10–2:1)
 - C. God's Rebuke of Unfaithful Israel (2:2–13)
 - D. Israel's Renewal on the Basis of the Covenant (2:14–23)
 - E. Israel's Reconciliation—Symbolized by Hosea's Marriage (3:1–5)
- II. Divine and Prophetic Perspectives on Unfaithful Israel (4:1–14:8)
 - A. Opening Complaints against Israel (4:1–7:16)
 1. The threefold indictment (4:1–14)
 2. Hosea's condemnation of prostitute Israel (4:15–19)
 3. The three guilty parties (5:1–3)
 4. Hosea's charge: God's people are unfaithful (5:4–7)
 5. The threefold alarm (5:8–15)
 6. Hosea's advice: return to the Lord (6:1–3)
 7. God's concern for disloyal Israel (6:4–7:16)
 - B. Further Charges against Israel (8:1–11:11)
 1. Israel is a covenant-breaker (8:1–14)
 2. Hosea's reaction: Israel is doomed (9:1–9)
 3. Israel is an unprofitable plant (9:10–17)
 4. Hosea's reaction: Israel is a wayward vine (10:1–8)
 5. Israel is a perennial sinner (10:9–11)
 6. Hosea's warning: seek God or perish (10:12–15)
 7. God's compassion for disobedient Israel (11:1–11)
 - C. Concluding Considerations concerning Israel (11:12–14:8)
 1. The folly of deceitful politics (11:12–12:1)
 2. Hosea's observation: Israel has a history of deceit (12:2–6)
 3. The folly of deceitful practices (12:7–11)
 4. Hosea's observation: God will repay Israel's deceit (12:12–14)
 5. The folly of deceitful pride (13:1–16)
 6. Hosea's admonition: repent and confess all sins (14:1–3)
 7. God's consolation for repentant Israel (14:4–8)

Subscription (14:9)

COMMENTARY ON *Hosea*

◆ Superscription (1:1)

The LORD gave this message to Hosea son of Beeri during the years when Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah were kings of Judah, and Jeroboam son of Jehoash* was king of Israel.

1:1 Hebrew *Joash*, a variant spelling of Jehoash.

NOTES

1:1 *The LORD gave this message.* In a manner similar to that of several of the OT prophets, Hosea opened his prophecy with a declaration of the divine source of the words that will follow.

kings of Judah . . . king of Israel. Hosea indicated that his prophetic service was during the time of the kings whose reigns spanned the greater part of the eighth century BC (see Introduction). The failure to mention any of Jeroboam II's successors may indicate something of the conflicting claims for legitimacy of rule in the turbulent closing years of the northern kingdom.

COMMENTARY

Hosea made it clear at the onset of his prophecy that what he had to say and record was not of human origin. The opening narrative and succeeding oracles that make up the prophetic collection and lead to the closing piece of prophetic wisdom were not born of mere human experience and observation but came from God. All that Hosea experienced and the messages he received were the Lord's appointment for him and communication through him (cf. 2 Pet 1:20-21).

Hosea's opening words remind all believers that God is a God of revelation; his person and work are made known in the Scriptures (cf. 2 Tim 3:16). There believers may find strength and direction for life in its divinely inspired words (Ps 119:105; Prov 1:1-7). Accordingly, believers should turn to the Bible and follow its precepts so as to find direction and the true joy of living (Ps 119:111).

◆ I. A Prophetic Portrayal of Unfaithful Israel (1:2–3:5)

A. Israel's Rejection—Symbolized by Hosea's Marriage (1:2–9)

²When the LORD first began speaking to Israel through Hosea, he said to him, "Go and marry a prostitute,* so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution.

This will illustrate how Israel has acted like a prostitute by turning against the LORD and worshiping other gods."

³So Hosea married Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she became pregnant and gave Hosea a son. ⁴And the LORD said, "Name the child Jezreel, for I am about to punish King Jehu's dynasty to avenge the murders he committed at Jezreel. In fact, I will bring an end to Israel's independence. ⁵I will break its military power in the Jezreel Valley."

⁶Soon Gomer became pregnant again and gave birth to a daughter. And the

LORD said to Hosea, "Name your daughter Lo-ruhamah—'Not loved'—for I will no longer show love to the people of Israel or forgive them. ⁷But I will show love to the people of Judah. I will free them from their enemies—not with weapons and armies or horses and charioteers, but by my power as the LORD their God."

⁸After Gomer had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she again became pregnant and gave birth to a second son. ⁹And the LORD said, "Name him Lo-ammi—'Not my people'—for Israel is not my people, and I am not their God."

1:2 Or a promiscuous woman.

NOTES

1:2 *Go and marry a prostitute*. Lit., "a wife of harlotry." Several positions are held as to whether God actually told his prophet to marry an unholy woman: (1) The marriage was merely hypothetical, the account itself being a literary parable or allegory (Calvin). (2) The account is a dream or vision (Ibn Ezra, Maimonides). (3) The whole narrative is simply a stage play (Kaufman). (4) Hosea married a woman with promiscuous tendencies who later committed adultery (Hubbard, Wood), perhaps as a cult prostitute (Andersen and Freedman, Craigie, Mays). (5) Hosea's wife was only guilty of spiritual adultery (i.e., of idol worship—Stuart). (6) Hosea married an already adulterous woman (Garrett, McComiskey). Although the NLT text most naturally supports the last view, the accompanying textual note leaves open the possibility that Hosea is to marry a woman with promiscuous tendencies. In keeping with the full context, this appears to be the better choice. Such an understanding provides a clear parallel with God's own relation to his covenant people as demonstrated throughout Hosea's prophecies (cf. Jer 2:24-35). This position preserves both the integrity of God's character and the standards of his word, while allowing Hosea's life situation to serve as a visible spiritual lesson for the people to whom he was called to minister.

Several other variations have also been proposed; see Garrett 1997:43-50 and Laetsch 1956:21. Complicating the matter is the problem of whether ch 3 speaks of relations between Hosea and Gomer (whether supplying new details or being a duplicate account of ch 1) or of Hosea's dealings with a different woman (cf. Stuart 1987:64-65).

has acted like a prostitute by . . . worshiping other gods. God's primary charge against apostate Israel was its failure to worship him alone (cf. Exod 20:3-5; Deut 5:7-9; 6:4, 14-15; Matt 4:10). This theme surfaces repeatedly among the various oracles and undergirds God's final rhetorical question (represented as an exclamation in the NLT) to his wayward people in 14:8.

1:4 *Name the child Jezreel*. Jezreel means "may God sow/scatter." While the meaning inherent in the name will be brought up later, here it calls attention to that place where "Jehu was swept to power over all Israel on a mighty tide of bloodshed" (Hubbard 1989:61).

avenge the murders he committed at Jezreel. Details of Jehu's bloody deeds at Jezreel are found in 2 Kgs 9:17-37; 10:7-8. It was a bloodbath that carried over into Samaria (2 Kgs 10:17-27).

bring an end to Israel's independence. The NLT rendering combines the wording of vv. 4 and 5 in the MT. The end of the northern kingdom was to come nearly 100 years after the death of Jehu in 814 BC. His dynasty, however, came to an end in 752 BC, some 30 years before the fall of Samaria. The punishment of Jehu's dynasty and the end of the northern kingdom are thus telescoped into a single prediction. Such telescoped prophecies are attested elsewhere in the Scriptures (e.g., Isa 61:1-3; cf. Luke 4:16-21).

1:6 *Lo-ruhamah.* The Hebrew root underlying the name of the second child is located in the noun *rekhem* [TH7358, ZH8167] (womb), from which come the denominative verb *rakham* [TH7355, ZH8163] (have compassion/pity) and the related nominal derivatives, which carry the thought of compassion or mercy. A deep emotional concept is thus associated with the second child's name (cf. NIDOTTE 3.1096-1097).

or forgive them. Scholars are divided as to the meaning of the MT. As Garrett (1997:60) observes, "The most obvious meaning of the line is, 'But I will certainly forgive them.'" This rendering makes a stark contrast between the final phrase and the previous part of the verse, which speaks of God's lack of compassion for Israel. The interpretation of this phrase will also affect one's treatment of v. 7. Garrett decides on a positive reading of both, suggesting that God intends the reader to hold both Israel's judgment and its hope of forgiveness in dynamic paradoxical tension. In contrast, Andersen and Freedman (1980:188-194) take a negative approach, holding that the earlier negative of v. 6 ("I will no longer," NLT) controls all that follows, so that both Israel and Judah may expect God's judgment, not his deliverance. Steering a middle course between these two positions, most commentators (e.g., Keil, Laetsch, McComiskey, Stuart, Wood) and translations (e.g., LXX, Vulgate, and all the standard English versions) opt in some fashion for Israel's condemnation and God's assurance of continued support for Judah.

Although some scholars (e.g., G. A. Smith, Wolff) have argued that v. 7 is a later interpolation, this conjecture is without textual support. Even Emerson (1984:88-95), who finds several Judean passages in Hosea to be intrusive secondary redactions, hesitates to exclude 1:7 from the primary Hosean corpus. For a critique of Emerson's work, see my remarks in *Hebrew Studies* 29:112-114.

1:9 *Lo-ammi.* Some have suggested that neither the second nor the third child born to Gomer after her marriage to Hosea was Hosea's. Nothing in the text makes this certain, however. "Not my people" would remind Israel of the sanctions inherent in the Sinaitic covenant (Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Deut 27:9).

As indicated in the outline (see Introduction) Hosea's relationship with Gomer bookends the first section of the book, Hosea's marriage to Gomer (1:2-9) being balanced by God's instructions to take back his estranged wife (3:1-5). Woven into the chiasmic structure of the first three chapters is an orderly presentation of narrative features. Each chapter is dominated by God's command, after which further comment or narrative details occur. In chapters 1 and 3 the prophet's compliance follows God's command.

COMMENTARY

God instructed Hosea to take a wife whose promiscuity would not only cause him heartaches but also bring a separation between them (1:2-3). Having done what God asked him to do (1:4), the subsequent events of the narrative provide divine comment upon Hosea's tenuous situation with Gomer (1:5-9). The names of the three children born to Gomer reflect the fragile nature of their marriage due to her promiscuity.

It is evident that Hosea's relationship with Gomer and the names of the three children are symbolic. Thus, Gomer depicts God's relation to the nation, often

represented metaphorically as his wife (e.g., Isa 54; Jer 2:2-3; 3:1-9). Just as Gomer was to prove unfaithful, so Israel had worshiped other gods and done horrendous deeds. Likewise, the details relative to the three children carry a prophetic significance, much as Isaiah and his family did (Isa 8:18). The names of the three children represent the people of Israel and warn of God's judgment upon the nation and its citizenry.

God stated through the name Jezreel that he would bring to justice the standing crimes of Jehu and his dynasty. Not only would Israel's fourth dynasty be brought to an end but the irreversible tide of sin set in motion by Jehu's bloody deeds would eventuate in the demise of the northern kingdom. Critics have often accused God of inconsistency in first commanding Jehu to extirpate the dynasty of Ahab and then, as here, condemning him for it. Such criticism, however, deals amiss with the facts. For while Jehu did fulfill his divine commission, he exceeded it by exterminating even his remotest rivals. Further, his halfhearted devotion to God and his law became evident in his embracing the apostate state religion instituted by Jeroboam I (2 Kgs 10:31). His manipulation of events to suit his own selfish ends is illustrated in the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III of Assyria, where his submission, accompanied by heavy tribute to the Assyrian king, is recorded.

Nor were his successors any better. Jehu and his dynasty were thus duly condemned. When people use the name of God as a pretext for their own desires and plans, like Jehu and his dynastic successors, they stand in danger of divine punishment. H. Hailey (1971:137) observes, "One may do the command of the Lord and yet be in rebellion against Him, doing the thing commanded because it is what the individual desires and not because it is what God desires."

The names of the second and third children are also instructive. God's tender compassion for his nation and people would be exchanged for "no pity/no mercy." The time of divine judgment was fast approaching. The nation and people that he had taken into covenant with himself had violated the conditions of the covenant by disobedience and would suffer the consequences. No longer "my people," they would suffer many disasters, including defeat and deportation at the hands of their enemies (Deut 28:25-29; cf. 2 Kgs 17:1-23). As Sweeney (2000:21-22) comments, the name of the third child is a virtual reversal of God's statement at the founding of the nation (cf. Exod 6:6-7; Lev 26:12) and signals "the disruption of the relationship between YHWH and Israel."

Oh, that Israel would follow the example of Judah, which (though it would later come in for its share of criticism) was the repository of God's covenantal future blessings (1:6-7)! As heirs of the promises in the Abrahamic, Sinaitic, and Davidic covenants, Judah could look forward to that era when God's new covenant would be realized in David's heir (Ezek 34:20-31; 36:21-28). In Judah was centered the promise that they would be God's people (Jer 31:33). In that day they would know God and obediently live out God's precepts as written in their hearts (Jer 31:34).

This passage is instructive for the Christian believer. Most significantly it lays stress on the crucial importance of obedience and faithfulness. Hosea was obedient

to God in taking a wife that he would not have chosen for himself. His nation and people, however, were not obedient, for they had fallen into a dead orthodoxy mixed with the worship of Baal; these evils had infected Israel's total life situation. In this they had failed to keep covenant with God (Exod 19:5) and his commandments (Deut 27:10; Jer 32:23); hence, they became liable to the penalties for disobedience (Deut 11:27-28; 28:15-28).

The situation of ancient Israel must not be that of today's believer. Indeed, by the very act of believing, believers have come to enjoy right standing before God. Such has been accomplished through the obedience of Christ who, though he is God's son (Heb 3:6), "learned obedience from the things he suffered. . . . and he became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him" (Heb 5:8-9; cf. Phil 2:8). As those who "belong to his dear Son" (Eph 1:6; 1 Pet 1:2), Christians too must walk in obedience even as he did (1 John 2:6). May we be obedient to God's claim upon our lives (cf. Acts 26:19ff), serving him not in merely routine, outward service or for our own selfish ends, but out of a pure heart. May we be ever mindful not only of whom we serve (1 Thess 1:9; 2 Tim 1:3), but of Christ's own example and the price of his provision for us (1 Pet 1:14-15).

Although believers may not be God's symbols to an entire community as were Hosea and his family, they are nonetheless his witnesses (Acts 1:8) and ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). Therefore, they are so to live as not to be detriments to the cause of Christ (Matt 16:19; 1 Cor 8:9; 2 Cor 6:3; Phil 1:27). Rather, they should be those whose consistency and faithfulness are attractive to others so that they too might come into the joy of the obedience of Christ (1 Cor 9:19; Phil 4:5; 1 Pet 2:11-17).

◆ B. Israel's Restoration on the Basis of the Covenant (1:10–2:1)

^{10*}Yet the time will come when Israel's people will be like the sands of the seashore—too many to count! Then, at the place where they were told, 'You are not my people,' it will be said, 'You are children of the living God!' ¹¹Then the people of Judah and Israel will unite together. They will

choose one leader for themselves, and they will return from exile together. What a day that will be—the day of Jezreel*—when God will again plant his people in his land.

^{2:1*}"In that day you will call your brothers Ammi—'My people.' And you will call your sisters Ruhamah—'The ones I love.'

1:10 Verses 1:10-11 are numbered 2:1-2 in Hebrew text. 1:11 *Jezreel* means "God plants." 2:1 Verses 2:1-23 are numbered 2:3-25 in Hebrew text.

NOTES

1:10 [2:1] *like the sands of the seashore.* This image often appears as an indication of large numbers (e.g., Josh 11:4; 1 Sam 13:5; Rom 9:27). As here, the simile is applied at times to Israel's future hope, especially in connection with the Abrahamic covenant as culminating in the new covenant (Gen 22:17-18; Jer 33:22).

children of the living God. Those who had been called "not my people" will become God's acknowledged family. In contrast to Baal and the dead idols, Israel's God is the true and living God. In him alone are life (Pss 42:2; 84:2) and the hope for success (Josh 3:10).

1:11 [2:2] *the day of Jezreel.* This speaks of a day when God's scattered people will be freshly planted (see note on 1:4 on the meaning of "Jezreel") in the land. The double sense



Joel

RICHARD D. PATTERSON

INTRODUCTION TO *Joel*

JOEL WARNED HIS PEOPLE of the coming Day of the Lord. Unless repentance was forthcoming, God's judgment would come against them. The Scriptures indicate that the Day of the Lord that Joel's contemporaries faced was just a foretaste of a final, universal judgment: In the future, God will deal with all sinful nations and people. He will then establish for himself a redeemed, purified people upon whom he will pour out his blessings. Peter's use of Joel's prophecy (cf. Acts 2:17-21 with Joel 2:28-32) gives assurance that all believers in Christ can experience the blessings of spiritual life prior to the great judgment of God.

AUTHOR

Modern scholarship largely accepts the unity of the book of Joel and has agreed that Joel was its author. Beyond his name (meaning "Yahweh is God") and patrilineage (the son of Pethuel [Bathouel in the LXX]), little is known of his personal circumstances. Although some have suggested the possibility that Joel might have been a priest, due to his strong interest in ritual fasting and prayer (Finley 1990:2), all that can be said with certainty is that the prophet was a man of vitality and maturity who understood the spiritual significance of contemporary issues.

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

When an unprecedented locust infestation blanketed the land, Joel understood it as nothing less than the Day of the Lord's judgment, a foretaste of an even greater judgment if the people did not mend their ways. Accordingly, Joel wrote to call the people to repentance and restoration to God's favor so as to avoid that coming divine punishment. The issues concerning the Day of the Lord would afford the prophet the opportunity to reveal God's intentions for the great Day of the Lord in the eschatological future.

The date of the book's composition must coincide with the time of a terrible locust plague. But this is a matter of heated scholarly debate. Conjectures have ranged from the ninth century BC to the time of the Maccabees in the second century BC. Some (e.g., Keil) have found evidence for the time of the boy-king Joash (835-796 BC) in the fact that Joel does not mention any king and because prominence is given to the Temple and priesthood. Some (e.g., Pusey) have opted for an early eighth-century date, citing correspondences between Joel's material and that

of Amos, as well as the locust plague itself (cf. Amos 1:2; 4:9; 7:1-3 with Zech 14:5). Others opt for a late preexilic time, stressing either Joel's supposed receptivity to Jeremiah's influence (e.g., Kapelrud) or the actions in 3:2b as being best explained as reflecting a time between the Babylonian invasions of Jerusalem in 597 and 586 BC (e.g., Rudolph). Still others favor an exilic setting (e.g., Reicke) or an early (e.g., Allen) or later (e.g., Wolff) postexilic date (400 BC and later).

In addition to these data, scholars have noted that Joel often speaks in terms that are paralleled in other prophets. The question, of course, is whether Joel has drawn upon others for his text, or whether they have utilized his prophecy, or whether all have drawn upon a common prophetic repertoire. Wolff (1977:10-11) avers that Joel is a debtor to other prophets, some as late as Malachi (cf. 2:11b; 3:4 with Mal 3:2; 4:5). Because of this, Joel must have been written "in the century between 445 and 343 BC" (Wolff 1977:15). But, as Chisholm (1990:53) notes, "Arguments based on verbal parallels are notoriously subjective and inconclusive." Indeed, one could just as easily point to a rather strong case for Zephaniah's use of Joel (cf. 2:1-2, 11 with Zeph 1:14-18), as well as dozens of lexical and theological correspondences that Joel has in common with the other eighth-century prophets, making Joel a spokesman of that era.

The complexities of the data and arguments preclude any dogmatic decision, but there is much to commend the traditional conservative preference for a preexilic date. Perhaps most telling is the plague itself. While such incursions are common enough in the ancient Near East, the late eighth-century Assyrian hymn to Nanaya, which bears specific literary and linguistic parallels to Joel,¹ and the utilization of the plague motif by Amos (Amos 4:9; 7:1-3), who also has phraseology (Amos 1:2; 9:13; cf. 3:17-18) and subject matter (Amos 1:6, 9; cf. 3:2-4) in common with Joel, make the theory of an eighth-century date at least an attractive possibility.

In the first half of that century, Israel and Judah enjoyed a time of great prosperity. Together the two kingdoms managed to acquire nearly the same territorial dimensions that Solomon held. Both Jeroboam II in the north and Uzziah in the south were strong monarchs who expanded and strengthened their kingdoms (2 Kgs 14:25; 2 Chr 26:6-15).

The kings who followed in the latter half of the eighth century were not of the same caliber as these two, however. Moreover, they found themselves caught up in the rising power of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, beginning with Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BC), who fought two western campaigns (744-743 BC; 734-732 BC), the second of which saw the capture of age-old Damascus, to Israel's north. Around that time, the northern kingdom was being led by a series of weak kings and finally fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Although Judah managed to survive, it did so at the cost of vassalage in the days of the wicked Ahaz (735-720 BC). Some degree of independence was achieved with the withdrawal of Sennacherib's forces from Jerusalem in the face of divine intervention during the reign of the godly Hezekiah (Sennacherib's third campaign—701 BC; cf. 2 Kgs 18:13-19:37).

Thus, accepting a date for Joel sometime during the eighth century BC, we may say that Joel prophesied in exciting and pivotal times. Whatever the exact period in this century of change, Joel would have ministered to a southern kingdom beset by great spiritual problems. The first half of the century saw an empty formalism grip the people, while outright apostasy set in with the reign of Ahaz, a condition that remained rampant until the reforming efforts of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:3-6; 2 Chr 29-31). Despite the best efforts of that king, however, a spiritual vacuum that already existed in Judah (2 Kgs 17:18-20) would resurface even more vehemently in the days of the evil Manasseh (698/697-642 BC). To such a people, Joel's message of imminent judgment and the need of immediate repentance was both timely and necessary. The danger was real. How would the people respond to the divine message given through his faithful prophet?

AUDIENCE

Whatever the time period involved, it is clear that Joel wrote to the citizens of Judah. He often refers to Judah and Jerusalem (2:32; 3:1, 17-18, 20) and their leaders (1:9, 13-14; 2:17) and citizens (3:6, 8, 19), or to Zion (2:1, 15, 23; 3:17, 21) and its people (2:15-17, 23). He was familiar with their history and geography (1:2; 3:2-8, 12, 14, 18) and was fully aware of the Temple and its services (1:9, 13-16; 2:14, 17; 3:18).

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

The canonicity of Joel seems never to have been in question. Allen (1976:32-33) suggests that it enjoyed authoritative acceptance from the start. Certainly by the onset of the second century BC, such was the case for all of the Minor Prophets, as attested by Ben Sirach (Sir 49:10). Although Joel stands in a different order in the Septuagint (between Micah and Obadiah), the Septuagint's textual variations from the Masoretic Text are few and of questionable value (1:5, 8, 18; 2:12; 3:1). The second-century AD manuscript of portions of 2:20-3:21 found at Wadi Murabba'at, which reflects a proto-Masoretic tradition, underscores the fact that the text of the book has been well preserved.² The necessity for proposed emendations is minimal at best.

LITERARY STYLE

Thematically, Joel builds his prophecy around the Day of the Lord, every chapter being marked by that theme. In proclaiming that message, Joel employs strategically placed oracles of judgment (e.g., 2:1-11), interspersed with lament oracles featuring a call to mourning together, followed by a reason for doing so (1:5-7, 8-10, 11-12, 13-18, 19-20; 2:12-14, 15-17)—all aimed at bringing the populace to repentance. All of this culminates in what may be termed "kingdom oracles" (Patterson 1993:302-303), messages designed for the eschatological future, which blend together pronouncements of universal judgment and salvation oracles promising hope for God's long-beleaguered people (e.g., 2:28-32; 3:9-17, 18-21).

Moreover, Israel itself had been brought to shame for its treatment of God (2:27). Accordingly, a second theme emerges in Joel's prophecies—that of repentance. Israel must turn to God in unswerving faithfulness if it hopes to ameliorate or avoid the impending catastrophe it faces (1:14; 2:12-17). These two themes provide the basis for yet a third: God's judgment and his people's faithfulness will ultimately result in Israel's full deliverance and everlasting felicity (2:27, 32; 3:16-20).

Several other themes are also present: (1) Judgment takes the form of an invasion in all three chapters. (2) The people are warned of danger by the sound of the shofar (2:1, 15). (3) The valley is the scene of the nations' defeat (3:2, 12, 14). (4) Mount Zion is the place of salvation and final blessing (2:32; 3:17, 21). It may be noted, as well, that the person (2:13-14) and works (e.g., 2:18-32) of Yahweh, Israel's covenant God, undergird the whole of Joel's prophecy.

THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Joel participates in the Zion theology so prevalent in the book of Psalms.⁶ Zion theology has its focus on the only true God (2:27), who is Israel's God (2:17), the eternal Divine Warrior (1:15; 2:11; 3:11-16) who punishes his foes (3:1-8, 12, 19, 21), while protecting (3:16) and caring for (2:18-27) his own. A patient, gracious, and merciful God (2:13, 17), he deals with all people justly (2:23; 3:1-8) and receives all who call upon him in faith (2:28). A sovereign God, he expects his followers to submit willingly to him and worship him (1:13-14; 2:15-17) from the heart (2:12-13) in order that they may live in his righteousness and goodness (2:23-27), while looking forward to his blessed presence forever (3:17-21).

OUTLINE

- I. Joel's Present Instructions (1:1-2:27)
 - A. Lessons from the Locust Plague (1:1-20)
 1. The prospect: the locust invasion (1:1-4)
 2. A plea for personal penitence (1:5-13)
 3. A call for worship (1:14-15)
 4. The resultant scene (1:16-20)
 - B. Warnings Based on the Locust Plague (2:1-27)
 1. The prospect: the coming invasion (2:1-11)
 2. A plea for communal repentance (2:12-14)
 3. A call for worship (2:15-17)
 4. The resultant scene (2:18-27)
- II. God's Future Intentions (2:28-3:21)
 - A. The Prospect: The Outpoured Spirit (2:28-32)
 - B. The Coming Judgment (3:1-8)
 - C. The Climactic Battle (3:9-17)
 - D. The Resultant Scene (3:18-21)

COMMENTARY ON

Joel

- ◆ I. Joel's Present Instructions (1:1–2:27)
 - A. Lessons from the Locust Plague (1:1–20)
 - 1. The prospect: the locust invasion (1:1–4)

The LORD gave this message to Joel son of Pethuel.

²Hear this, you leaders of the people.
Listen, all who live in the land.
In all your history,
has anything like this happened
before?

³Tell your children about it in the years
to come,

and let your children tell their
children.

Pass the story down from generation
to generation.

⁴After the cutting locusts finished
eating the crops,
the swarming locusts took what
was left!

After them came the hopping locusts,
and then the stripping locusts,* too!

1:4 The precise identification of the four kinds of locusts mentioned here is uncertain.

NOTES

1:1 *The LORD gave this message.* Joel announces at the outset that what he has to say was given to him by the Lord. Joel has been commissioned to deliver a divine message to his countrymen.

Joel son of Pethuel. Like Hosea, Micah, and Zephaniah, Joel identifies his family lineage. The LXX renders Pethuel as Bathouel, a reading followed by the Syriac and Old Latin. This was the name of Rebekah's father ("Bethuel," Gen 22:23) and others (cf. Josh 19:4; 1 Chr 4:30). Joel's name (meaning "Yahweh is God") attests to a family commitment to Israel's covenant God.

1:2 *Hear this.* Joel's message begins with an imperative. The subgenre of this opening prophecy is often debated. Thus, for example, Crenshaw (1995:82, 84) opts for an invitation to pay attention to Joel's summons to lament and return to Yahweh; Stuart (1987:239) decides for a call to communal lament; and Allen (1976:46-48) thinks it is a summons to national lament. All of these bear an element of truth and fall loosely under the rubric of instructional prophecy, containing warnings and exhortations (Patterson 1993:303-304). Such prophecies typically begin with an imperative and are followed by the reason for the warning, which is frequently introduced by the Hebrew particle *ki* [TH3588, ZH3954] ("for" or "because").

leaders. This word (*zeqenim* [TH2205, ZH2418]) can refer either to those of old age (Crenshaw 1995:86, "old timers") or those civil leaders who enjoyed an official role in communal life. The NLT follows the latter. Allen (1976:48) remarks, "The elders were ever a force in Israelite government, whether in the context of the local, tribal, or national community."

Listen. Joel turns from the elders to the general populace (lit., "all who dwell in the land").

has anything like this happened before? This rhetorical question is to be answered with a firm "No!" The calamity Joel is about to describe is unparalleled in anyone's memory. Crenshaw (1995:86) points out Sumerian literary parallels, citing unprecedented events or activities, so the motif itself is not without parallel.

1:3 Tell your children. So extraordinary and significant are current events that the account of them is to be passed on to subsequent generations. The preservation of significant events was a normal Hebrew tradition (see Exod 12:24-27; Deut 4:9; 6:6-8, 20-23; 32:7; Esth 9:20-28).

1:4 locusts. The nature of the locust plague is often debated. Some (e.g., Kapelrud, Sellers, Thompson) think that the four words for locusts here represent successive stages in the development of the locusts. Most scholars point out that the four nouns do not exhaust either the stages of the locusts or the various names assigned to locusts in the Scriptures (the OT has several others) or elsewhere in Hebrew literature. Therefore, the four words here are taken to reflect successive waves of attack, thus pointing to the intensity of the infestation and the total devastation of the land. Keil (1954:181-182) observes, "The thought is rather this: one swarm of locusts after another had invaded the land, and completely devoured its fruit."

There is disagreement also as to whether the locusts are to be understood literally or figuratively. While most take the text at face value as referring to actual locusts, some (Stuart 1987:232-234) follow a different approach, viewing the locusts as depicting an enemy invasion. Andinach (1992:441) treats the locusts as "a metaphor that clarifies and enforces the characteristics of a human army in its action against the people and the land." Amos also refers to locust plagues, pointing out that God's people had failed to respond to divinely sent locusts by returning to the Lord (Amos 4:9), and that on occasion his intercession had staved off God's renewed sending of the locusts (Amos 7:1-3).

Helpful discussions as to the nature of locusts together with examples of locust invasions can be found in J. D. Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," *National Geographic* 28 (1951):511-550; Driver 1915:84-92; Pusey 1953:161-162.

COMMENTARY

Joel begins his prophecy by pointing out that what he had to say was not born of his own wisdom but had come from God himself. As with the other prophets, Joel clearly believed in divine revelation. The eternal God and covenant Lord of Israel had chosen to communicate himself to his people through his prophet. Thus, the basic nature of prophecy as being the proclamation of God's message is underscored.¹

Joel then begins his instructions to the populace. He invites all the people to hear his words. Could anyone recall such a locust devastation? It was the kind of event that should and would be retold by the succeeding generations. A series of locust infestations had swept across the land destroying all the crops. The mention of four types of locusts may indicate that the locusts had appeared in a series of four waves. If so, Joel's notice coincides with other prophets who spoke of God's judgment in terms of four types of punishment (cf. Jer 15:3; Ezek 14:21). If, as has been argued in the Introduction, Joel prophesied in the eighth century BC, it is of interest that Amos, Joel's contemporary, also mentioned a severe locust plague (Amos 4:9).

These opening verses are a reminder, not only to God's people in Joel's day but also to believers of succeeding generations, that God takes note of sinful behavior and will take serious measures to chastise his people so as to bring them back to himself.

Therefore, all who read Joel's words ought to bring themselves to self-examination and so live as to reflect the standards of a holy God in their lives. To be sure, not all disasters in the natural world can be viewed as cases of divine judgment. Yet the fact that God does use such methods (cf. Lev 26:15-16; Deut 28:20-24; Amos 4:9; 7:1-3) to bring correction to people should cause them to examine their spiritual condition when they do occur. Such instances may be opportunities for sinners to repent and seek God's face and for saints to renew their spiritual commitment.²

ENDNOTES

1. On the genre and types of Old Testament prophecy, see Patterson 1993:296-309.
2. Fausset (1948:514) remarks, "The judgments of God are mutually united as the links of a chain, each link drawing on the other; and yet so arranged that at each successive stage time and space are allowed for the averting of the succeeding judgment by repentance."

◆ 2. A plea for personal penitence (1:5-13)

⁵Wake up, you drunkards, and weep!
Wail, all you wine-drinkers!
All the grapes are ruined,
and all your sweet wine is gone.

⁶A vast army of locusts* has invaded
my land,
a terrible army too numerous to
count.

Its teeth are like lions' teeth,
its fangs like those of a lioness.

⁷It has destroyed my grapevines
and ruined my fig trees,
stripping their bark and destroying it,
leaving the branches white and bare.

⁸Weep like a bride dressed in black,
mourning the death of her husband.

⁹For there is no grain or wine
to offer at the Temple of the LORD.
So the priests are in mourning.
The ministers of the LORD are
weeping.

¹⁰The fields are ruined,
the land is stripped bare.

The grain is destroyed,
the grapes have shriveled,
and the olive oil is gone.

¹¹Despair, all you farmers!
Wail, all you vine growers!
Weep, because the wheat and barley—
all the crops of the field—are
ruined.

¹²The grapevines have dried up,
and the fig trees have withered.
The pomegranate trees, palm trees,
and apple trees—
all the fruit trees—have dried up.
And the people's joy has dried up
with them.

¹³Dress yourselves in burlap and weep,
you priests!
Wail, you who serve before the
altar!

Come, spend the night in burlap,
you ministers of my God.
For there is no grain or wine
to offer at the Temple of your God.

1:6 Hebrew *A nation*.

NOTES

1:5 *Wake up . . . weep . . . Wail*. Those singled out for special warning are given a three-fold challenge: wake, weep, and wail. Typically, Joel forms his instructional/lament oracles (which make up the bulk of the first two chapters and 3:9-17) with imperatives, followed by motive clauses introduced by the particle *ki* [TH3588, ZH3954] ("for" or "because").

drunkards. Crenshaw (1986:94) views these *shikkorim* [TH7910A, ZH8893] in a positive or, at least, neutral sense, pointing to positive statements in the OT as to the benefits of wine. The root, however, is overwhelmingly used in a negative sense so that the vast majority of interpreters take the word here (as does the NLT) in a condemnatory sense. From the root *shakar* [TH7937, ZH8910] come the derived nouns *shikkor* [TH7910, ZH8893] (drunkard), *shikkaron* [TH7943, ZH8913] (drunkenness), and *shekar* [TH7941, ZH8911] (strong drink). Wine and strong drink are often paired in warnings against intoxication (Lev 10:9; Prov 20:1). The ready availability of wine in the northern kingdom during the eighth century is illustrated in the Samaria Ostraca, many of which deal with receipts for wine. It is likely Judah was no different. Whatever the precise emphasis on wine here, God's people are pictured as pursuing their own pleasure, oblivious to the great danger to which their spiritual lethargy had exposed them.

grapes . . . sweet wine. The NLT renders according to the sense. With the grape harvest ruined, there would be no wine. Therefore, wine drinkers would lament the loss of the new wine. The Hebrew text indicates that such "sweet wine" (*asis* [TH6071, ZH6747], wine fermented "only five to seven days instead of the usual nine" [Crenshaw 1995:95]) was "cut off from your mouth" (cf. NRSV). While wine itself was considered a sign of God's blessing (cf. 2:23-24) and was used in the drink offering (Lev 23:12-13), the use of the common words for wine indicates the possibility of excess to the point of intoxication. For *yayin* [TH3196, ZH3516] (wine), see Prov 20:1; for *tirosh* [TH8492, ZH9408] (new wine), see Hos 4:11; and for *'asis* (sweet wine), see Isa 49:26.

1:6 A vast army of locusts. Lit., "a nation of locusts." The NLT has rendered the Hebrew metaphor according to its sense. The locusts are likened to a nation whose invading army is not only powerful but too vast to number. The comparison of armies and locusts is often attested not only in the literature of the ancient Near East (Thompson 1955:52-55) but also in the OT (Judg 6:5; 7:12; Jer 51:14; see commentary on Nah 3:15-17; cf. also Job 39:19-20; Rev 9:7).

terrible army. The adjective *'atum* [TH6099, ZH6786] (strong, powerful) is also used by Daniel to describe the mighty army of the king of the south (Dan 11:25), but the locusts in the Exodus plague, for example, are described by the psalmist (Ps 105:34) as innumerable rather than powerful. Hubbard (1989:45) records a modern-day invasion that "was described in the newspapers in terms reminiscent of Joel. In one county 200,000 acres were covered with insects over every inch and in some places stacked on top of each other." See also Wolff (1977:27-28).

like lions' teeth. The cutting strength of locusts was often reported in ancient times. Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 1:212) noted that the various locusts could even gnaw through doors. Two terms for "lion" (*'aryeh* [TH738A, ZH793] and *labi'* [TH3833, ZH4233]) appear here, rendered as "lion" and "lioness" in the NLT.

1:7 grapevines . . . fig trees. The vine and the fig tree were often used as symbols of God's blessing (cf. Hos 2:12; Amos 4:9; Mic 4:4; Hag 2:19; Zech 3:10; see also 1 Kgs 4:25; 2 Kgs 18:31; Ps 105:33; Isa 36:16; Jer 5:17; 8:13). The vine also functioned as a symbol of the nation (Ps 80:8-15; Isa 5:2-6; Jer 2:21).

bark . . . branches. The denuding of trees, leaving them without bark and whitened, as well as the thorough devastation left by invading locusts, is well documented (Smith 1929:394-395; Pusey 1953:163).

1:8 Weep. The verb *'alah* [TH421, ZH458] is found only here in the OT. It is cognate with the Syriac *'ela'* (lament) and Arabic *'alla* (mourn). Unlike the more general term for weeping found in 1:5 (*bakah* [TH1058, ZH1134]), it specifically denotes crying born of deep sorrow. The Hebrew root *bkh* can designate weeping for various reasons, such as joy (Gen 33:4), pouting (Judg 14:16-17), grief (2 Sam 19:1-2), repentance (Neh 1:4), or personal (2 Sam 12:15-23) or public (Zech 7:3) distress. The imperative *'eli* [TH421, ZH458] is feminine singular, either suggesting the personification of Jerusalem as a woman (cf. Jer 31:15; Lam 1) or reflecting the image of the bereaved virgin that follows.

like a bride dressed in black. Lit., “like a virgin clothed in sackcloth.” For the wearing of sackcloth as a symbol of sorrow or remorse, see the note on Jonah 3:5.

mourning the death of her husband. Although the Hebrew text does not mention the death of a husband, such is the natural assumption of the virgin’s putting on sackcloth. The NLT’s “husband” should not be taken to indicate that the marriage had been consummated—the young woman may yet have been in her father’s household. Wolff (1977:30) points out that the young woman had been acquired as the prospective bridegroom’s wife “by the binding legal act of paying the bridal price.”

1:9 *there is no grain or wine to offer.* The absence of grain and wine seriously impaired the daily burnt offerings. Both products were an integral part of the sacrificial ritual (Lev 2; 6:14-18; 9:16-17; 23:18, 37).

the priests are in mourning. Because the priests were allowed to eat a portion of the grain offering (Lev 2:3, 10), they would feel the loss of grain and wine. Although it can be used figuratively (e.g., “the earth mourns,” Isa 24:4) and in parallelism with verbs of weeping (2 Sam 19:2), the verb *’abal* [TH56, ZH61] is often used of mourning for the dead (2 Sam 13:31-37) or in connection with an announcement of coming judgment (Neh 1:4; Esth 4:3).

ministers of the LORD. The Hebrew root of the word translated “ministers” (*sharath* [TH8334, ZH9250]) was often employed to depict the religious duties of the Levites and priests who served in the Tabernacle and Temple (cf. Exod 28:35, 43; 1 Chr 16:4, 37). It also became a technical term for one who does special or responsible service. Joseph was a minister to Potiphar (Gen 39:4), Joshua was Moses’s minister (Exod 24:13; 33:11; Josh 1:1), and Elisha performed a similar function for Elijah (1 Kgs 19:21). The Greek word *leitourgia* [TG3009, ZG3311] (service) in the NT is similar in that it conveys the notion of priestly service.

1:10 *fields are ruined, the land is stripped bare.* The devastation of the fields is highlighted with alliteration featuring a play on harsh sibilants: *shuddad sadeh* [TH7703/7704, ZH8720/8441], “ruined fields.” Likewise, the phrase “the land is stripped bare” is composed with alliteration: *’ablah ’adamah* [TH56A/127, ZH62/141]. The verb translated “stripped” (*’abal* [TH56A, ZH62]) is the same verb used previously to describe the priests’ mourning, hence literally: “the ground mourns.”

grain . . . grapes . . . olive oil. The loss of these crops, customarily harvested in the fall, points to God’s fulfilling the threatened judgment upon his nation for covenant unfaithfulness and transgressions (cf. Deut 28:51). All three were important agricultural products and deemed to be the result of God’s blessing upon his people—blessings that could be withdrawn as punishment for sin (Num 18:12; Deut 7:13; 11:14; 28:51; Jer 31:12).

1:11 *Despair . . . Wail.* The imperatives directed at those who tend the crops reflect a sense of shame and intense disappointment, which is reflected in a terrified look and bitter cry (cf. Amos 5:16-17). The word translated “despair” is *hobishu* (from the verb *bosh* [TH954, ZH1017], “be ashamed/dismayed”) and represents a play on sounds with the verbal phrase of the previous verse: “the [new] wine is dried up” (*hobish* from the verb *yabesh* [TH3001, ZH3312]; NLT, “grapes have shriveled”).

all the crops of the field. The NLT rendering gives the intended sense of the MT. “Wheat and barley” function as a metonymy representing the total loss of the agricultural harvest.

1:12 *pomegranate . . . palm . . . and apple trees.* The representative nature of these products of the orchard follows in the next phrase: “all the fruit trees.” The noun translated “apple” (*tappuakh* [TH8598, ZH9515]) has been taken by some (Allen 1976:54) to mean apricot. Support for the meaning “apple” comes not only from postbiblical Hebrew but also from Gordon (1965:499), who sees a relationship between the Minoan pictograph for apple, with phonetic value *tu*, Hebrew *tappuakh*, Ugaritic *tuppah*, and Arabic *tuffah*.

COMMENTARY

Joel begins his instructions with a triple imperative calling for lamentation: Wake up, weep, and wail! He first turns to the general populace, calling them a group of drunkards. The lives of God's people had become obsessed with the pursuit of pleasure. Although the first half of the eighth century BC had seen some spiritual awakening in Judah (2 Chr 26:4-5), King Uzziah was not always the spiritual leader he should have been (2 Kgs 15:4). Ultimately, his sinful pride led to his downfall (2 Chr 26:2, 6-21). Nor were things better in the north. Indeed, the eighth-century prophets indicate that the spiritual level of the populace had not risen above that of the kings of the northern and southern kingdoms (cf. Hos 4:11-19; 7:5, 13-14; Amos 2:4-8; 6:6). No doubt, the very prosperity of the eighth century contributed to the desperate spiritual condition of God's people. How tragic it is that times of ease and prosperity too often lead to spiritual and moral lethargy, and to compromise and defeat. The great military and economic gains of the era for both north and south are detailed in the Scriptures and validated by the archaeologist's spade. Excavations at various biblical sites illustrate the condition of the times. At Samaria a cache of ostraca was found which proved to be receipts for wine, oil, and barley. The names of those involved in the transaction often included the name of the pagan deity Baal, attesting to the growing loss of true religion.

Joel's designation of the populace as "wine drinkers" was thus appropriate. They had turned what God intended as a blessing into a wanton consumption that all too often led to drunkenness and debauchery. Israel's religious experience was seriously affected, degenerating into an empty formalism devoid of spiritual vitality. The eighth-century prophets denounced the wine-drinking habits of the people, complaining that such had permeated all levels of society (from the king downward) and had infected every area of the peoples' lives (cf. Isa 5:11-12, 22; 22:13; 28:1; Hos 4:11-19; 7:5, 13-14; Amos 2:4-8; 6:6; Mic 2:11).

Accordingly, Joel chides the people as those who would mourn the loss of vineyards, for that meant the loss of wine for drinking. In so doing, however, he calls attention not only to the vine but also to the fig tree. Both were well-known symbols of God's blessing for his covenant people (cf. Hos 2:12; Amos 4:9; Mic 4:4; see also 1 Kgs 4:25; 2 Kgs 18:31). In this, Joel recognized that the unprecedented locust plague was nothing less than the judgment of God upon his wayward people.

Joel's evaluation of his society stands as a warning to ours. That which so easily brings intoxication and personal degradation (Gen 9:21; 19:32; Prov 20:1; Isa 28:7) can easily corrupt one's thinking, even that of God's people (Hos 4:11). Far better is it to be free of its influence (Deut 29:6; Jer 35:6) and to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18).

While excessive drinking can lead to a degenerate lifestyle, it is not the only besetting sin. Whatever exerts so dominating and controlling an influence on a person's life that it takes away spiritual vitality and productivity is sin; it needs to be abandoned (Rom 6:1-14; 14:23b; 1 John 5:21). May God help us to be preoccupied with Christ, not with selfish indulgence (Phil 3:7-11).

Joel goes on to point out that great spiritual issues were at stake in the destructive locust plague (1:8-10). He mentions the loss of grain and wine, key ingredients not only to Israel's economy but to its worship experience. Desperate as conditions were for the people's source of food and drink, there were greater issues to be considered. The worship of God had been placed in jeopardy. Rather than grieving over what their loss of grain and wine meant to their daily consumption, they ought to have mourned the loss of their opportunities to perform the daily sacrifices.

Without these products, the meal and drink offerings could not be offered. Both were crucial products in the sacrificial system. The drink offering is particularly significant to the full scriptural record. It was employed chiefly to accompany and culminate the offerings that are spoken of as having a pleasing aroma before God and that symbolize full dedication (the burnt offering, together with its grain offering, signifying active service) and loving communion (the peace offering) with God (Exod 29:38-42; Lev 2; 6:14-18; Num 15:1-10; 28:3-8; 29:30).

It is this image that Paul drew upon expressly in Philippians 2:17-18, as he emphasized both the Philippians' consecration and his own commitment to Christ's will for his life. Were Paul to die in the Roman prison from which he was writing, his death would be merely a joyous drink offering to the dedicated sacrifice (= the burnt offering) and priestly service (= the grain offering), which the Philippians' faith had evidenced. Accordingly, he could rejoice and urged them to rejoice as well. Theirs had been a sacrificial faith and loving service. What would be more appropriate than for Paul to crown that consecration with the drink offering of his life?

May we learn a lesson from this symbol of strong devotion. May our churches, like that of Philippi, have those kinds of people that a Paul (or our pastor) would gladly die for. May our lives be characterized by a faith that produces such a total dedication that it issues forth in fruitful service for Christ. May we live lives that are consciously poured out in joyous surrender to him who "bore the sins of many and interceded for rebels" (Isa 53:12).

Such godly devotion was lacking in the populace of Joel's day, and with the judgment on the crops, even the outward forms of such devotion would be beyond their reach to attain (cf. 2:14). In light of the real significance of the losses of grain and wine, it is no wonder that Joel tells them that their sorrow should be akin to that of a young lady whose husband has died. It is only natural that the priests should realize what the loss of those crops meant not only to their inability to perform the sacrificial offerings but to Israel's spiritual condition. The loss of the opportunity even to offer the sacrifices should have caused the citizenry as a whole to realize that their spiritual service had degenerated into a meaningless formalism (cf. Isa 1:2-20). Further, their unfaithfulness and syncretistic practices (Hos 2:5; Amos 2:8) had established them as those who had broken the covenant bond between themselves and the Lord (cf. Deut 8:19-20; 30:15-18). Israel's condition was serious. Far more disastrous than what the locusts had done was what it symbolized! God would no longer tolerate their duplicity. Rather, he had taken away the ability and high privilege of offering those sacrifices that were intended to symbolize his people's devotion to him (cf. Hos 2:9-13; 9:1-4).

The lesson is obvious. True religion is an active one that comes from the heart (Deut 6:4-5; Jas 1:22-27). Mere ritual and routine, without the genuine spiritual reality that is evidenced by a demonstrated allegiance to a sovereign God, is unacceptable to him (1 Sam 15:22-23; Ps 40:6-8; Isa 1:10-20; Mic 6:8). May we be those who put our faith into action in true devotion, both in worship and service, while attending to our daily pursuits (Deut 10:12-13; Josh 22:5; 1 Sam 12:24; 1 Kgs 9:4; Ps 101:1-3; Matt 22:37-40).

Joel's words to those who tend the crops (1:11-12) are also instructive. Although they would weep over the economic loss and the cutoff of their food supply, the commodities mentioned also had spiritual significance. Especially noteworthy are the vine and fig tree. These appear at times in the Scriptures to symbolize the basic relation of God to his people, as well as the blessings he bestows on them for their obedience (Ps 80:8-15; Isa 5:2-6; Jer 2:21; cf. Matt 21:18-21, 28-46). Indeed, the divine promise to a faithful remnant spoke of a future peace, prosperity, and felicity, symbolized by sitting under one's own vine and fig tree (Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10). Likewise, the pomegranate, palm, and apple trees were not only important to the economy but often symbolized spiritual nourishment, refreshment, joy, and fruitfulness of life (Deut 8:6-10; Ps 92:12; Song 2:3).

The Scriptures picture the believer's basic spiritual relationship with the Lord using the motifs of the vine and the fig tree. As God saw in Israel the prospect of faithful service as an obedient people (Hos 9:10), so the Lord expects believers (the branches) to abide in Christ (the vine) in order that they may live fruitful and productive lives (John 15:4). Failure to maintain a close walk with the Lord, however, can only spell spiritual disaster (Matt 21:19-21; Luke 13:6-9; John 15:5-6). Further, a display or pretense of spirituality without real fruit-bearing invites the Lord's judgment, much as Jesus cursed the fig tree for showing a promise of fruit without actually bearing any (Matt 21:18-19). Believers are thus reminded that the Lord expects his followers to be active, genuine, and faithful Christians who serve the Lord out of a pure heart, regardless of the exigencies of life (cf. Hab 3:17-19).

A final lesson comes from Joel's admonition to the priests. Having noted their lamenting (1:9), he calls upon them to spend the night in heartfelt contrition and penitence (1:13). The situation was severe, as they should be the first to recognize. For theirs was the exalted task of ministering before the Lord. Surely they were to set the example for all as to the proper course of spiritual action (cf. Luke 12:48). But the other eighth-century prophets indicate that the priests had scarcely done so previously. Given to drink (Isa 28:7-10), yet teaching for a price (Mic 3:11; cf. 2 Cor 2:17), they personally ignored God's law. Such conduct could only cause God's people to perish for lack of spiritual knowledge (Hos 4:4-9).

Joel's challenge to the false spiritual leadership thus stands in distinct contrast to the work of the one who is the promised Prophet and Great High Priest (Deut 18:15-18; Heb 8:6; 9:21-28). So also it should be with believers. For as a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9), they are said to do spiritual service for God. This is not only true for those specially called to minister before God but for all believers. Theirs



Amos

ANDREW E. HILL

INTRODUCTION TO *Amos*

AMOS WAS A SHEPHERD and a sycamore-fig farmer from Tekoa, a village about ten miles south of Jerusalem. His denial of any association with the religious establishment emphasized his detachment from the formal institutions of the royal court and Temple (7:14-15). Given his platform as an independent layman, Amos had the freedom to proclaim God's message unfettered by vested interests or public opinion. Religious apostasy, moral decay, social injustice, and political corruption in the northern kingdom prompted God to send Amos across the border of Judah to preach in Bethel of Israel. Amos condemned Israel because they had "forgotten how to do right" (3:10). Since the preaching of Amos is dated to the early or mid-eighth century BC, he is the first Old Testament prophet to address the theme of the "day of the LORD" (5:18; chs 7-8). His understanding of the ethical implications of Israel's covenant relationship with God for individual and corporate behavior made him a champion of social justice (5:7, 15, 24; 6:12).

AUTHOR

The book is silent on the specifics of authorship, although it is generally assumed that the prophetic word formula ("This message was given to Amos," 1:1) signifies that Amos was responsible in some fashion for writing down his own message. The exact details concerning how the oracles that Amos delivered to Israel at Bethel came to be recorded remain unknown. He may have dictated his revelations to a scribe or composed them himself. The latter seems more likely given the first-person accounts of his messages and visions. He may have committed his revelations to writing shortly after his return to Tekoa from his brief "preaching campaign" in the northern kingdom of Israel. His ministry covers a period of less than two years (1:1), and in fact was likely only a few months (G. Smith 2001:209-210) or even a few days long (cf. Hayes 1988:46-47, who connects Amos's preaching with the Marheshvan festival instituted by Jeroboam as an alternative to the fall pilgrimage Festival of Shelters; 1 Kgs 12:32-33).

Apart from the facts that the name Amos means "burden-bearer" and that he was from Tekoa (1:1), all we know of Amos comes from his own confession that he was not a professional prophet but a shepherd and sycamore-fig farmer (cf. 7:14-15). This disclaimer about not being a member of the "religious establishment" is significant because it implies his freedom to proclaim God's message

without any political motivations. As an “independent layman” and a “blue-collar” worker without formal academic and religious training, Amos reminds us that God shows no partiality in calling people to serve his cause. This is a timely admonition in our age of “professionalism.”

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

The message of Amos is dated to the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah (c. 791/783–742/740 BC) and Jeroboam II, king of Israel (793/786–753/746 BC). Since the reigns of both of these kings extended over a period of more than four decades, and further, the exact dates for the rule of each king vary by some two to seven years depending upon the source consulted,¹ this leaves some ambiguity as to the exact date. Traditionally, the date of the book of Amos has been assigned to the middle years of the reign of Jeroboam II, sometime in the 760s BC (Niehaus 1992:316; Smith 2001:206). More recent historical analysis and chronological calculations have pushed the date for the message of Amos nearer the end of the reign of Jeroboam II, perhaps around 750–748 BC (cf. Hayes 1988:26-27).

The reference to the “two years before the earthquake” in the superscription (1:1) provides little help in determining the precise date of Amos’s prophecy. Archaeological findings at sites like Samaria and Hazor have been interpreted by some to attest to such destruction by an earthquake around this general time (see the discussions in Hayes 1988:46-47; Anderson and Freedman 1989:198-199), and Zechariah’s reference to the natural disaster indicates that this tremor was long remembered in Israel (Zech 14:5), but attempts to pinpoint the year in which the earthquake occurred are speculative. As a consequence, it seems best to assign the time of Amos’s prophetic activity to a general period ranging from 760–750 BC.

The general occasion prompting Amos’s message to Jeroboam II and Israel was the religious apostasy and moral and social decay of the northern kingdom (cf. 2:6-16). More specifically, the Lord God of Heaven’s Armies had become weary of Israel’s sins of idolatry and oppressive greed (3:13–4:2). God’s patience had expired, and his decree of judgment and exile signaled the “sudden end” of Israel (7:9). The earthquake itself may have been the event prompting the prophet to publish his experience. The citation of the devastating natural disaster in the superscription suggests that Amos viewed the event as a partial fulfillment of his oracles to Israel and as confirmation of his divine commission (cf. 9:1).

The biblical records of the reigns of Uzziah and Jeroboam II are found in 2 Kings 14:17–15:7 and 2 Chronicles 26. Both kings brought political stability and economic prosperity to their respective kingdoms. Both kings expanded their territorial borders by means of successful military campaigns. For instance, Uzziah fortified the walls and towers of the city of Jerusalem and built other defense outposts throughout Judah (2 Chr 26:9). His policies also increased agricultural productivity (2 Chr 26:10). In addition, he assembled a well-equipped army that enabled Judah to subdue the Philistines, Arabs, and Ammonites (2 Chr 26:6-8, 11-15). Although

regarded a righteous king by the biblical historians, Uzziah was stricken with a skin disease as divine punishment for usurping priestly duties (2 Kgs 15:3-5; 2 Chr 26:16-20). The malady was God's judgment against the king's pride, and it plagued him until his death, making him a social outcast in his own kingdom (2 Chr 26:21).

Jeroboam II similarly expanded the political control of Israel into the Aramean regions of Damascus and Hamath by means of military achievements (2 Kgs 14:28). We learn (indirectly) from the prophets Amos and Hosea that under the policies of Jeroboam II the northern kingdom enjoyed greater economic prosperity than anytime in its history since the united monarchy of David and Solomon (3:15; 4:1-2; Hos 5:7; 8:14). Unlike Uzziah, however, Jeroboam II was assessed as an evil king by the biblical historians because he perpetuated the idolatry of his predecessors (2 Kgs 14:24).

Despite the facade of material wealth during what has been called the "Silver Age" of Israelite history (Paul 1991:1), Amos looked past external appearances and charged that the nation was guilty before God of sinning again and again (2:6) and forgetting how to do right (3:10). Thus, Israel was "ripe" for divine judgment (8:1-2). Underneath the veneer of political stability and economic prosperity, the cancer of social and moral decay metastasized. The success of Jeroboam II had come at the expense of the poor (who were oppressed by social injustice; 2:6; 4:1; 5:11) and of true worship (which was corrupted by religious apostasy; 3:14; 4:4-5). A just and holy God had no choice but to punish the people who had violated the intimacy of their covenant relationship with him (3:1; 5:25-27).

AUDIENCE

Broadly understood, the people of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel were the intended audience of Amos's message (2:4-16; 3:1, 13; 5:1; 6:1; 7:15). Specific groups or classes of people within the northern kingdom were targeted, including the "wealthy" (3:15; cf. 4:1; 6:4) and the "famous and popular" (6:1). Likewise, certain individuals, including Jeroboam II, king of Israel, and Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, were also recipients of the prophet's oracles (cf. 7:10-17).

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

Amos is the third book in the collection known as the Minor Prophets (or the "Book of the Twelve" in the Hebrew Bible). The Twelve Prophets are usually grouped with the other Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and, without exception, are found in the earliest delineations of the Old Testament canon. These twelve books were always copied on one scroll in the ancient Hebrew manuscript tradition. The order of the Twelve Prophets is uniform in the Masoretic tradition of the Hebrew Bible (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). The order of the Twelve Prophets does vary, however, in some canon traditions. For example, Amos and Micah immediately follow Hosea in the Septuagint (LXX).² According to Hubbard (1989:88-89), the position of Amos as third among the Twelve Prophets is warranted because

Finally, Amos understands God as the divine healer and restorer (9:11-15). Like Ezekiel, the prophet knows that God does not delight in the death of the wicked—but rather that they should “come back to the LORD and live!” (5:4, 6; cf. Ezek 18:23, 32). Even in judgment God will not destroy Israel completely (9:8) because he is also a God of mercy (5:15). God desires to be Israel’s “helper,” but he can only help those who decide to “hate evil and love what is good” (5:15).

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction (1:1-2)
- II. God's Judgment on Israel's Neighbors: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab (1:3-2:3)
- III. God's Judgment on Judah and Israel (2:4-16)
 - A. Judgment against Judah (2:4-5)
 - B. Judgment against Israel (2:6-16)
- IV. Further Oracles against Israel (3:1-6:14)
 - A. Listen, People of Israel (3:1-15)
 - B. Listen, Cows of Bashan (4:1-13)
 - C. Listen, People of Israel (5:1-17)
 - D. How Terrible for Those Anxious for the Day of the Lord (5:18-27)
 - E. How Terrible for Those Who Lounge in Jerusalem and Samaria (6:1-14)
- V. Visions of Judgment (7:1-9:10)
 - A. Three Visions: The Plague of Locusts, Devouring Fire, and the Lord's Plumb Line (7:1-9)
 - B. Interlude: Amaziah Challenges Amos (7:10-17)
 - C. Fourth Vision: A Vision of Ripe Fruit (8:1-14)
 - D. Fifth Vision: A Vision of God at the Altar (9:1-10)
- VI. Epilogue: The Restoration of Israel (9:11-15)

ENDNOTES

1. See the comparative chronological chart in Hill and Walton 2000:480.
2. According to Jones (1995:3-5, 54-55), the overlapping chronological information in the superscriptions, the size of the books, and the literary parallels between the three books may be seen as evidence that Hosea-Amos-Micah formed a unified literary corpus.
3. Sellin and Fohrer (1968:436-437) are representative of such scholarship, as they confidently list passages that “surely do not derive from Amos” (e.g., 4:13; 5:8-9; 8:8; 9:5-6, 8-15). On the redaction of Amos, see further the discussions in Hayes 1988:37-38 and Hubbard 1989:98-102.
4. See Dorsey 1999:277-286 for more on the literary structure of Amos, including a discussion of Limburg’s “sevenfold” organization of Amos.

COMMENTARY ON

Amos

◆ I. Introduction (1:1–2)

This message was given to Amos, a shepherd from the town of Tekoa in Judah. He received this message in visions two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash,* was king of Israel.

²This is what he saw and heard:

“The LORD’s voice will roar from
Zion
and thunder from Jerusalem!
The lush pastures of the shepherds
will dry up;
the grass on Mount Carmel will
wither and die.”

1:1 Hebrew *Joash*, a variant spelling of Jehoash.

NOTES

1:1 *This message.* Lit., “the words of Amos.” The term (*dabar* [TH1697, ZH1821], “word”) is used here as a technical term for divine revelation, in this case, oracles of Yahweh delivered by Amos. As a title, the expression may be understood as “the story of Amos” or “the record of Amos” (i.e., materials connected with the name of Amos; cf. Andersen and Freedman 1989:184–185).

shepherd. The word for “shepherd” (*noqed* [TH5349, ZH5924]) is rare, used in the OT only here and in 2 Kgs 3:4. It is unclear whether Amos was a tender of flocks or an owner of sheep (cf. Stuart 1987:299, “sheep breeder”). His autobiographical statements to Amaziah concerning his profession suggest the prophet was “just a shepherd” (i.e., a hired hand, not a wealthy owner and breeder of flocks; see 7:14).

Tekoa. A hill-country village allotted to the tribe of Judah located 10 miles southwest of Jerusalem (Josh 15:59, LXX). Tekoa was home to one of David’s mighty warriors (2 Sam 23:26) and the unnamed wise woman who brokered Absalom’s return to Jerusalem after his slaying of Amnon (2 Sam 14:1–24).

visions. The word “vision” (*khazah* [TH2372, ZH2600]) is a technical expression for one form of divine revelation. Amaziah identified Amos as a “seer” (*khozeh* [TH2374, ZH2602]; 7:12, NLT reads “prophet”), a title Amos accepted for himself, unlike the title “prophet” (*nabi*’ [TH5030, ZH5566]), which he rejected (7:14). According to Andersen and Freedman (1989:189), the vision is the experience in which the divine revelation is received and both “auditory and visionary components were integral to the prophet’s close encounter with God.” It is also noted that the term “seer” (*khozeh* [TH2374, ZH2602]) is applied to Judean prophets alone, perhaps because of their emphasis on the divine council motif (cf. Hubbard 1989:125).

Uzziah . . . and Jeroboam II. Cf. 2 Kgs 14:17–15:7. The incomplete date formula sets the ministry of Amos during the period of the divided Hebrew kingdoms sometime in the

mid-eighth century BC. The precise dating of the oracles of Amos to “two years before the earthquake” is of little help in establishing the chronology of the prophet’s ministry (see “Date and Occasion of Writing” in the Introduction).

1:2 LORD. The divine name (Yahweh) associated with Israel’s covenant experience at Mount Sinai is the prophet’s favorite title for God and is found 60 times in Amos.

roar. The verb “roar” (*sha’ag* [TH7580, ZH8613]) is often connected with the roaring of a lion (e.g., Judg 14:5; Isa 5:29). Amos made the direct association between Yahweh and a roaring lion later in his message to Israel (3:8). This roaring of Yahweh serves as a call to repentance in Hosea 11:10, while Joel used the same word to threaten judgment against the nations (Joel 3:16). Yahweh’s roar is a metaphor for divine judgment in Amos, indicated by the effect of his thunderous outburst—the death of living things! Later Jeremiah uses the same expression to describe God’s judgment against the whole earth (Jer 25:30).

Zion . . . Jerusalem. The geographical movement from the specific site of the Temple to the city of Jerusalem emphasizes the location of true worship for the Hebrew people—the place where Yahweh set his name. The association of the divine presence of Yahweh with Jerusalem and Judah implicitly indicted the false worship centers of Dan and Bethel in the northern kingdom of Israel (cf. 7:13). The NLT “thunders from Jerusalem” (*qol + natan*; lit., “gives” or “utters his voice,” NRSV) is interpretive based on the parallelism of the preceding line describing Yahweh’s voice like that of a roaring lion.

Mount Carmel. The peak is part of a mountainous area in northern Israel dividing the plain of Acco to the north from the plain of Sharon to the south. The lush tree cover of Mount Carmel made it a symbol of beauty and fertility (Isa 35:2). The larger context of Amos’s message suggests that Carmel is also a symbol for the kingdom of Israel itself that will soon experience the “withering” judgment of God (cf. 9:3). No doubt the reference to Carmel is also an allusion to the earlier triumph of Yahweh over Baal during the days of Elijah the prophet (1 Kgs 18:20-40).

dry up . . . wither. The verbs *’abal* [TH56A, ZH62] (dry up) and *yabesh* [TH3001, ZH3312] (wither) are often found in contexts describing divine judgment (e.g., Isa 24:4, 7; Ezek 17:9, 24) and at times are paired together to indicate the extent of the devastation (e.g., Joel 1:10). The word *yabesh* especially connotes the power of God, as it is used to describe the drying up of the Sea of Reeds and the Jordan River (Josh 4:23; Ps 74:15).

COMMENTARY

The superscription (1:1) is a formal statement that corresponds to the title of a document. It serves to classify literature by genre or literary type (in this case as an oracular or prophetic text) and to identify the author, audience, date, and sometimes the occasion prompting the divine message. This superscription identifies the author of the book as Amos and includes a brief biographical sketch noting him as “a shepherd from the town of Tekoa in Judah.” It also classifies the genre as prophetic revelation given in the form of a vision, and broadly dates the book to the reigns of rival kings of the divided Hebrew monarchies. The theological purpose of the superscription is to emphasize that God himself is the source and authority behind the message of Amos (cf. 2 Pet 1:20-21).

The book of Amos is unusual among the Minor Prophets in that an introduction to the prophet’s message (1:2) is coupled with the superscription (1:1; note the prelude to Zechariah’s visions [Zech 1:2-6] that accompanies the superscription to the book [Zech 1:1]). The introduction sets both the tone and the theme of the

message of Amos. The mood of the book is ominous and threatening, evidenced in the “roaring” and “thundering” of the voice of Yahweh. The theme of the book is the destruction and death associated with divine judgment, seen in the descriptions of pasture lands “drying up” and grass “withering and dying” (1:2). Theologically, the introduction legitimizes God as the divine Judge because the name “LORD” (*yhwh* [TH3068, ZH3378]) signifies his position as the suzerain or king in his covenant relationship with the vassal Israel. Later, the prophet Jeremiah would illustrate this master–servant relationship with his message about the potter and the clay (Jer 18:1-17).

◆ II. God's Judgment on Israel's Neighbors: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab (1:3–2:3)

³This is what the LORD says:

“The people of Damascus have sinned again and again,* and I will not let them go unpunished!

They beat down my people in Gilead as grain is threshed with iron sledges.

⁴So I will send down fire on King Hazael's palace, and the fortresses of King Ben-hadad will be destroyed.

⁵I will break down the gates of Damascus and slaughter the people in the valley of Aven. I will destroy the ruler in Beth-eden, and the people of Aram will go as captives to Kir,” says the LORD.

⁶This is what the LORD says:

“The people of Gaza have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished!

They sent whole villages into exile, selling them as slaves to Edom.

⁷So I will send down fire on the walls of Gaza, and all its fortresses will be destroyed.

⁸I will slaughter the people of Ashdod

and destroy the king of Ashkelon.

Then I will turn to attack Ekron, and the few Philistines still left will be killed,” says the Sovereign LORD.

⁹This is what the LORD says:

“The people of Tyre have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished!

They broke their treaty of brotherhood with Israel, selling whole villages as slaves to Edom.

¹⁰So I will send down fire on the walls of Tyre, and all its fortresses will be destroyed.”

¹¹This is what the LORD says:

“The people of Edom have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished!

They chased down their relatives, the Israelites, with swords, showing them no mercy.

In their rage, they slashed them continually and were unrelenting in their anger.

¹²So I will send down fire on Teman, and the fortresses of Bozrah will be destroyed.”



Obadiah

RICHARD D. PATTERSON

INTRODUCTION TO *Obadiah*

OBADIAH WAS CALLED ON to experience the perils of life in a time of disaster. Not only was the kingdom of Judah in the process of collapse from its internal problems, but neighboring enemies were taking advantage of the kingdom's difficulties to despoil it. Nevertheless, God had a message for his people. One day their enemies would experience God's judgment. Then a purified Israel would inherit the Land of Promise, and God would dwell in their midst.

AUTHOR

The name Obadiah is a common one in the Scriptures, occurring 18 times in various forms. Jewish and Christian traditions have held that the prophet was the same Obadiah who was King Ahab's palace administrator (1 Kgs 18:3-16). Contemporary scholarship, however, has hesitated in settling upon any specific biblical person, so that Finley (1990:339) says, "Nothing is known about the author beyond his name and that he received a prophetic revelation." Although some have contended that Obadiah was a prophet who functioned as part of the Temple staff in Jerusalem, in the final analysis such remains unprovable. Allen (1976:137) remarks, "It is safer to conclude that Obadiah borrowed cultic and traditional themes in developing his prophecy."

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

Suggested dates for the book range from the ninth century to the late fourth century BC. Conservative scholars have adopted a wide span of dates, including both preexilic and exilic eras (i.e., from the ninth century to the sixth century BC). Final determination has largely been based on the interpretation of the denunciation of Edom in 1:10-14. Some commentators (e.g., Keil, Niehaus) have followed the traditional ninth-century BC date, citing general association with the description of events during the reign of King Jehoram of Judah. Others have defended an eighth-century BC date, either in the time of Amaziah and Uzziah (e.g., Pusey) or Ahaz (e.g., Raven), or the time of Jeremiah (e.g., Young). Most scholars (e.g., Stuart, Raabe) have opted for a sixth-century BC date because they view these crucial verses (1:10-14) as referring to events concerned with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Thus Smith opts for a date somewhere between 587 and 500 BC.

A more precise date could be affixed if the relation of Obadiah 1:1-9 to Jeremiah 49:7-16 could be determined. Here again, scholars are divided as to whether Jeremiah borrowed from Obadiah (e.g., Keil, Pusey), Obadiah was dependent upon Jeremiah (e.g., Armerding, Bewer), or both drew upon common prophetic material (e.g., Finley). While Obadiah's penchant for drawing upon traditional Hebrew phraseology makes the second option most likely (Raabe 1996:22-33), the data are capable of such diverse evaluation that a final decision as to literary dependency seems unlikely.

The occasion of Obadiah's prophecy, then, would be variously understood. If a ninth-century BC date is decided upon, the denunciation of Edom would be tied in with the Edomite campaigning in Jehoram's day (2 Kgs 8:16-24) and the subsequent Arabian-Philistine invasion of Judah and Jerusalem (2 Chr 21:16-17). If the time period is that of Amaziah/Uzziah, Obadiah's prophecy would parallel the sentiment of Amos, whose general condemnation of Edom's perennial hostility merited a prophetic judgment oracle (Amos 1:11-12). If Obadiah is seen as prophesying during the reign of Ahaz, the prophet referred to the defeats by the Edomites and Philistines (2 Chr 28:17-18). Taking the setting of the book as exilic most naturally views Edom's vile behavior in connection with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Like the date, then, the occasion of Obadiah's prophecy is difficult to determine. Yet the message of Edom's sure judgment for its traditional position of animosity toward God's people remains the same and is in harmony with the words of several other prophets (Isa 11:14; 21:11-12; 34:1-17; 63:1-6; Jer 25:21; 49:7-22; Lam 4:21; Ezek 25:12-14; 35:1-15; 36:1-38; Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11-12; 9:12; Mal 1:2-5). In that regard, Edom becomes representative of all of God's foes, who will ultimately be defeated in the great Day of the Lord (see especially Isa 34:1-17; 63:1-6; Ezek 35:1-15; 36:1-38).

AUDIENCE

Whatever the time period represented by the book, Obadiah wrote to citizens of Judah and Jerusalem. He was thoroughly familiar with events that had taken place in the holy city (1:11-14) and concerned about its sacred reputation and destiny (1:16-17, 21).

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

In contrast to the debate over the date and occasion of the book, its canonicity is not in question. Like the rest of the Minor Prophets, its acceptance is attested at least by the second century BC by Ben Sirach (Sir 1:39).

Likewise, the text was largely well preserved, as attested by the second-century AD scroll of the Minor Prophets found at Wadi Murabba'at, reflecting the tradition of the Masoretic Text. One may safely say with Watts (1969:30) that "the text of Obadiah is generally in very good shape."

LITERARY STYLE

Despite its brevity, the prophecy displays a carefully structured format of prophetic poetry. Niehaus (1993:505) observes that Obadiah was “a master of various poetical techniques.” The prophecy is also freely sprinkled with striking images. For example, Edom’s stronghold is likened to an eagle’s nest (1:4) and its eventual defeat is compared to a hot fire quickly burning stubble (1:18). Obadiah also employed irony to great effect: Although Edom’s defeat will be a more thorough destruction than that of looters or robbers who at least leave something behind (1:5-6), it is a just reward for what Edom has done to others (1:15-16). The prophecy is also noteworthy for its elliptical style (1:19-20) and its effective use of repetition (1:11-14) and wordplay, such as the pun in 1:11-12 where “foreigners” (*nakrim* [TH5237A, ZH5799]) will effect “his [Edom’s] misfortune” (*nakro* [cf. TH5235, ZH5798]).

MAJOR THEMES

The basic theme of the book is the judgment of Edom, a theme held in common with Joel and Amos. This major emphasis is developed around the motif of brotherhood, which links the two halves (1:1-14, 15-21) of the book together. Indeed, the conduct of Edom (called Esau in 1:6, 8-9, 18, 21) was particularly loathsome, for it had oppressed Judah and Jerusalem, its brother (called Jacob, 1:10; cf. 12, 17-18). Yet, just as Esau was to find his blessing in Jacob (Gen 25:23; 27:27-40), so the land of Edom would find its only deliverance through those who come from Jacob’s descendants on Mount Zion (1:21).

Mountains form a significant motif in the book. Thus, the failure of the heights of Edom (1:2-4) stands in sharp contrast with the success of Mount Zion (1:17, 21). The subject of deliverance forms a subtheme, cast in a salvation oracle, that underscores the restoration of a remnant of God’s people so they can participate in the Lord’s final universal reign.

THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Obadiah’s theological emphases reflect the major message of the book. The Day of the Lord is seen as a corollary to the Lord’s universal sovereignty (1:15). This “day” is a time when his justice will be vindicated, as rebels are punished and God’s people delivered and rewarded in accordance with the principles of God’s retributive justice (1:15-21). Israel may be certain that God has not rejected his people but will reverse their present plight (Raabe 1996:60). In keeping with this latter emphasis, the theological themes of the Abrahamic covenant for the Lord’s remnant can be seen (1:17-21). The teleological purposes of God’s divine grant to his people find expression here. God is neither blind to present circumstances nor incapable of dealing with them. Ultimately, the God of history “is also the Lord of the future” (Allen 1976:139), for he will reign over all nations from Mount Zion, where his restored people will enjoy the age-old promises resident in the covenant granted by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

OUTLINE

Many outlines have been suggested for Obadiah, one of the most thorough being that of Raabe (1996:18-22). Although he makes a strong case for viewing the structure of Obadiah as built around (1) the divine speech formulae (1:1, 4, 8, 18), (2) perceived stitching devices between the resultant units (1:1-4, 5-7, 8-18, 19-21), and (3) the distinction between poetry and prose sections suggested in certain editions of the Hebrew text, one must proceed with caution in applying these data too stringently. This is because (1) divine speech formulae are often given for emphasis rather than as structural indicators; (2) a different set of thematic and stitching devices may be seen as readily as those suggested by Raabe; and (3) even granted the distinction between prose and poetry (although this is often difficult to ascertain in Hebrew prophecy), a change in literary medium need not be viewed as a thematic structural indicator.

Accordingly, the following outline is a simple thematic one that allows due weight to the progressive nature of Obadiah's message: the impending doom of Edom (1:1b-9), the causes for its demise (1:10-14), and a consideration of the Day of the Lord (1:15-21).

Superscription (1:1a)

- I. The Day of Edom's Destruction (1:1b-14)
 - A. The Call to Battle against Edom (1:1b)
 - B. The Course of Edom's Defeat (1:2-9)
 - C. The Cause for Edom's Defeat (1:10-14)
- II. Edom and the Day of the Lord (1:15-21)
 - A. The Judgment of the Nations (1:15-16)
 - B. The Restoration of Israel (1:17-21)

COMMENTARY ON

Obadiah

◆ Superscription (1:1a)

This is the vision that the Sovereign LORD revealed to Obadiah concerning the land of Edom.

NOTES

1:1a vision. About this term of divine revelation, see note on Nah 1:1. Laetsch (1956:193) appropriately remarks, “What Obadiah wrote was not the product of his own reflection, of his keen insight into the political and religious conditions of his day; nor was it merely the application of God’s Word to a given situation. It was a vision, a divine revelation of God’s purpose.”

Obadiah. Obadiah (whose name means “servant of Yahweh”) is appropriately named, for as God’s prophet he was also the Lord’s servant (cf. 1 Kgs 14:18, NIV; see also 2 Kgs 9:7; Jer 7:25; Ezek 38:17, NIV; Zech 1:6).

concerning the land of Edom. While the phrase *le’edom* may be translated either “unto Edom” or “about/concerning Edom,” the latter probably is to be understood here (cf. Jer 49:7), but without discounting the fact that God’s message was also intended for Edom (see Wehrle 1987:34-42).

COMMENTARY

Obadiah’s short prophecy deals with the perennial problem of Edom’s hostility toward God’s people, Israel. The first 14 verses speak of Edom’s destruction: the call to battle against Edom (1:1b), the course of Edom’s defeat (1:2-9), and the causes that precipitate its demise (1:10-14). The final verses (1:15-21) present the theme of the Day of the Lord, including the judgment of Edom and the nations (1:15-16), and the restoration of God’s people to their land (1:17-21). Edom has had its “day” with God’s people; now in the Day of the Lord, it would receive the just reward for its actions.

Edom owes its name to Esau, also called Edom (Gen 25:25, 30), who established his dwelling in the area formerly known as Mount Seir (Gen 36:8-9) after he drove out the Horites (Gen 14:6; cf. Deut 12:2). Edom was also known as Teman (1:9; Hab 3:3, NIV) after Esau’s grandson (Gen 36:15). Edom was often the object of prophetic denunciation (Isa 34:1-15; Jer 49:7-22; Ezek 35:1-15; Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11-12; 9:12; Mal 1:2-5) due to its longstanding enmity toward God’s people (cf. Num 20:14-21; Judg 11:16-17; 1 Sam 14:47-48; 2 Sam 8:14; 1 Kgs 11:14-25; 2 Chr 20:1-30).

The term “Sovereign LORD” (lit., “The Lord Yahweh”) emphasizes the key theological perspective and theme of the book: God’s sovereignty over the nations. The message Obadiah received was from the One who rules the universe and controls the destiny of nations. While that message was designed for Obadiah’s audience, it also was of concern for Edom.

◆ I. The Day of Edom’s Destruction (1:1b–14)
 A. The Call to Battle against Edom (1:1b)

We have heard a message from
 the LORD
 that an ambassador was sent to
 the nations to say,

“Get ready, everyone!
 Let’s assemble our armies and
 attack Edom!”

NOTES

1:1b *We have heard*. The parallel in Jer 49:14 reads, “I have heard.” The plural here may indicate Obadiah’s reception of the same message Jeremiah received (hence the plural *we*), or the plural *we* could include his audience in the implications of the divine message. Niehaus (1993:513) renders the compound preposition *me’eth* [TH4480/854, ZH4946/907] (lit., “from” + “with”) as “straight from” and adds that this “suggests that the immediate source of the verb’s action is Yahweh himself.” The message is introduced in standard formula: “Thus says the Lord” (a phrase that occurs 133 times in the Latter Prophets), attesting to the fact that the prophet is God’s messenger (Raabe 1996:99-105).

that an ambassador was sent. The NLT takes the Hebrew coordinate clause as subordinate to the hearing (indirect discourse); so also Luther’s translation (“We have heard from the Lord that an emissary was sent among the heathen”). NIV and GW take the sending of the ambassador as direct discourse—the clause is a statement of the import of the news, that is, that a messenger had been sent. As the text stands, the particle more naturally introduces a statement of the steps that God had already taken for carrying out the message that was heard. “The Lord who is author of the oracle was already taking steps to carry out its message in clear demonstration to the faithful that he was Lord of history” (Allen 1976:145).

Get ready. . . let’s . . . attack. The two verbs reflect a typical Hebrew sequence in which the imperative with a cohortative yields virtual subordination to express intended purpose: “Arise in order to attack” (Waltke and O’Connor 1990:574-575). Although the Hebrew prepositional phrase reads “against *her*” (cf. Jer 49:14, NASB) rather than the expected masculine singular suffix used elsewhere in Obadiah when referring to Edom, the prophets are known to alternate between genders when referring to Edom (Jer 49:14, 17, NASB). Such variation may be accounted for on the basis of an implied head construct noun *’erets* [TH776, ZH824] (land) before Edom. Thus, in some cases authors retain the sense of the natural head; in others they make agreement with the resultant surface structure. In any case, we need not emend the text on the basis of Jer 49:14 or LXX; nor do we need to view the preceding *shullakh* [TH7971, ZH8938] (was sent) as a defectively written pual participle (Allen 1976:144), for the form is fully explicable as a pual suffix conjugation as it stands. If a participle is deemed necessary, one might suggest that the preceding mem of *baggoyim* [TH1471, ZH1580] (to the nations) serves as a double-duty consonant to be read also with *shullakh*. (For the principle of double-duty elements, see Lehman 1967:93-101.)

COMMENTARY

The summoning of the nations to battle demonstrates that human history moves at two levels. Behind the actions of nations stands the person of God himself, the controller of history. Thus, while people act out their plans, they are nonetheless circumscribed by the all-encompassing purposes of God, neither compromising human accountability nor God's standards of justice. Here the sovereignty of God is wedded to the theme of the Divine Warrior who enters the arena of human political affairs to bring judgment to the wicked and deliverance to his own. The blending of these two themes gives assurance to the weary believer that however dark the circumstances, the battle is the Lord's (1 Sam 17:47; 2 Chr 20:15). The scriptural perspective that the prophet's words are the special revelation of God is reinforced here. Obadiah reports that what he will say stems both from God's revelation to his prophet in a visionary experience and via a divine message. The truth that God can and does reveal himself to mankind thus finds specific confirmation here, a fact repeatedly reported by the other prophets.

◆ B. The Course of Edom's Defeat (1:2-9)

²The LORD says to Edom,

"I will cut you down to size among
the nations;
you will be greatly despised.

³You have been deceived by your
own pride
because you live in a rock fortress
and make your home high in the
mountains.

'Who can ever reach us way up here?'
you ask boastfully.

⁴But even if you soar as high as
eagles
and build your nest among
the stars,
I will bring you crashing down,"
says the LORD.

⁵"If thieves came at night and robbed
you
(what a disaster awaits you!),
they would not take everything.
Those who harvest grapes
always leave a few for the poor.
But your enemies will wipe you out
completely!

⁶Every nook and cranny of Edom*

will be searched and looted.
Every treasure will be found
and taken.

⁷"All your allies will turn against you.
They will help to chase you from
your land.
They will promise you peace
while plotting to deceive and
destroy you.
Your trusted friends will set traps
for you,
and you won't even know
about it.

⁸At that time not a single wise
person
will be left in the whole land
of Edom,"
says the LORD.

"For on the mountains of Edom
I will destroy everyone who has
understanding.

⁹The mightiest warriors of Teman
will be terrified,
and everyone on the mountains
of Edom
will be cut down in the slaughter.

* Hebrew *Esau*; also in 8b, 9, 18, 19, 21.

NOTES

1:2 I will cut you down to size. Lit., “I have made you small.” NLT translates according to the sense of the context. Proud, lofty Edom will be brought down from its height and high-mindedness. The Hebrew verb is a prophetic perfect, a prediction being viewed as already accomplished.

1:3 rock fortress. The noun *sela'* [TH5553, ZH6152] carries with it the nuance of a crevice of a rock, though it may also indicate a rock or cliff. It thus differs from such near synonyms as *tsur* [TH6697, ZH7446] (large rock) and *'eben* [TH68, ZH74] (stone). (See my remarks in TWOT 2.627.) Here a play on the name of Edom's capital city, Sela, is intended.

1:4 eagles. The metaphorical use of the eagle is quite common both in the OT (e.g., Deut 28:49 [NLT, “vulture”]; 2 Sam 1:23; Ezek 17:3, 7; Hos 8:1) and in the ancient Near East. Tiglath-pileser III (1114–1076 BC) reports that his ancestor Ninurta-apil-Ekur spread his wings over the land like an eagle (Grayson 1976:17), much like the Lord is said to have carried Israel (Exod 19:4). Sargon II (722–705 BC) reports that he caused his forces to fly over the mountains like valiant eagles (see *The Assyrian Dictionary* 325), and Sennacherib (705–681 BC) asserts that on his fifth campaign his enemies' abodes were located “on the peak of Mount Nippur, a steep mountain, like the nests of the eagle (vulture), king of birds” (Luckenbill 1927:122). (For a fine discussion of these and other parallels, see Niehaus 1993:517-518.) Likewise, the metaphorical use of the eagle is known from ancient Ugaritic literature. Thus, Baal is given two clubs which, in his hands, swirl like an eagle to strike down his enemy. (See Gordon 1965:3.68, lines 13-24. An English translation may be found in Coogan 1978:88-89.) It is not extraordinary, then, that Jer 49:22 predicts an enemy of Edom that “swoops down like an eagle, spreading his wings over Bozrah.”

1:5 thieves . . . Those who harvest grapes. Obadiah continues his use of imagery here, employing irony and repetition. Like 1:4, which contains a double condition, 1:5 similarly has two conditional contexts: When thieves and robbers or grape gatherers do their work, they at least leave something behind. In both cases, the conditional clauses are introduced by the Hebrew particle *'im* [TH518, ZH561] (if), while in both, the contrast with Edom is preceded by the rhetorical *halo'* [TH1886.2/3808, ZH2022/4202] (Would it not . . . ?) and the exclamatory particle *'ek* [TH349, ZH375] (how) to emphasize the thoroughness of Edom's ransacking.

1:6 Edom. The MT reads *Esau* here and in verses 8b, 9, 18, 19, and 21. The reference to Edom as Esau is deliberate, emphasizing the heinous nature of Edom's crime. It violated the very nature of brotherhood (see Introduction, “Major Themes”). The verb that follows (NLT, “searched and looted”; Heb., *nekhpesu* [TH2664, ZH2924]) is plural, the controlling noun being viewed as a collective subject. Its form anticipates the following plural verb (NLT, “found and taken”; Heb., *nib'u* [TH1158, ZH1239]).

treasure. This word for treasure occurs only here in the OT but is related to a well-attested Semitic root meaning “hide,” “store up,” or “treasure” (*tsapan* [TH6845, ZH7621]). Thus, Moses was hidden three months due to Pharaoh's decree to put Hebrew male babies to death (Exod 2:2). Job complained that God stores up a man's punishment for his sins (Job 21:19), while the writer of Proverbs observed that God “grants a treasure of common sense to the honest” (Prov 2:7). The Hebrew root *tspn* finds its way into the Akkadian of Tell el-Amarna (*tsapanu*; El-Amarna 147:10). The noun can also refer to “secret (hiding) places” so that Raabe (1996:146) can say, “Neither the descendants of Esau nor their riches will go undetected by the enemies in spite of their hiding-places. Ordinary thieves and plunderers might not have the time necessary to discover such secret places (v. 5), but Edom's enemies will painstakingly and extensively seek after them and find them.”

1:7 They will help to chase you from your land. The meaning of the passage depends on the understanding of the root *shalakh* [TH7971, ZH8938] (send) and the noun *gebul* [TH1366,

ZH1473] (border). If the verb is understood as “send away,” the sense may be that of escorting or sending back to their border the Edomite envoys who have come to Edom’s allies for help. If a wider range of the verb is maintained, it could be understood that the Edomites’ former allies assist Edom’s enemies in driving the Edomites from their land. The NLT (along with the majority of translations) favors the latter understanding; Keil and Niehaus, the former. Still a third solution favors the thought of sending Edomite refugees to their allies’ borders, where they are still vulnerable to their enemies.

They will promise you peace while plotting to deceive and destroy you. This sentence forms the second of three parallel clauses in the Hebrew text. Those at peace with the Edomites are the very ones who will act deceitfully against them in their hour of greatest need. Significantly, each of the major clauses in the Hebrew text ends with a second masculine singular pronoun.

Your trusted friends will set traps for you. This sentence constitutes the third of the parallel clauses in the Hebrew text. Two problems stand out here. (1) Is the precise meaning of the Hebrew *lakhmekka* [TH3899, ZH4312] “[the men of] your bread,” or by reading a substantive participle (*lokhameyka*), is it “those who eat your bread” (cf. Symmachus, Vulgate, Targum)? The NLT may be compatible with either solution. In any case, the mention of peace and the sharing of bread are well-known treaty terms. Together, they reinforce the idea that Edom’s trusted allies could not be trusted. As Edom had deceived its kin Israel countless times, so it would be betrayed by its friends. (2) The second difficulty concerns the Hebrew noun *mazor* [TH4204, ZH4650]. Elsewhere it means “sore” or “wound” (e.g., Jer 30:13; Hos 5:13, NASB). Such a meaning, however, seems difficult in collocation with the following *takhteyka* [TH8478, ZH9393] (beneath you). Therefore, many have opted for a relation with a verbal root known in postbiblical Hebrew, “twist,” “cover with a web,” and in Syriac, “stretch out”; hence, NLT “set traps for you.” Raabe (1996:154-155) thinks that “after the allies expel Edomites from their dwellings, non-Edomites will settle in their place” (cf. Zech 9:6). If the term refers to strangers, it ironically anticipates the theme of v. 11.

you won’t even know about it. Nearly the same Hebrew construction is found in Deut 32:28, which the NLT translates “without understanding.” Besides the NLT’s rendering (cf. point 2 below), the words have been taken in several other ways: (1) If Edom had any sense, they would “know the awful end to which their covenant-breaking behavior must lead (Deut 32:29-30)” (Niehaus 1993:522); (2) Edom is so undiscerning that they will not be able to anticipate their allies’ treachery (Allen); (3) the Edomites are simply bewildered, not knowing what to do or how to help themselves (Keil); and (4) with non-Edomites occupying the land, Edom’s traditional wisdom will be absent (Raabe).

1:8 At that time. This phrase is often used in the prophets when speaking of the Lord’s intervention, whether in judgment or deliverance (Armerding 1985:346). It appears frequently in an eschatological setting. In the Hebrew text, v. 8 begins with a rhetorical question expecting an affirmative answer: “Will I not . . . destroy the wise men from Edom?” The NLT translates according to the sense, giving the expected answer as a direct divine assertion (cf. NRSV)—the whole matter being emphasized by the following “says the LORD,” a phrase that concluded a unit in v. 4 but introduces one here (Raabe 1996:163).

not a single wise person will be left. The force of the context and the parallel with Jer 49:7 demand not a complete annihilation of the wise men but a total abrogation of their wisdom. Depressed and devoid of wise counsel, Edom’s military situation stood in dire peril. Forms of the traditional terms “wisdom” (*khokmah* [TH2451, ZH2683]) and “understanding” (*tebunah* [TH8394, ZH9312]) underscore the seriousness of Edom’s condition. The motif of God abrogating human wisdom is common not only to the wisdom literature but to the prophetic oracles as well.

mountains of Edom. The term (cf. 1:9, 19, 21) reflects Edom's pride in its mountain location (1:2-4) and forms a distinct thematic contrast with Mount Zion (1:17, 21; see the Introduction's "Major Themes").

1:9 mightiest warriors. Although it had sociological implications (see Allen 1976:153), the Hebrew term *gibbor* often carries with it a nuance of heroism (cf. 2 Sam 23:8-39; 1 Chr 11:15-19), particularly for designating soldiers. At times, such a one could be called a "mighty man of valor" (*gibbor khayil* [TH1368A/2428, ZH1475/2657]; e.g., 2 Chr 13:3b; 17:16). Thus Kosmala (TDOT 2.374) observes, "By far the most frequent use of the word *gibbor* occurs in connection with military activities, especially as a designation for a warrior, either a man who is eligible for military service or is able to bear arms, or one who has actually fought in combat, who has already distinguished himself by performing heroic deeds." Here, however, there is a touch of irony: The warriors are anything but heroic. Rather, being demoralized, they become terrified (cf. Isa 31:9). The verb here (root, *khatath*) is at times applied to defeated nations (2 Kgs 19:26; Isa 37:27). Edom is about to share the same fate as its neighbor Moab (Jer 48:20, 34).

Teman. This was one of Edom's chief cities (Amos 1:12), located in the northern part of the country. The term could thus stand for a region in the northern sector or for the entire country (Jer 49:7; Hab 3:3). Job's counselor Eliphaz came from Teman (Job 2:11).

slaughter. This noun was linked with v. 10 rather than v. 9 in the ancient versions. However, not only is the Masoretic punctuation against doing so, but as Finley (1990:363) points out, "The text of Obadiah in the Hebrew scroll of the Minor Prophets [from Wadi Murabba'at] supports the lack of a conjunction as in MT." The cutting down and slaughtering of the enemy is a feature commonly reported in the annals of the ancient Near Eastern kings.

COMMENTARY

In this opening section, the Lord himself reports that he will deal with Edom's pride. The word "behold," with which this judgment oracle begins, puts the Edomite nation on notice that God is active in the affairs of people, particularly proud nations and individuals who flaunt themselves defiantly in the face of God and mistreat his people. Such was Edom.

In the course of announcing Edom's destruction, Obadiah cites two basic sins that marked its condition: He indirectly notes its pride (1:2-9) and directly marks its overt crimes against God's people (1:10-14). He begins by condemning Edom's pride in its geographical location that provided it with a spectacular defensive system. Set on a high plateau, its capital city of Sela was surrounded by steep cliffs. Access could be gained only on its southeast side, which was well defended. So elevated, it could boast, "Who can ever reach us way up here?" Their pride, however, was both presumptuous (Raabe 1996:123) and ill-advised, for it foundered on two points: (1) Judah's former king Amaziah had already successfully campaigned there (2 Kgs 14:7); and (2) the forces that would attack it were sponsored by none other than the God of the universe. The hyperbolic imagery here is stirring. Was Edom located on the heights? It must reckon with him who rides on the clouds of heaven (cf. Deut 33:26; Ps 68:33; Isa 19:1; see Patterson 1985:37). Stuart (1987:417) observes, "Since Yahweh's power is unlimited, it does not matter how high set and well defended Edom might be. It will fall." Though it had the strength

to soar like an eagle (cf. Isa 40:31) or put itself above the stars, these would not avail against the God who in his care for his own is likened to a great eagle (Exod 19:4; Deut 32:11) and is the one who created the stars (Gen 1:1, 14; Ps 8:3-4).

The implied condemnation contained in the announcement of Edom's judgment (given in 1:5-6) centers on Edom's wealth. Set high and seemingly secure from invasion, Edom had been able to amass considerable wealth, not only from its agriculture and mining, but from its vast trading enterprises and raiding forays. Nevertheless, unlike burglars who take only the most opportune and valuable items and grape gatherers who leave some gleanings behind, Edom's conquerors will thoroughly ravish its land and carry away every last hidden treasure.

How fleeting material wealth can be! How foolish to build one's life upon personal treasures (Luke 12:16-21), which can never satisfy (Eccl 4:8). So often it is squandered by those who have made it or by those to whom it is left (Pss 39:6; 49:6, 10). Moreover, for some, wealth can lead to conceit (1 Tim 6:17) and selfishness (Luke 12:17).

The sin that polluted Edom can also infect today's believers. It is far better to honor God with one's wealth (Prov 3:9) and seek the spiritual riches that only he can supply (Matt 6:33; Eph 1:7; 3:8; Phil 4:19; Col 2:2-3). Indeed, the believer's whole life is a treasure that God has freely given (Matt 13:11-16) and hence should be stewarded (1 Pet 4:10) with fruitful productivity (Matt 13:22-23). In so doing, the believer will come to know the glorious riches of Christ in him, the hope of glory (Col 1:27).

Israel was God's own special treasure (Ps 135:4) whom he had chosen and loved. Moreover, because he had solemnly promised its ancestors long ago that he would watch over Abraham's descendants, Israel on its part was to reflect God's holy standards in its walk before him (Deut 7:6-11; 14:1-2). God's people were to remember their covenant with him so as to serve him faithfully (Exod 19:5-6) and thus experience God-given success (Deut 26:16-19).

New Testament believers are likewise reminded that in God's great loving-kindness (Eph 2:4-7) they have become God's special possession (1 Pet 2:9-10) through the redeeming work of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, like Israel of old, they are to be a holy people, eager to do what is good (Eph 2:8-10; Titus 2:14). As such, today's believers are challenged to love each other with genuine affection (Rom 12:10). Rather than devouring one another like modern-day Esau, Christians should treat each other with genuine brotherly affection, as Christ commanded (John 15:12; cf. 1 John 3:15-16). Not only would churches fare better, but non-believers might just be more likely to receive the message of Christ's sacrificial love for a lost world (John 3:16) if Christians were to follow Christ's command to love one another and live in harmony with each other.

Verse 7 focuses on treachery, its background coming from the situation between Jacob and Esau (see Introduction). Just as Edom has betrayed his brother Israel, so it will be treated by its allies in its hour of need. Not only will Edom's friends desert them, but they will turn against them, even laying traps for them, much as Edom

had done to Israel (1:11, 14). Brotherhood and treaty obligations were held in high esteem in the ancient Near East, and the violation of either was considered a loathsome deed (cf. Prov 27:10; Isa 33:1; Jer 38:22; Amos 1:9).¹

The Scriptures remind the believer that “a friend is always loyal” (Prov 17:17; cf. 18:24). The New Testament often speaks of brotherhood and friendship, the most significant comment being Jesus’ own observation that “there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). In laying down his life for sinners, Christ makes them his friends who are therefore expected to return his love and to love others as Christ has loved them (John 15:9-17; Jas 2:23-24).

Verses 8 and 9 zero in on Edom’s vaunted reputation for wisdom. Edom was noted as a center of wisdom (1 Kgs 4:30; Job 2:11), doubtless due to its advantageous position in the trading enterprises of the ancient Near East. Yet, even Edom’s wisdom would prove to be of no avail before the omniscient Lord, who would commission Edom’s attackers. Human wisdom scarcely challenges that of the omniscient one, nor is it fully formed apart from him (Prov 1:7; 14:16; 15:33; 22:4).

Not only would Edom’s wisdom fail, but its warriors would prove ineffective (cf. Nah 3:13). Overcome by dismay and totally demoralized, their courage would turn into sheer terror.² Inevitable consequences would soon follow, proud Edom facing not only defeat but widespread slaughter.

In summary, this section (1:2-9) concerns Edom’s certain defeat. Neither its natural defensive position (1:2-4), nor its vast wealth (1:5-6), nor its many business associates and supposed allies (1:7), nor its wisdom or warriors (1:8-9) could prevent its demise. While this section repeatedly emphasizes the sovereignty of God and his active intervention in the affairs of earth’s history, the great need for God to do so is likewise made evident. Indeed, all of Edom’s hopes rested on conceit and pride.

Edom was to learn what the prophets uniformly proclaim: No matter how strong or arrogant a nation, it may be assured that “the pride of her power will end” (Ezek 30:6). Pride brought down Sodom (Ezek 16:49-50) and Gomorrah; it caused Tyre to self-destruct (Ezek 28:17) and was the besetting sin for which Moab was to suffer the Lord’s judgment (Jer 48:29-30). Whether in nations (Isa 2:11) or individuals, God is “able to humble the proud” (Dan 4:37). For “pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall” (Prov 16:18).

The Scriptures reveal that nothing so deceives the heart like pride (Jer 49:16) so that people are all too easily subject to the pride of life (1 John 2:16). God hates pride and arrogance (Prov 8:13; 16:5), so much so that he punishes the proud (Ps 31:23). Indeed, there is a day coming when the Lord “will punish the proud and mighty and bring down everything that is exalted” (Isa 2:12).

Although believers may take comfort in knowing that those who so arrogantly oppose God (cf. Rev 13:6) will ultimately fail and fall (cf. 2 Thess 2:4-10), they must realize that God is no less displeased with pride in those who claim his name (2 Chr 26:16; Jer 13:8-11; Zeph 3:11-12). Accordingly, they should remind themselves that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (Prov 3:34; Jas 4:6). They

must renounce pride and seek the humility that was demonstrated so clearly in Christ, their great example (Matt 11:29; 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:5-8). May God help us to forsake pride and selfish ambition and be clothed with genuine humility (Col 3:2; 1 Pet 5:5) so that individually and collectively we may be people dependent on God. May we be like Paul, who exclaimed, "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14, NKJV).

ENDNOTES

1. Ancient Near Eastern tradition characteristically had clauses stipulating the conditions and importance of treaty obligations. The Assyrian Annals often mention the punishment of treaty violators. Niehaus (1993:522) gives several examples.
2. Thus Fausset (1948:570) remarks, "Pride goes before a fall; and the proud often pass suddenly from the height of self-confidence to the depth of despair. Overweening self-reliance passes into unreasoning and unreasonable fear. No human sagacity for which Edom was famed can be relied on in an exigency, if men ignore God."

◆ C. The Cause for Edom's Defeat (1:10-14)

¹⁰"Because of the violence you did
to your close relatives in Israel,*
you will be filled with shame
and destroyed forever.

¹¹When they were invaded,
you stood aloof, refusing to help
them.

Foreign invaders carried off their wealth
and cast lots to divide up Jerusalem,
but you acted like one of Israel's
enemies.

¹²"You should not have gloated
when they exiled your relatives
to distant lands.
You should not have rejoiced
when the people of Judah suffered
such misfortune.
You should not have spoken arrogantly
in that terrible time of trouble.

¹³You should not have plundered the
land of Israel
when they were suffering such
calamity.

You should not have gloated over
their destruction
when they were suffering such
calamity.

You should not have seized their
wealth
when they were suffering such
calamity.

¹⁴You should not have stood at the
crossroads,
killing those who tried to escape.
You should not have captured the
survivors
and handed them over in their
terrible time of trouble.

¹⁰ Hebrew *your brother Jacob*. The names "Jacob" and "Israel" are often interchanged throughout the Old Testament, referring sometimes to the individual patriarch and sometimes to the nation.

NOTES

1:10 *close relatives in Israel*. Lit., "your brother Jacob." The charge of violence against kin comes to the fore. The reference to Jacob builds on the story of Jacob and Esau in Gen 25:19-26. As the descendant of Esau, Edom had a long history of enmity against Israel (cf. Joel 3:19).

1:11 *When they were invaded*. The construction points to a specific occasion (lit., "In the day that . . ."). During the time of greatest need, these near relatives deserted their Israelite



Jonah

RICHARD D. PATTERSON

INTRODUCTION TO *Jonah*

JONAH WAS A COMPLEX CHARACTER. He was called by God to announce to Assyria (the world power of his day) that it must repent or face the judgment of God. But Jonah believed that Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) deserved the judgment of God. So he ran away. Dramatically rebuked and recalled by God, his message to Nineveh was well received with the result that a period of national repentance occurred, which in turn prompted God's mercy on the city. Jonah was disappointed that God had spared the mighty city, but God reminded him that he cares for the souls of all people—a good lesson for us all.

AUTHOR

Some modern scholars maintain the traditional Jewish and Christian position that the chief character of the book, Jonah son of Amittai, is also its author (e.g., Schrader 1989:644). Since most of the book does not claim to be Jonah's words and proceeds in third-person narrative, most contemporary scholars prefer to think of it as being authored by a single narrator who, though he possibly could be Jonah, is not likely to have been that well-known person (Stuart 1987:431-432). If Jonah is viewed as the author, he is doubtless to be identified with the prophet from Gath-hepher, who ministered in the days of Jeroboam II (792–752 BC; 2 Kgs 14:25).

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

Critical scholars have largely decided against both the traditional date and authorship of this book. The critical view proceeds along several lines of argument. Historical blunders are said to be evident. For example, the statement that Nineveh *was* an illustrious city of *three days' journey* (3:3) is doubly faulted. (1) Since Nineveh no longer existed after 612 BC, it indicates that the narrative could only take place after that date. (2) Because Nineveh was less than three miles across in the eighth century BC, Jonah would scarcely need three days to cross it. But both arguments are faulty. The former suggestion flounders on the obvious use of "was" as simply being part of the narrative perspective of the book. The latter fails to reckon that because the term "great city" is used elsewhere in the Old Testament of a large, cosmopolitan area (Gen 10:11-12), it may refer here to "greater Nineveh," an area including Calah and Khorsabad.¹ The terms "great" and "three days" as applied to Nineveh may also simply be ancient Near Eastern protocol for describing the relative importance of the city.

Likewise, the reference to the king of Nineveh (3:6), rather than to the king of Assyria, is said to be both unprecedented and inaccurate because Nineveh was not the capital in the early eighth century BC. Yet, in the Old Testament, kings are at times designated by a chief city, such as in the case of "Ahab king of Samaria" (1 Kgs 21:1, NASB) and the Aramean king who was known as the "king of Damascus" (2 Chr 24:23, NASB). Although Nineveh did not become the official capital of Assyria until the time of Sennacherib (705–681 BC), "Assyrian kings had their seats in Nineveh as early as the tenth century BC and at least two kings before the eighth century had their palaces built there."²

Other texts that have appeared to strain historical credulity include (1) the supposed figure of 600,000 people in Nineveh (an estimate based upon the 120,000 "children" in 4:11)³; (2) the issuing of the decree by king and nobles together in 3:7; and (3) the clothing of animals in sackcloth in 3:8. However, (1) the 120,000 figure may intend the total population of greater Nineveh or be symbolic of Nineveh's greatness; (2) granted the weak political position of the kings in the mid-eighth century BC, a decree may well have been issued together with the name of a strong provincial governor;⁴ and (3) one cannot be certain of specific Assyrian customs.⁵ Attempts to date the composition of the book to the fifth century BC due to its supposed purpose as an allegory designed to promote a more universalistic spirit in the face of the narrow nationalistic spirit of the age are scarcely convincing. As Archer (1974:309) points out, not only do numerous points in the Jonah narrative fail to fit the criteria of allegory, but "there is not the slightest historical evidence to show the existence of any such universalistic sentiment among the fifth-century Jews, as this theory predicates." Archer suggests further that this supposed zeal demonstrates circular reasoning: Jonah must have been written in a later period because of the supposed character of Jewish thought in that age—as attested only by the book of Jonah! The failure of the critical view to prove its case categorically, therefore, makes it clear that there is no certain historical reason to abandon the traditional eighth-century date for the setting of the book, regardless of whether one holds the view that Jonah authored the book (D. Alexander 1988:61).

Critics have also doubted the preexilic date on the basis of linguistic perceptions. Thus, Jonah is said to be typically late Hebrew, highly influenced by "Aramaisms," a sure indicator of the postexilic period. A closer analysis of the data, however, indicates that the critical conclusion is vastly overdrawn and that Jonah may even reflect a more northerly Hebrew dialect.⁶ In any case, the presence of Aramaisms found as early as the second millennium BC in Ugaritic makes any supposed dating argument based on Aramaic somewhat tenuous. As Baldwin (1993:546) concludes, "On linguistic evidence there is no reason why the book should not be pre-exilic, even eighth-century, in origin."

The trustworthiness of Jonah is also questioned on the basis of the fish episode (a whale of a tale!) and the impossibility of a heathen city repenting at the preaching of an Israelite prophet. Both suggestions, of course, discount supernatural intervention. Moreover, the political weakness of the crown, as well as the presence of

plagues in 765 and 759 BC (or through the whole period?), as well as the occurrence of a solar eclipse in 763 BC,⁷ may have provided a ready environment for the reception of the message of this prophet of Yahweh.

In light of the above discussion, the setting of the book can be and is probably best dated to the reign of Jeroboam II, probably during the reign of the Assyrian ruler Ashur-dan III (771–754 BC). It was a time of Assyrian weakness, a time when royal political power had to be exercised cautiously through strong provincial governors who may have reduced the king to little more than king in name only—and that to little more than his city of residence (Grayson 1982:273-275; see also Olmstead 1951:172-174; Saggs 1984:82-84). Wilson (1985:186) points out that “Though Nineveh did not become the permanent capital of Assyria until Sennacherib ruled (705–682 BC), Assyrian kings had their seats in Nineveh as early as the thirteenth century BC. As a royal residence, Nineveh alternated with Ashur and Calah (Nimrud) throughout the Early, Middle, and Late Assyrian periods.” Another view of the king living in Nineveh comes from Lemanski (1992:46) who suggests the possibility that Nineveh was, at this time of political weakness, “an independent or semi-independent city state with its own ruler.”⁸ Some evidence suggests that the era was also a time of economic difficulty for Assyria, a condition that was only worsened by the great plagues of 763 and 759 BC. This, together with the solar eclipse mentioned above and some military defeats, could make a superstitious and worried people quite ready to receive God’s prophet and his words.

If, then, the traditional date for the ministry of Jonah can be adopted, there is little reason to suggest a much later time for the composition of the book. In light of Assyria’s known past atrocities and the actual hostility of Shalmaneser III in the ninth century BC against Ahab and Jehu, neither Jonah nor his contemporaries would be able to understand why God would send him to Nineveh to warn that traditional enemy and impious city. Accordingly, following a return from Nineveh, Jonah may have recorded his own mistaken concept of God’s concern for a lost mankind as a means of justifying the ways of God to his countrymen. The book, then, while containing prophetic and didactic historical narrative, is also a type of theodicy (see “Literary Style”). However tragic this incident in the prophet’s life had proven to be, God would use it as a didactic tool to inform Israel that “God cares about all the people of the earth” (Limburg 1993:34).

AUDIENCE

D. Alexander (1988:62) cautions that “experience shows that any attempt to identify the audience of the book is likely to be too subjective to be of lasting value in determining its date of composition.” However, if the previous argumentation as to the dating of Jonah’s ministry is valid, it could be that Jonah’s audience was his contemporaries in the northern kingdom. Despite the territorial gains during the years of Jeroboam II’s reign, the old enmity with Assyria and the important city of Nineveh remained. Perhaps like Jonah, who was grateful enough for temporary shade from the heat of the day but unmoved concerning the people to whom he had been

Other themes of note include that of calling (1:2, 6, 14; 2:2[3]; 3:2, 4, 6, 8), wickedness (1:2, 7-8; 3:8, 10; 4:1-2), and repentance and prayer (1:14; 2:7-9[8-10]; 3:5-10; 4:2). Underlying the whole, of course, are the theological themes of divine sovereignty, love, and forgiveness.

THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

As noted above, the book of Jonah (like Daniel) reminds its readers of God's sovereignty (Schrader 1989:644). He is in control, not only of the elements of the natural world (e.g., the sea, the fish, the plant), but the destinies of people (the Ninevites, the sailors, and God's prophet). He is the only true God (1:9), the God whose wise direction and intervention into the flow of earth's history are intended for people's good (2:10[11]; 3:9-10; 4:6-8).

God is also shown to be one who genuinely loves and cares for all the people of the earth, Jew and Gentile alike, faithful believer, and even runaway prophet. The book emphasizes throughout that where there is true repentance, God may relent the threatened punishment. Both Jonah and the Ninevites experienced the full force of God's love and forgiveness. As Stuart (1987:98) appropriately observes, "People, no matter how wicked, are still valuable to God. They are intrinsically objects of his love." The book also reminds all people of the need for prayer (1:14; 2:1-9[2-10]) and the need to respond to God's goodness in genuine worship (1:16; 2:4[5], 8-9[9-10]; 3:5-9).

OUTLINE

- I. The Prophet at Sea (1:1-2:10)
 - A. Jonah's Commission and Response (1:1-3)
 - B. Jonah and the Sailors (1:4-16)
 - C. Jonah and God (1:17-2:10)
- II. The Prophet at Nineveh (3:1-4:11)
 - A. Jonah's Recommissioning and Response (3:1-3a)
 - B. Jonah and the Ninevites (3:3b-10)
 - C. Jonah and God (4:1-11)

ENDNOTES

1. See A. Parrot, *Nineveh and the Old Testament* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 85-88. Other scholars have suggested that Jonah simply spent three days preaching from corner to corner (e.g., Archer 1974:310-311), or that ancient Near Eastern customs of hospitality would have dictated a three-day period with specific practical arrangements (Wiseman 1979:38), or that three days may be symbolic of a large, illustrious city (Wolff 1976:148).
2. See M. R. Wilson, "Nineveh," in *Major Cities of the Biblical World* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985), 186.
3. The NLT takes the Hebrew "who do not know their right from their left" as indicative of "spiritual darkness." It can also be taken as indicative of physical/mental immaturity, hence the understanding of some that these 120,000 are children.

COMMENTARY ON

Jonah

◆ I. The Prophet at Sea (1:1–2:10)

A. Jonah's Commission and Response (1:1–3)

The LORD gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: ²"Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are."

³But Jonah got up and went in the op-

posite direction to get away from the LORD. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the LORD by sailing to Tarshish.

NOTES

1:1 *The LORD gave this message.* Lit., "and the word of the Lord came." Similar opening formulae occur in the OT over 100 times, each used to express divine communication to a prophet. The reception of the word of the Lord authenticated one as God's prophet. The exact Hebrew idiom *wayehi* [TH2050.1/1961, ^{ZH}2256/2118] (and it came to pass), however, appears as an opening phrase in a prophetic book only here and in Ezekiel.

Jonah. Jonah's name means "dove." Although various fanciful attempts have been made to relate the prophet's name symbolically to such matters as the plot of the narrative or to conditions in the northern kingdom, the common use of animal names for human beings in Hebrew makes such reconstructions precarious at best.

son of Amittai. Jonah's full designation identifies him with the prophet from Gath-hepher, who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:25). Taken at face value, this phrase indicates that the following narrative tells of events that took place in the first half of the eighth century BC (see Introduction). If it could be determined whether this episode in Jonah's life took place before or after that which is recorded in 2 Kings, it would have a distinct bearing on one's understanding of the prophet's spiritual odyssey.

1:2 *Get up and go.* Lit., "Arise! Go!" The double imperatives carry with them a sense of urgency. Since Hebrew syntax dictates that the major stress in such cases is on "the going" (*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, §120g [286-287]), Jonah is to respond immediately to the Lord's command. Similar injunctions were given to Elijah (1 Kgs 17:9) and Jeremiah (Jer 13:6).

the great city of Nineveh. Like the Hebrews' own Jerusalem (Jer 22:8), Nineveh was termed a "great city" (cf. also Babylon, Dan 4:30; Gibeon, Josh 10:2). While the adjective could indicate size here, it may also have to do with the city's status or prominence (Wiseman 1979:35-36)—perhaps both are intended. By ancient Near Eastern standards, Nineveh was a sizeable and illustrious city. Nineveh's greatness serves as an important thematic thread woven throughout the fabric of the book (cf. 3:2-3; 4:11). Nineveh was a city with a long and important history stretching back to the third millennium BC, and God was concerned for the people in this city.

Announce my judgment against it. The root *qara'* [TH7121, ZH7924] is used with great frequency in the book (see Introduction). Here it is used with the preposition 'al [TH5921, ZH6584], thus "preach against." Although some commentators equate the force of this phrase with *qara' 'el* [TH413, ZH448] (preach unto), Keil (1954:389) may be correct in insisting on their differentiation. The NLT has preserved the distinction (cf. 3:2).

I have seen how wicked its people are. Lit., "their wickedness has come up before me." The cause for the Lord's judgment against Nineveh is spelled out (cf. 3:8, 10). The noun translated "wicked" here (*ra'ah* [TH7451B, ZH8288]) is used elsewhere in Jonah in various senses and provides a thematic thread in three of the four chapters of the book (see Introduction). Sadly, Nineveh's extreme wickedness and cruelty would only intensify in the following century, as attested by Nahum and Zephaniah.

1:3 Jonah got up. God instructed Jonah to get up, and so he did; but he arose to follow a course opposite to that which the Lord had commanded him.

to get away from the LORD. The Hebrew text indicates that Jonah was attempting to flee from the presence of the Lord. Unlike Jeremiah (Jer 17:16), Jonah was a runaway prophet. Although Nineveh's case had come up before God, Jonah would go "in the opposite direction"—away from the Lord's presence. The play on words and ideas is instructive. As Limburg (1993:43) points out, "Only Cain, the murderer, is described in the Bible as making a similar attempt to run 'away from the presence of the LORD' (Gen 4:16)." Since Jonah himself acknowledged that God is the maker of heaven and earth (1:9) and since he was probably acquainted with the older story of Job (cf. Job 23:10; 38:4-14), he presumably would have been aware that no one could be out of the view of the omnipotent Creator and sustainer of the earth (cf. Ps 139:7-10). Thus, the motivation for Jonah's flight must be sought in something other than his physical removal from God. While Stuart (1987:450) suggests that "Jonah, the ardent nationalist, therefore, attempted to flee to a place where no fellow believers would be found, hoping that this would help insure that God's word would not come to him again," Calvin and others (cf. Allen 1976:205; D. Alexander 1988:101) are probably correct in affirming that the phrase simply indicates that Jonah is announcing his unwillingness to serve God in this capacity. Thus Laetsch (1956:222) observes, "To flee from His presence = to refuse to serve Him in this office."

He went down. This is the first of several instances of Jonah's "going down." Although Stuart (1987:437-438, 451-452) points to the simplicity of vocabulary in the Jonah narrative and the natural use of "going down" in the various occasions where the term is used in the book, the literary plays in the use of this and other items of vocabulary seem far too well-placed to be so easily dismissed.

Joppa. This port city (modern Jaffa) is known to have existed at least from the seventeenth century BC (Kaplan and Kaplan 1976:2.532-541). Known as Yapu in the fourteenth-century BC Egyptian Amarna Letters and Yappu in the neo-Assyrian inscriptions, it was likely controlled by the Philistines in the early centuries of the first millennium BC. Because it was the only natural harbor on the south Palestinian coast, it was important as a seaport for the area (2 Chr 2:16; Ezra 3:7). In New Testament times, the apostle Peter visited there, staying at the home of Simon, a tanner (Acts 9:43). Joppa was the location of Peter's well-known vision regarding ritual purity and his meeting with the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18).

he found a ship. Sasson (1990:81) points out that "the verb *matsa'* [TH4672, ZH5162] . . . often involves an unexpected discovery or good fortune. From Jonah's perspective, as contrasted to the reader's or the author's, the fact that he found a ship going to the earth's other extremity must have promised a successful flight from God."

Tarshish. The location of Tarshish is uncertain. (For details, see my remarks in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* 4.103, 4.169.) Although several sites have been suggested, Allen (1976:205) is probably correct in following Albright's dictum: "There were doubtless at

least as many Phoenician settlements which bore the name *Tarshish* as there were 'New Towns' [= Carthage]." Wherever its location, the point is that Jonah was attempting to go as far west from Nineveh (which lay to the east) as he possibly could. Tarshish was grouped with other lands beyond the sea that had not heard of God nor seen his glory (Isa 66:19).

bought a ticket. Several expositors have suggested that Jonah paid the total expenses for the whole ship. While the Hebrew phrase can be understood to mean "paid its (the ship's) hire," the matter is far from certain. The jettisoning of the cargo (1:5), as well as the ship's indicated destination, would tend to suggest that the ship had already been loaded for its intended voyage and that Jonah had stumbled fortuitously upon it as it was about to set sail. If so, it may be best to retain the traditional understanding as reflected in the NLT (cf. LXX, Vulgate, NIV, NRSV).

the LORD. This is Yahweh (*yhwh* [TH3068, ZH3378]), the name of the covenant God of Israel; it is found ten times in ch 1, five times in chs 2 and 4, and two times in ch 3. The generic term for God, *'elohim* [TH430, ZH466], occurs some twelve times, while the compound designation *yhwh 'elohim* is found four times. The term *'el* [TH410A, ZH446] occurs but once (4:2). Several expositors have commented on the careful deployment of the names. Thus Limburg (1993:45-47) thinks *yhwh* is used to refer to the God a Hebrew would know, but *'elohim* is employed when speaking of a god known to non-Israelites. He suggests further that the compound *yhwh 'elohim* is a transitional name, while the single occurrence of *'el* is due to traditional creedal formulations.

COMMENTARY

The opening words of the book remind all who read them that God is a God of revelation. His will and his standards have been communicated to mankind, and the Scriptures are that revelation. Therefore, even when reading a good story in the Bible, such as that of Jonah, the believer is to remember that the account has a divine purpose, both for those involved in the various episodes and for those who read them. Paul puts it well, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

This opening passage of Jonah also indicates that God does indeed call and commission some to be his special ambassadors. Whether a Jeremiah of Old Testament times (Jer 1:4-10) or a Paul of New Testament days (Acts 9:1-19; Gal 1:10-17), those who would serve as pastors or missionaries should be conscious of God's claim upon them (Eph 4:11).¹

These verses also testify to the nature and character of God. An omniscient God, he knew not only the state of affairs in Nineveh and with his prophet, but was and is cognizant of all that takes place on earth (Prov 15:3; Isa 46:10; Jer 23:23-25; Heb 4:13). The Scriptures also reveal that in addition to knowing the hearts of all people, God cares about their well-being. The great city of Nineveh was in a desperate state. The word translated "wicked" (*ra'ah* [TH7451B, ZH8288]) can also be used of personal or corporate troubles or calamities. As such, it is admirably suited to depict not only Nineveh's recent calamitous events (see Introduction), but its moral perversity that may have occasioned such troubles.² If God has such concern for the welfare of a people that merited only his judgment (cf. 4:11; 2 Pet 3:9), how much more should

believers understand that God knows their every need and longs to lead them into increasingly productive and satisfying lives.

This passage also teaches us about disobedience. God's disobedient prophet had willfully turned away from a sovereign God who wanted him to be an instrument of his will. One might think, "How shocking!" Yet how easy it is for all of us to do the same.³ Like Jonah, each one of us must come to realize that because God is not only sovereign but truly omnipotent, disobedience is both useless and foolish (cf. 1 Sam 15:23). As Jonah was to pay a heavy price for his sinful behavior, so sin always pays heavy wages to those in its employ (Prov 14:11; Rom 6:23). May God help each of us to be obedient, faithful, and profitable servants so that we may experience the Lord's good favor not only throughout this life but also in that to come (Ps 31:23; Matt 25:23; 2 Tim 1:12).

ENDNOTES

1. R. Baxter (*The Reformed Pastor* [London: Epworth Press, 1950], 119-120) said of the pastoral office, "God hath determined by His word that there shall be such an office . . . and what sort of men, as to their qualifications shall receive it. . . . God also giveth men the qualifications which he requireth." C U. Wagner (*The Pastor* [Schaumburg: Regular Baptist Press, 1976], 1) remarks, "One of the most vital areas of pastoral theology is that of the call to the ministry; the awareness of such a call is imperative."
2. Thus Stuart (1987:449) observes, "God's compassion had been aroused by the misfortune. Instead of simply destroying the city for its evil, he would give it a chance to repent so as to remove the misfortune. Jonah would announce the chance."
3. Ellison (1985:369) astutely notes that "the Christian worker anxious to avoid the full impact of modern problems should have no difficulty in understanding Jonah's action."

◆ B. Jonah and the Sailors (1:4-16)

⁴But the LORD hurled a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to break the ship apart. ⁵Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship.

But all this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold. ⁶So the captain went down after him. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" he shouted. "Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will pay attention to us and spare our lives."

⁷Then the crew cast lots to see which of them had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did this, the lots identified Jonah as the culprit. ⁸"Why has this awful storm come down on us?" they demanded. "Who are you? What is

your line of work? What country are you from? What is your nationality?"

⁹Jonah answered, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

¹⁰The sailors were terrified when they heard this, for he had already told them he was running away from the LORD. "Oh, why did you do it?" they groaned. ¹¹And since the storm was getting worse all the time, they asked him, "What should we do to you to stop this storm?"

¹²"Throw me into the sea," Jonah said, "and it will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm is all my fault."

¹³Instead, the sailors rowed even harder to get the ship to the land. But the stormy sea was too violent for them, and they



Micah

ANDREW E. HILL

INTRODUCTION TO *Micah*

MICAH WAS A PREEXILIC PROPHET who ministered to both the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. He was a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah, who also prophesied during the eighth century BC (1:1; cf. Isa 1:1). The name Micah means “Who is like Yahweh?” and his message to God’s people was a play on his name—he presents the LORD as incomparable and supreme. For instance, Micah recognized his God, Yahweh, as “the LORD of all the earth” (4:13), who would one day settle international disputes and bring all wars to an end (4:3). This meant Micah’s God was worthy of the worship of the peoples of the world (4:1). He also knew God as a jealous champion of his covenant relationship with his people Israel—he would tolerate no rivals (4:4-5; 5:12-14; 6:16). Micah acknowledged God as a righteous God who hated injustice and who sided with the poor and oppressed (2:1-2, 8-9; 3:1-2). Micah’s God was one to be feared because he could both destroy the wicked and deliver the righteous (2:3; 3:12; 4:11-12; 5:15). Micah’s God delights to show his compassion and mercy to the repentant (7:18-20). Because of all this and more, Micah knew God as a unique God and could therefore ask, “Where is another God like you?” (7:18).

AUTHOR

The book is silent on the specifics of authorship, although it is generally assumed that the prophetic word formula (“The Lord gave this message to Micah,” 1:1) signifies that Micah was responsible, in some fashion, for writing down his own message. The so-called first-person “editorial suture” in 3:1 (“I said”) also suggests “that Micah had a hand in editing the book traditionally assigned to him” (Alexander, Baker, and Waltke 1988:149). The exact details of how the visions God showed Micah came to be recorded remain unknown.

As mentioned, the name Micah means “Who is like Yah[weh]?” and it is presumed that the title “Micah of Moresheth” (1:1) means he was from the village of Moresheth-Gath some 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem. Craigie’s (1985:2) observation that Micah resided as an “outsider” in Jerusalem and suggestion that the title “Micah of Moresheth” was intended to distinguish Micah the prophet from the other Micahs living in Jerusalem at the time has merit.

Little else is known about Micah since the sermons of his book contain no autobiographical information. It appears he was among the professional prophets centered in Jerusalem. As with all true prophets of God, the source of his message was

the Spirit of the Lord (3:8). Micah must have been a man of some courage, as well, since he boldly challenged the false prophets of his day (cf. 2:6-11). A century later, Micah was remembered by Jeremiah as the prophet who brought revival to King Hezekiah and the people of Judah, averting (for the time) the terrible disaster of divine judgment (Jer 26:17-19). He is not to be confused with Micaiah, son of Imlah, a prophet of the northern kingdom during the reign of King Ahab (874–852 BC; cf. 1 Kgs 22:8-28).

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

The message of Micah is dated generally to the reigns of three kings of Judah: Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The reigns of these kings extended over a period of more than six decades; they ruled in Jerusalem from approximately 750 to 687 BC. The exact dates for the rule of each king vary by some eight to ten years depending upon the source consulted (see the comparative chart in Andersen and Freedman 2000:xviii; cf. Thiele 1983:131-134, 174-176). The alternative dating schemes for the reigns of the three Judahite kings are compared below:

KING	HIGHER OT CHRONOLOGY	LOWER OT CHRONOLOGY
Jotham	759–744 BC	750–732 BC
Ahaz	743–727 BC	735–716 BC
Hezekiah	727–699 BC	716–687 BC

The biblical records of the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah are found in 2 Kings 15:32–16:20; 18–20; and 2 Chronicles 27–32. Only kings Jotham and Hezekiah receive a favorable theological review from the biblical historian (cf. 2 Kgs 15:34; 18:5-6). The exact date (or dates, assuming the book came together during the stages of Micah's ministry) for the writing of the messages is impossible to determine.

Form-critical scholarship of the Old Testament has disputed the authenticity of several oracles in the book of Micah, especially 2:12-13; 4:1–5:9; and 7:8-20 (see the discussion in Alexander, Baker, and Waltke 1988:145-149). Dates for the contested speeches are assigned variously to the exilic or postexilic period of Hebrew history, depending upon the source. Recent study addressing the literary integrity of Micah assesses the book more favorably as showing "signs of overall integration" (Andersen and Freedman 2000:27). Hillers (1984:4) ends up rejecting the redaction-criticism of Micah due to its highly speculative character and prefers a synchronic approach that reads "the book as arising for the most part out of one situation."

According to Waltke (Alexander, Baker, and Waltke 1988:149), if one rejects the posture of skepticism towards the superscription (1:1), then there is nothing to rule out an eighth-century provenance for the book. Andersen and Freedman

(2000:112-113) concur, suggesting that the editorial headings of the four eighth-century prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah) have a terminus *ad quem* in the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah (Hezekiah's reign took place anywhere from 727 to 687 BC, depending upon the source cited). This being the case, it may indicate that the writings of the four prophets were assembled and published as a single corpus in the latter years of Hezekiah's reign.

Typically, the impetus for Micah's oracles is connected historically to the Assyrian threat that arose in the aftermath of the Syro-Ephraimite War (734 BC). For instance, Micah begins his message (1:3-7) by forecasting the fall of Samaria (this event occurred in 722 BC after a three-year siege of the city; cf. Allen 1976:241). Some have interpreted the judgment pronounced against Judah in 1:9-16 as a reference to the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC by King Sennacherib of Assyria (2 Kgs 18:17-37). R. L. Smith (1984:5) interprets the pericope of 1:10-16 as a description of the march of Sennacherib from Lachish to Jerusalem. Yet none of the individual oracles of the book is dated (directly or indirectly). Beyond this, Micah betrays no awareness of the dramatic events associated with Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC. In fact, Andersen and Freedman (2000:113) suggest that Micah 1:10-16 refers to an earlier period when Samaria and Jerusalem were under similar threats from enemies (perhaps during the reigns of Jotham or Ahaz). It seems best to simply recognize that Micah's oracles were prompted generally by the impending threat of the Assyrian empire to the welfare of both Samaria and Jerusalem.

In short, then, Micah prophesied sometime between 750 and 690 BC. He directed his sermons of judgment and hope to the divided Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Micah was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah (cf. Isa 1:1) and Hosea (cf. Hos 1:1). Micah observed what Amos had documented a generation earlier: two nations ripe for the judgment of God because of widespread corruption in the civil leadership (3:9-11), rampant social injustice (6:10-12), shameless religious apostasy (5:12-15), misplaced confidence in their own military might (5:10-11), and twisted theological thinking about God and the day of his visitation (2:6-11). (See "Theological Concerns" below.)

Micah ministered during the period of the great Assyrian crisis in Hebrew history. The nation of Assyria began to reemerge as an international "superpower" during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC), who extended Assyrian influence along the upper Euphrates River and is credited as the founder of the Neo-Assyrian empire. His successor, Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC) expanded Assyrian rule westward in a series of military campaigns (during which time King Jehu was forced to pay tribute to Assyria and Israel was reduced to vassal status).

After half a century of decline, Assyrian imperialism once again threatened the west under the arrogant and ruthless leadership of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BC). King Menahem of Israel was forced to pay tribute to Assyria as a vassal-state (2 Kgs 15:19-20), and later during the reign of Pekah, Tiglath-pileser invaded Israel and annexed the northern portion of the Israelite kingdom (2 Kgs 15:29-30). King Ahaz of Judah also paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser as payment for Assyrian intervention in

the invasion of Judah by the armies of Israel and Aram (in retaliation for Judah's refusal to join the coalition against Assyria, 2 Kgs 16:5-9). Tiglath-pileser's son, Shalmaneser V (727-722 BC) laid siege to Samaria in a western campaign (2 Kgs 17:3-4). The capital city of Israel actually fell to Shalmaneser's successor, Sargon II (722-704 BC), after a three-year siege (2 Kgs 17:5-6).

Sargon's son and successor, Sennacherib (704-681 BC), continued the policy of westward expansion in a campaign that included the invasion of Judah (2 Kgs 18-19). According to the Old Testament record, the city of Jerusalem was spared when the Assyrians withdrew from Judah after the angel of the Lord mysteriously killed a large portion of the Assyrian army (2 Kgs 19:35-36). (For more on the historical background to the book of Micah, see Hillers 1984:4-8; Alexander, Baker, and Waltke 1988:138-143; and G. V. Smith 2001:421-426.)

Micah witnessed three major historical events associated with Assyrian aggression against the Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah, including (1) the defeat of the Israelite and Aramean coalition by Tiglath-pileser III in the Syro-Ephraimite war (734-732 BC; cf. 2 Kgs 15:29); (2) the fall of Samaria to Sargon II and the Assyrians in 722-721 BC (2 Kgs 17:5-6); and (3) the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib in 701 BC. Out of this experience, Micah could speak firsthand both about the horrific destruction left behind in the wake of Assyrian imperialism (5:5-6) and the stunning deliverance that God was able to provide for his people if they would only trust in him (4:10; 7:15-16; cf. Jeremiah's commentary on Hezekiah's response to Micah's preaching, Jer 26:18-19).

AUDIENCE

Broadly understood, Micah addresses "all the people of the world" (1:2). This represents the theological perspective of a prophet who understands God as sovereign over all the nations (4:2-3). More specifically, Micah preached to the people and the leaders of the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel (e.g., 1:16; 3:1; although Allen [1976:272] notes that at times Micah uses the names "Jacob" and "Israel" ambiguously because he speaks to the whole nation since both kingdoms are equally guilty before God). The prophet also targeted specific groups of people for indictment, including the wealthy (e.g., 2:1-2) and the political and religious establishment (e.g., 3:11). According to Jeremiah, Micah had some success in his ministry because his oracles prompted King Hezekiah and the people of Judah to turn from their sins and worship the Lord (Jer 26:17-19).

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

Micah is the sixth book in the collection known as the Minor Prophets (or "Book of the Twelve" in the Hebrew Bible). The Twelve Prophets are usually grouped with the other Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and without exception are found in the earliest delineations of the Old Testament canon. These twelve books were always copied on one scroll in the ancient Hebrew manuscript tradition. The order of the Twelve Prophets is uniform in the Masoretic tradition of the Hebrew

continuity of God's activity with earlier Hebrew history (7:20). As House observes, "it is significant that the book closes with a statement on the removal of sin as part of Yahweh's promises to Abraham. Defeating sin both fulfills the purpose for which the Lord called Abraham in the first place and demonstrates God's specific love for Abraham's descendants" (1998:371).

OUTLINE

Superscription (1:1)

- I. The Book of Doom (1:2–3:12)
 - A. Grief over Samaria and Jerusalem (1:2–16)
 - B. Judgment against Wealthy Oppressors (2:1–5)
 - C. True and False Prophets (2:6–11)
 - D. Hope for Restoration (2:12–13)
 - E. Judgment against Israel's Leaders (3:1–12)
- II. The Book of Visions (4:1–5:15)
 - A. The Lord's Future Reign (4:1–5)
 - B. Israel's Return from Exile (4:6–5:1)
 - C. A Ruler from Bethlehem (5:2–6)
 - D. The Remnant Purified (5:7–15)
- III. The Book of Judgment and Pardon (6:1–7:20)
 - A. The Lord's Case against Israel (6:1–8)
 - B. Israel's Guilt and Punishment (6:9–16)
 - C. Misery Turned to Hope (7:1–20)

COMMENTARY ON

Micah

◆ Superscription (1:1)

The LORD gave this message to Micah of Moresheth during the years when Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah were kings of Judah. The visions he saw concerned both Samaria and Jerusalem.

NOTES

1:1 *The LORD gave this message.* Lit., “the word of the LORD came.” The combination of the verb “to be” (*hayah* [TH1961, ZH2118]) with the phrase “the word of the Lord” (*debar-yhwh* [TH1697/3068, ZH1821/3378]) constitutes the prophetic word formula. The formula commonly introduces a report of prophetic revelation in the oracular speech of the OT.

Moresheth. This was the prophet’s hometown, a village located in the Shephelah region of Judah some 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The mention of these kings sets the ministry of Micah during the period of the Hebrew divided kingdoms sometime toward the end of the eighth century BC (see “Date and Occasion of Writing” in the Introduction).

visions. The title of the book recognizes “vision” (*khazah* [TH2372, ZH2600]) as both the occasion and the medium of the message of Yahweh. “The verb describes extraordinary kinds of seeing and particularly those connected with the reception of messages from a deity” (Andersen and Freedman 2000:119). This technical term for prophecy may also refer to the wider perception of divine revelation and in “Micah’s case it was evidently of an auditory nature” (Allen 1976:265).

Samaria. The city was located seven miles northwest of Shechem and was established as the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel by King Omri (1 Kgs 16:24). According to Andersen and Freedman (2000:126), the naming of kingdoms after their capital cities was not normative practice for the Hebrews. It does reflect contemporary usage, however, as other states during this time period were named after their capital.

Jerusalem. The capital city of Judah and the location of Yahweh’s temple, the place where God established his name (Deut 12:11; 14:23). God loved Jerusalem because his presence resided there symbolically, as associated with the Ark of the Covenant housed in the Temple (Pss 9:11; 74:2; 76:2; 87:2). But his love for the city would not keep him from judging the people of Judah for their rebellion against him.

COMMENTARY

The superscription (1:1) is a formal statement that corresponds to the title of a document. It serves to classify literature by genre or literary type (in this case as an oracular or prophetic text) and to identify the author, audience, date, and sometimes the occasion prompting the divine message. This superscription identifies the author of

the book as Micah and notes his “hometown” as Moresheth. It also classifies the genre as prophetic revelation given in the form of a vision, and broadly dates the book to the reigns of three kings of the Hebrew divided monarchy of Judah.

The theological purpose of the superscription is to emphasize that God himself is the source and authority behind the message of Micah (cf. 2 Pet 1:20-21). The use of the covenant name “Yahweh” (or “LORD,” 1:1) for God is appropriate and anticipates the summons to trial issued to Samaria and Jerusalem for “sins and rebellion” in violation of the Mosaic covenant (1:5). The reference to the “kings of Judah” (1:1) may foreshadow Micah’s vision of the “king” who would ultimately restore the Hebrews as a unified nation (cf. 2:13; 5:2).

◆ I. The Book of Doom (1:2–3:12)

A. Grief over Samaria and Jerusalem (1:2–16)

²Attention! Let all the people of the world listen!
Let the earth and everything in it hear.
The Sovereign LORD is making accusations against you;
the LORD speaks from his holy Temple.

³Look! The LORD is coming!
He leaves his throne in heaven and tramples the heights of the earth.

⁴The mountains melt beneath his feet and flow into the valleys like wax in a fire,
like water pouring down a hill.

⁵And why is this happening?
Because of the rebellion of Israel*—yes, the sins of the whole nation.
Who is to blame for Israel’s rebellion?
Samaria, its capital city!
Where is the center of idolatry in Judah?
In Jerusalem, its capital!

⁶“So I, the LORD, will make the city of Samaria a heap of ruins.
Her streets will be plowed up for planting vineyards.
I will roll the stones of her walls into the valley below,
exposing her foundations.

⁷All her carved images will be smashed.

All her sacred treasures will be burned.
These things were bought with the money earned by her prostitution, and they will now be carried away to pay prostitutes elsewhere.”

⁸Therefore, I will mourn and lament.
I will walk around barefoot and naked.

I will howl like a jackal and moan like an owl.

⁹For my people’s wound is too deep to heal.
It has reached into Judah, even to the gates of Jerusalem.

¹⁰Don’t tell our enemies in Gath*;
don’t weep at all.
You people in Beth-leaphrah,*
roll in the dust to show your despair.

¹¹You people in Shaphir,*
go as captives into exile—naked and ashamed.

The people of Zaanan* dare not come outside their walls.
The people of Beth-ezel* mourn,
for their house has no support.

¹²The people of Maroth* anxiously wait for relief,
but only bitterness awaits them as the LORD’s judgment reaches even to the gates of Jerusalem.

¹³Harness your chariot horses and flee,
 you people of Lachish.*
 You were the first city in Judah
 to follow Israel in her rebellion,
 and you led Jerusalem* into sin.
¹⁴Send farewell gifts to Moresheth-
 gath*;
 there is no hope of saving it.
 The town of Aczib*
 has deceived the kings of Israel.
¹⁵O people of Mareshah,*

I will bring a conqueror to capture
 your town.
 And the leaders* of Israel
 will go to Adullam.
¹⁶Oh, people of Judah, shave your
 heads in sorrow,
 for the children you love will be
 snatched away.
 Make yourselves as bald as a vulture,
 for your little ones will be exiled
 to distant lands.

1:5 Hebrew *Jacob*; also in 1:5b. The names "Jacob" and "Israel" are often interchanged throughout the Old Testament, referring sometimes to the individual patriarch and sometimes to the nation. 1:10a *Gath* sounds like the Hebrew term for "tell." 1:10b *Beth-leaphrah* means "house of dust." 1:11a *Shaphir* means "pleasant." 1:11b *Zaanan* sounds like the Hebrew term for "come out." 1:11c *Beth-ezel* means "adjoining house." 1:12 *Maroth* sounds like the Hebrew term for "bitter." 1:13a *Lachish* sounds like the Hebrew term for "team of horses." 1:13b Hebrew *the daughter of Zion*. 1:14a *Moresheth* sounds like the Hebrew term for "gift" or "dowry." 1:14b *Aczib* means "deception." 1:15a *Mareshah* sounds like the Hebrew term for "conqueror." 1:15b Hebrew *the glory*.

NOTES

1:2 Attention! Lit., "Listen!" (*shama'* [TH8085, ZH9048]). This imperative verb introduces a summons-to-listen formula (cf. Deut 4:1; 6:4; Hos 4:1; Amos 3:1). In prophetic contexts the word typically means "listen to, heed by acting upon, or putting into practice what has been said" (NIDOTTE 5.178). The formula signals that an important message is forthcoming or a divine truth is about to be revealed. Micah uses the imperative "listen!" elsewhere in 3:1, 9; 6:1, 2, 9.

Sovereign LORD. This epithet literally means "my Master Yahweh"; the title expresses the intimate connection between Yahweh and the acts of judgment threatened in the prophet's sermons. God's rule of creation and the nations is embodied in this compound divine name.

accusations. Lit., "witness" (*'ed* [TH5707, ZH6332]). The word connotes a courtroom setting. God will serve as both the witness who brings testimony against Israel and the court that carries out the sentence (see the discussion in Andersen and Freedman 2000:155-156).

holy Temple. "The earthly shrine [i.e., the Jerusalem Temple] was but an outpost, a replica of the real headquarters [of God] in heaven" (Andersen and Freedman 2000:157).

1:3 throne. The NLT thus renders "place" (*maqom* [TH4725, ZH5226]) interpretively due to its parallel construction with "holy Temple" (1:2). Allen (1976:270) notes that the description of God's leaving his Temple to "[trample] the heights of the earth" (1:3) "is a mode of expression that denies any suggestion that Yahweh is limited to his terrestrial sanctuary" (cf. Judg 5:4-5; Ps 11:4; Hab 2:20).

1:5 rebellion. This word (*pesah'* [TH6588, ZH7322]; 1:5, 13; 3:8; 6:7; 7:18) means to commit a legal offense and signifies an act of rebellion in the form of social transgression. Such treacherous "conduct constituted rebellion against Yahweh himself" (NIDOTTE 3.708). Andersen and Freedman (2000:170) further note, "in a political setting it means 'treason,' in religion 'apostasy.' Both ideas merge in idolatry as Israel's worst violation of covenant obligations to Yahweh."

Israel. This is the name of the northern kingdom after the split of the Hebrew united monarchy upon the death of Solomon (c. 930 BC). The kingdom of Israel was comprised of those 10 Hebrew tribes that settled north of Jerusalem and east of the Jordan River. This rival kingdom to Judah was established by God through the prophet Ahijah as a

punishment for Solomon's sin of idolatry (1 Kgs 11:29-39). The kingdom of Israel endured as a geo-political entity c. 930–722 BC, when the Assyrians conquered the nation and annexed the territory into their empire (cf. 2 Kgs 17:7-23).

sins. The word *khatta'th* [TH2403A, ZH2633] is often used by the OT prophets of covenant violations (especially idolatry; cf. Lev 26:18, 21; Deut 9:21; Jer 17:3). The term refers not only to the evil action or deed committed but also to the associated consequences (cf. TDOT 4.312).

Judah. This is the name of the southern kingdom after the split of the Hebrew united monarchy upon the death of Solomon (c. 930 BC). The kingdom of Judah was comprised of those Hebrew tribes that settled south of Jerusalem (essentially Judah, Dan, and Simeon). God preserved the kingdom of Judah for the sake of his servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, where his Temple resided (1 Kgs 11:34-39). The kingdom of Judah endured as a geo-political entity from c. 930–587 BC, when the Babylonians conquered the nation and annexed the territory into their empire (cf. 2 Kgs 25:1-21).

1:7 carved images. The word *pasil* [TH6456, ZH7178] refers to statues of gods (or goddesses) carved from wood or stone (and sometimes overlaid with silver or gold; cf. NIDOTTE 3.644-646). Such carved images were prohibited for the Hebrews by Mosaic law (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8). The Hebrew prophets consistently condemned the worship of these carved images, often with scathing satire (e.g., Isa 44:9ff; Hab 2:18).

sacred treasures. The term *'ethnan* [TH868, ZH924] means "gift" generally, often in the context of a harlot's pay (e.g., Deut 23:18; Hos 9:1). Micah associated the carved images with the earnings of prostitutes. It is unclear whether the idea is that these idols were donated to the prostitute or purchased with her wages (cf. Andersen and Freedman 2000:181). The NLT opts for the latter ("bought with the money earned"; 1:7).

prostitution. This is probably a reference to the ritual prostitution characteristic of Canaanite fertility cult worship incorporated into Hebrew worship by means of religious syncretism. According to Allen (1976:273-274), the Israelites had degraded Yahweh into a fertility cult god and "the destruction of its material representations is Yahweh's vindication of himself and his true character."

1:8 mourn and lament. The impending destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem prompted Micah to break into lamentation over the two cities. The prophet's pastoral heart for his people caused him to weep for his audience (cf. Alexander, Baker, and Waltke 1988:154).

barefoot and naked. This was one of several rituals for mourning the dead in the biblical world. The stripping away of clothing and footwear signified the laying aside of one's former status and was a symbolic admission of defeat (Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas 2000:781; cf. the enacted prophecy of Isaiah, Isa 20:2).

jackal . . . owl. The habitations of these animals are typically associated with desert wastelands (cf. Isa 34:13; Jer 50:39).

1:10 Gath. One of the five principal city-states of the Philistines, located nine miles east of Ashdod and six miles south of Ekron. Gath was a border town and the nearest of the Philistine city-states to the east of Judah. The words introduce a funeral lamentation (see 1:8-9). Micah did not want the pagan Philistines, who were the archrivals of the Hebrews, to gloat over their downfall (cf. 2 Sam 1:20).

Beth-leaphrah. A village or town of unknown location (probably in the Shephelah region), mentioned in the OT only by Micah.

1:11 Shaphir. A village or town of unknown location (probably in the Shephelah region), mentioned in the OT only by Micah.

Zaanana. A village of unknown location, possibly the Zenan (Josh 15:37) of the Shephelah near Lachish (cf. Andersen and Freedman 2000:209).

Beth-ezel. A village of unknown location (probably in the Shephelah region), mentioned in the OT only by Micah.

1:12 Maroth. A village of unknown location (probably in the Shephelah region), mentioned in the OT only by Micah. Andersen and Freedman (2000:209) discount the identification with Maarath (Josh 15:59) because of its southern location in the hill country of Judah.

1:13 Lachish. A former Canaanite city-state prominent in Joshua's conquest (Josh 10:31). The city was a chariot city from the time of Solomon and a strategic fortress in Judah due to its location on a main route from the coastal plain to the Hebron hills. The city was fortified by Rehoboam after the split of the Hebrew united monarchy (2 Chr 11:9), and it was captured by the Assyrian King Sennacherib in his assault on Jerusalem in 701 BC (2 Kgs 18:14, 17; 19:8). Later, the city was conquered by king Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians (Jer 34:7), and Hebrews resettled there after the Babylonian exile (Neh 11:30).

1:14 Moresheth-gath. This was most likely the hometown of Micah the prophet. The hyphenated name suggests that the Hebrew village was close enough to Gath to be considered a satellite of that Philistine city (cf. McKeating 1971:160). (See also the discussion of Moresheth in the note on 1:1.)

Aczib. Probably the Aczib near Mareshah on the border of the Shephelah with Judah (cf. Josh 15:44). The better-known Aczib located in Asher is not a candidate for this reference (cf. Andersen and Freedman 2000:211).

1:15 Mareshah. A village allotted to the tribe of Judah (Josh 15:44) located in the Shephelah some 13 miles northwest of Hebron. Rehoboam fortified the town after the split of the Hebrew united monarchy (2 Chr 11:5-12). The prophet Eliezer, son of Dodavahu was from Mareshah (2 Chr 20:37).

Adullam. A fortress city like Lachish, fortified by Rehoboam after the split of the Hebrew united monarchy (2 Chr 11:7). The site has a long history of occupation and had associations with the patriarch Judah (cf. Gen 38:12) and David (one of his hideouts, 1 Sam 22:1).

1:16 shave your heads. This was a custom associated with mourning the dead. The symbolic disfigurement was intended to show empathy with those in the throes of grieving over deceased family members (see Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas 2000:782).

COMMENTARY

The lament over Samaria and Jerusalem (1:2-16) is the first installment of a series of judgment oracles against the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the prophet's "book of doom" (1:2-3:12). Micah's first sermon may be outlined in two sections: the judgment oracle against Samaria (1:2-7) and the introduction to the song of lament (1:8-16). The song of lament over the fallen cities of Judah may be divided into three sections: the introductory call declaring the prophet's intention to mourn (1:8-9), the lament song commemorating the fall of the Judean cities (1:10-15), and the epilogue addressed to a personified Jerusalem (1:16). The unity of the passage is derived from "the actuality of the vision that created the report of the theophany (1:3-4), the threat (1:5-7), and the agonized response (1:8-16)" (Andersen and Freedman 2000:203). The tone of this literary unity is "panic," even "hysteria," brought about by Yahweh's visitation. The purpose of the section is to declare Yahweh's intent to destroy his own people on account of their breach of covenant relationship with him.

There is general agreement among the commentators that there is a certain amount of wordplay in the itinerary of the lament song (1:10-15). A look through the various text notes to 1:10-15 in the NLT margin gives a glimpse of what's going on here: Many of the villages and towns listed in the itinerary feature wordplays between the name of the site and its predicted doom (see the chart in Andersen and Freedman 2000:213, which identifies seven examples of potential wordplay in the list of 13 villages and cities; cf. Isa 10:24-32 for an example of similar wordplay). Andersen and Freedman (2000:214) conclude that the wordplay in the lament is not systematic but rather an improvisation by free association for the purpose of making negative statements about each site (on wordplay more generally in Micah see Petrotta, 1991). Peterson (2000:508) captures the prophet's punning in contemporary language:

- ¹⁰Don't gossip about this in Telltown.
 Don't waste your tears.
 In Dustville,
 roll in the dust.
 In Alarmtown,
 the alarm is sounded.
- ¹¹The citizens of Exitburgh
 will never get out alive.
 Lament, Last-Stand City:
 There's nothing in you left standing.
- ¹²The villagers of Bittertown
 wait in vain for sweet peace.
 Harsh judgment has come from God
 and entered Peace City.
- ¹³All you who live in Chariotville,
 get in your chariots for flight.
 You led the daughter of Zion
 into trusting not God but chariots.
 Similar sins in Israel
 also got their start in you.
 Go ahead and give your good-bye gifts
 to Good-byeville.
- ¹⁴Miragetown beckoned
 but disappointed Israel's kings.
- ¹⁵Inheritance City
 has lost its inheritance.
 Glorytown
 has seen its last of glory.
- ¹⁶Shave your heads in mourning
 over the loss of your precious towns.
 Go bald as a goose egg—they've gone
 into exile and aren't coming back.

There is some disagreement, however, on whether or not the list of villages and cities in the itinerary represents a historical and topographical catalog or a literary and theological one. Waltke contends the itinerary is a literary one, designed primarily to give the lament “a dynamic and dramatic effect” (Alexander, Baker, and Waltke 1988:153). By contrast, others consider the list of doomed sites a plausible itinerary for the military invasion of the Shephelah, the western hill region of Judah (Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas 2000:781-782). All of the villages and towns mentioned are within a ten-mile radius of Moresheth-Gath (Micah’s hometown), and only Mareshah is out of order, assuming a campaign moving from Gath to Lachish and on to Jerusalem. Beyond this, there remains the question as to whether Micah’s lament reflects events associated with the invasion of Judah by the Israelite and Aramean coalition of the Syro-Ephraimite War (c. 735 BC) more generally or the Assyrian campaign against Judah led by King Sennacherib in 701 BC more specifically. The latter seems more likely given that the 12 cities mentioned in vv. 10-15 lay on the path of Sennacherib’s march to Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kgs. 18:13-16). Although Micah’s account is not a topographical order of the march of Sennacherib, the literary arrangement of the materials complements the Assyrian report of the invasion.

Micah’s opening oracle describes a theophany, a visible or audible manifestation of God in the created order. We learn in the Old Testament that such visitations by God may be for good or ill, for blessing or curse (e.g., Judg 13:23; 1 Sam 3:11-14). God does not act in a capricious or arbitrary way when he leaves his throne to encounter creation and humanity in some direct fashion. God always behaves in accordance with his word—specifically the stated threats and promises related to his covenant with Israel, or more generally with the nations in the constancy of his holy and righteous character. Reports or visions of theophanies in the Old Testament are significant theologically because they remind us that “God is active in the world . . . God is involved in all that happens . . . God is a participant and not merely an observer who set up the system but no longer gets in the way” (Simundson 1996:545). The truth brings comfort to those in distress. It may also incite fear and confusion when we experience terrible events and ponder whether or not God caused the catastrophe (or ask why he did not prevent it). But the point is not for us to determine guilt or innocence on the basis of the retribution principle (i.e., the righteous are blessed and the wicked are cursed). Nor is it incumbent upon us to try to determine the timing of God’s next theophany on the basis of some interpretive formula derived from analysis of biblical prophecy. The point is our recognition of God’s person and character, his power and glory, his sovereignty and freedom (Exod 6:6-8).

The prophet’s vision of theophany (1:2-4) led McKeating (1971:157) to raise the question: “What has prompted this terrifying visitation?” The answer is both simple and disturbing. Micah’s God is a God who denounces sin, the sin of the nations and his people Israel (as he speaks from his holy Temple, 1:2). Not only does God testify against sin, he visits the earth and punishes sin and rebellion (1:3-5). G. V. Smith (2001:444-445) has rightly observed that certain principles are manifest in the

pattern of divine behavior exhibited in Micah’s theophany (and all biblical theophanies), namely:

God is a universal God; he rules all nations and peoples; no person or thing stands outside God’s control (1:2).

God is holy, so his rule is characterized by the administration of true justice (1:2).

God is witness to the deeds of all people and all nations; nothing escapes his notice (1:2).

God is so overpowering that even the solid and permanent aspects of the created order dissolve before him (1:3-4).

Humanity is helpless to avert the enforcement of divine judgment (1:3-4).

God’s judgment is the complete destruction of all that sinful humanity holds dear and trusts in (1:5-7).

For this reason G.V. Smith (2001:445) concludes, “It is essential that every person understands the nature of God and his ways, so that the mistakes and misunderstandings that existed in Micah’s audience do not persist.”

◆ **B. Judgment against Wealthy Oppressors (2:1-5)**

What sorrow awaits you who lie awake at night, thinking up evil plans.

You rise at dawn and hurry to carry them out, simply because you have the power to do so.

²When you want a piece of land, you find a way to seize it. When you want someone’s house, you take it by fraud and violence. You cheat a man of his property, stealing his family’s inheritance.

³But this is what the LORD says: “I will reward your evil with evil; you won’t be able to pull your neck out of the noose.

You will no longer walk around proudly, for it will be a terrible time.”

⁴In that day your enemies will make fun of you by singing this song of despair about you:

“We are finished, completely ruined! God has confiscated our land, taking it from us. He has given our fields to those who betrayed us.”^{**}

⁵Others will set your boundaries then, and the LORD’s people will have no say in how the land is divided.

2:4 Or *to those who took us captive.*

NOTES

2:1 *What sorrow.* The interjection is literally rendered “woe” (*hoy* [TH1945, ZH2098]) and “to pronounce a ‘woe’ on someone meant to announce their funeral” (Limburg 1988:169). Three different sources have been suggested as the background for the literary form of the woe oracle: the curse of the prophetic judgment speech, the funeral lament, and the instruction of the Hebrew wisdom tradition (perhaps as a foil to the word “blessed”).



Nahum

RICHARD D. PATTERSON

INTRODUCTION TO

Nahum

NAHUM'S PROPHECY presents a graphic prophetic description of the fall of wicked Nineveh. Rather than continuing in the attitude of repentance displayed about a century earlier (see Jonah 3:6-10), the Ninevites resumed their godless oppression of others. Therefore, God's sure judgment would fall upon them. All nations, no matter how successful, will experience God's judgment if they are continually godless.

AUTHOR

Little is known of Nahum, the author of this short prophecy, beyond that which can be gleaned from his writings and the statement in the superscription that he was an "Elkoshite." This identifier has been understood to refer to a geographical location. A number of sites have been suggested, one on the left bank of the Tigris River, two in Galilee, and at least three in Judah. None of these views is conclusive, however. The author was acquainted with the people and places of Nineveh, but not in such a way that would necessitate more than good general knowledge. Thus the suggestion that Nahum's family may have been deported to Assyria after the fall of the northern kingdom, and that there Nahum gained firsthand knowledge of the area before returning to Judah, is speculative at best.

What is certain, however, is that the author had a high view of God and his word (1:2-10; cf. 1:12, 14; 2:2, 13; 3:5), preached against idolatry (1:14), immorality (3:4), injustice (2:11-12; 3:16, 19), and believed strongly in the eventual restoration of all God's people (1:12-13, 15; 2:2).¹

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

Because 3:8 mentions the fall of Thebes (663 BC) and predicts the fall of Nineveh (612 BC), the setting for Nahum's prophecy, if predictive, lies between these two events. The era largely parallels the reign of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668–626 BC), a time when Assyrian imperialism was at its height and marked by a cultural flowering and a socio-political system that spanned the length and breadth of the Fertile Crescent (thus it has been termed the *Pax Assyriaca*). The book of Nahum is intimately bound up with this period. But to what portion of the period from the fall of Thebes to that of Nineveh does it belong? Those who place more weight on God's prophets as keen critics and observers of the times or who discount the plausibility of predictive prophecy tend to date the book late, either close to the time of Nineveh's fall or around the time of its capture (J. M. P. Smith 1911; Haupt [1907] places it as late as the Maccabean era).

Conservative scholars usually assign a date to the book that antedates the fall of Nineveh but differ as to how long before 612 BC it was written. The position taken here assumes a time shortly after the fall of Thebes, whose collapse was a fresh lesson in the minds of Nahum's readers. Moreover, a civil war between the Assyrian ruler Ashurbanipal and his brother Shamash-shum-ukin was settled in 648 BC only after a bitter struggle and a gruesome massacre at the latter's power base in Babylon. From that time on, Nahum might well be expected to hold up the example of age-old Babylon, not Thebes, to the Assyrians. Further, the closer that one dates Nahum's prophecy to 612 BC, the more one would expect some mention of the forces that were to spell Assyria's doom, such as the Chaldeans, Medes, and Scythians. The failure to mention them could imply a time well before these peoples came to international prominence. All things considered, a date between 660 and 645 BC would appear to be most likely for the setting of the book.

AUDIENCE

Given the matters of authorship and the circumstances of writing mentioned above, I conclude that Nahum wrote to the people of Judah during the reign of Manasseh (698/697–642 BC). Judah's was a humbled and disillusioned populace, which had suffered not only the wickedness of its own king but also the reduction of the nation to Assyrian vassalage during the campaigning of Ashurbanipal (648 BC). Under such conditions, could Israel's God be viewed as still faithful to the promises to Abraham and David? Was he truly sovereign over the nations of this world?

Nahum's answer was a resounding yes! Despite all that had come to pass, God was in control of earth's history. All that had happened was but a prelude and a means to the judgment of both Judah and Nineveh and was, in turn, part of the process that would accomplish the restoration of God's people. Accordingly, Nahum wrote his short prophecy (1) to announce the doom of Nineveh and the demise of the mighty Assyrian empire and (2) to bring a message of consolation to a sinful and oppressed Judah.

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

The canonicity of the book has never been seriously questioned. Its prevalence among biblical manuscripts from the intertestamental period, its use by the sectarians at Qumran as a source for application to certain events in their own day, and its employment in the New Testament (Rom 10:15 cf. 1:15; Isa 52:7) and by the early church Fathers (Tertullian, Lucian) give witness to its acceptance. The text is especially well preserved, with possible corruptions being noted in few places (e.g. 1:4b; 3:18). The discoveries of the text of Nahum at Qumran (mostly from 4QpNah, a commentary on Nahum), a Hebrew scroll of the Minor Prophets at Wadi Murabba'at, and fragments of a Greek text of the Minor Prophets at Nahal Hever demonstrate that the consonantal text of Nahum "has been handed down with incredible accuracy for nearly two thousand years at least" (Cathcart 1973a:13).

every prophetic book, for the prophets uniformly combine condemnation and comfort in their messages.⁵

Nahum also employed several well-known motifs in his portrayal of Nineveh's sure demise, such as that of the shepherd and the sheep (Nineveh's leaders and populace, 3:18) and that of the message or messenger, with which each major unit or subunit concludes (1:15; 2:13; 3:19). Felt throughout the whole work is the motif of the Divine Warrior who subdues both the natural world and all his earthly enemies while protecting his own people (1:2-15; 2:2; 3:5-7).

THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Perhaps the most basic theological perspective of Nahum is that of God's sovereignty. God is seen as supreme over nature (1:4-6, 8), nations (1:15; 2:1, 3-7)—including Nineveh/Assyria (1:11-12a, 14; 2:8-13; 3:5-7, 11-19), Judah (1:12b-13; 2:2), Thebes/Egypt (3:8-10)—and all people (1:3, 6-10). As a sovereign God, he is also the controller of earth's history (1:12; 2:13; 3:5-7) who moves in just judgment against his foes (1:2-3a, 8-10, 14; 2:13; 3:5-7, 11-19) but with saving concern for those who put their trust in him (1:7-8a, 12b-13, 15; 2:2). God is shown also to be a God of revelation (1:1) who, although he is a jealous (1:2) and omnipotent God (1:3) who abhors sin (3:4-6, 19), is also long-suffering (1:3) and good (1:7) and has distinct purposes for his redeemed people.

Tremper Longman (1993:776) points out that a key element in Nahum's theological perspective is his employment of the Divine Warrior motif. He notes that already in the opening portion (1:2-8) the reader is presented with the "Divine Warrior whose appearance causes the cosmos to quake. This Warrior destroys his enemies and effects the salvation of his people." Concomitant with this presentation is the theme of God's wrath against his enemies who have provoked him to action (Becking 1995:277-296).⁶

Many have suggested that when Nahum adapted Isaiah's messianic promise (Isa 52:7) to his message concerning Nineveh's downfall (1:15), Nahum must have understood that God's dealings with Judah and Assyria were part of his purposes with respect to the coming of the Messiah.⁷ In any case, it is certain that the messianic import of Nahum's words was utilized by the early church and has brought comfort to the saints throughout the succeeding ages, who look forward with confidence to the coming of that One who will reign in righteousness and execute perfect peace.

OUTLINE

Superscription (1:1)

- I. The Doom of Nineveh Declared (1:2-15)
 - A. First Rhetorical Question (1:2-6)
 - B. Second Rhetorical Question (1:7-10)
 - C. The Consequences (1:11-15)

- II. The Doom of Nineveh Described (2:1–3:19)
 - A. God, the Just Governor of the Nations (2:1–2)
 - B. First Description of Nineveh's Demise (2:3–10)
 - C. The Discredited City (2:11–13)
 - D. Second Description of Nineveh's Demise (3:1–7)
 - E. The Defenseless Citadel (3:8–19)
 1. A comparison of Nineveh and Thebes (3:8–13)
 2. A concluding condemnation of Nineveh (3:14–19)

ENDNOTES

1. All biblical references are to the English text unless otherwise noted. In such cases the reference to the Hebrew versification will be included in brackets (e.g., 1:15[2:1]).
2. Though differing in specific details of presentation, M. Sweeney's article, "Concerning the Structure and Generic Character of the Book of Nahum," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (1992):364-377, also argues for the unity of Nahum, rightly observing that "the book of Nahum has a coherent structure." Nahum's literary artistry points to the removal of critical doubt as to the unity of the book. See further H. Peels, *Voed het old vertrouwen weder. De Godsopenbaring bij Nahum* (Kampen: Kok, 1993).
 Although I previously attempted to defend a partial or broken acrostic in verses 2-10 (see Patterson and Travers 1988:56-57), I have now largely abandoned the effort. The most that can be said for a proposed acrostic is that (1) three pairs of alphabetic sequence in directly following lines may be observed: beth-gimel (1:3b-4a), he-waw (1:5), and heth-teth (1:6b-7); (2) several other letters in the sequence of aleph-kaph (except daleth; 1:4) are present, though not always at the beginning of a line or in immediately following lines as in standard acrostics; and (3) a general pattern of progression may be seen in the Hebrew letters from aleph to kaph.
 The analysis of Floyd (1994:437) yields a similar result: "One can nevertheless conclude with regard to this unit itself that the hypothesis of an alphabetical acrostic here should now be laid to rest. This is partly because the evidence for the acrostic is itself so dubious, but also because the claim that the existence of an acrostic is supposed to support, namely that Nah 1:2-10 is basically a hymn, is also not viable."
 It is better, then, to conclude that the two-part poem detailing the Lord's revealed character and activities contains a high degree of repetition of letters, sounds, and ideas.
3. See Longman 1993:771-775; Patterson and Travers 1990:437-444.
4. See Patterson 1991:8-11; Patterson and Travers 1988:21-43.
5. See R. D. Patterson, "Old Testament Prophecy," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 302.
6. B. Becking (1995) relates the theme of divine wrath to covenantal theology, the Assyrian being viewed as a disobedient vassal to Yahweh. Becking also argues for the unity of Nahum, as well as a date in the seventh century BC. For the Divine Warrior theme, see the discussion of major themes in the introduction to Joel, the commentary on Habakkuk 3:8-15, and T. Longman III and D. G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).
7. In this regard Craigie (1976:67) remarks: "Nahum . . . here anticipates the Gospel. . . . In the same way, the message of the glad tidings of the Gospel comes to those who are oppressed and in despair. The message is one of peace, a peace from external oppression and a new kind of peace with the God who is the giver of all life."

COMMENTARY ON

Nahum

◆ Superscription (1:1)

This message concerning Nineveh came as a vision to Nahum, who lived in Elkosh.

NOTES

1:1 message. Because the noun *massa'* (oracle, message) is derived from the verb *nasa'* (lift up), two meanings have traditionally been assigned to it: (1) "burden" and (2) "oracle." Those who favor the first translation call attention to the more natural reading of the root in the idea of a burden that is carried, whether that of animals (2 Kgs 5:17) or people (Jer 17:21-22; cf. Deut 1:12), and to the customary following of the terms by an objective genitive ("the burden concerning X"). Those who take the noun to mean something like "oracle," "utterance," or simply "prophecy" point out that the term is used often to introduce non-burdensome prophecies (e.g., Zech 12:1; Mal 1:1) and that the associated verb is used of speaking in such cases as lifting up the voice (Isa 3:7; 42:11), of lifting up or taking up a parable (Num 23:7), proverb (Isa 14:4), prayer (Isa 37:4), lamentation (Amos 5:1), or the name of God (Exod 20:7; see Barker 1985:657). The strength of parallels in Ugaritic as well as the many biblical examples of *nasa'* [TH5375, ZH5951] used in a context of "lifting up the voice" appear to tip the weight in favor of the latter suggestion.

Nineveh. The mention of Nineveh in the superscription is significant in that without this notation the direction of the message of the entire first chapter could be unclear. Indeed, Nineveh is not specifically named until 2:8. The inclusion of the Assyrian capital in the superscription, therefore, identifies the object of the announcement of God's judgment with which the book begins.

vision. By calling his prophecy a vision, Nahum underscored the fact that what he said was not of his own invention but was that which God had specially revealed to him (cf. Obad 1:1). At the outset, then, Nahum made it clear that his words were not his own insights based on his observations of the events of his time. Rather, they were nothing less than the message given to him by the sovereign God whose word he must deliver, however difficult it might be.

Nahum. Hummel (1979:342) suggests that the meaning of Nahum's name ("comfort") is quite apropos. God's justice means judgment on the enemy but "comfort" to the faithful. Hummel goes on to say, "The point is not that God's people go scot-free, but precisely the reverse: if God so judges those whom He employs temporarily as instruments of His judgment upon His unfaithful people, how much more fearful the judgment upon His own people if they finally miss the message." The Hebrew text calls Nahum's prophecy "The book of the vision of Nahum." Accordingly, some (Keil 1954; Longman 1993) have suggested that the original prophecy was written and not delivered orally. While this is possible, the use of the phrase may simply suggest that Nahum's burdensome vision, whether delivered orally or not, had, under divine inspiration, been committed to a permanent record that all may read.

COMMENTARY

Nahum begins his prophecy with the observation that what is recorded here is not of his own invention but is both a prophetic oracle and a vision. The latter term, while dealing primarily with the communication of received revelation, may imply that the prophet, or *khozeh* [TH2374, ZH2602] (seer), was one who, as God's chosen servant, saw things from God's point of view and attempted to get others to see them too. The word "seer" may also indicate that Nahum was allowed a visionary glimpse of Nineveh's actual siege and fall before the events occurred.

Nahum asserted that God is a God of revelation and one who is active in the course of earth's history. As a revealer, unlike the god of the deists, Israel's God can and does make his will known to mankind (Num 24:4, 16; 2 Chr 32:32; Isa 2:1; Dan 2:26; 4:10; Amos 1:1; Obad 1:1). In specifically addressing Nineveh, Nahum emphasized that God does truly intervene in the affairs of nations.

The address to Nineveh also reminds all readers that God is a God of justice. To be sure, he allowed the Assyrians to punish Israel for its unfaithfulness and immoral behavior, but he who serves God ought not to use such service for selfish ends. The Assyrians had gone beyond their commission in the brutal way they carried out their divine assignment. Therefore, they would eventually face the certain and severe judgment of God.

Although Nahum's name was a common one, it may give a clue as to an important purpose of the book, that of giving "comfort" to God's people: However fierce and foreboding the circumstance might seem, God is indeed still sovereign and is concerned for the welfare and ultimate good of his own. Whatever trial or chastisement they may be enduring, God intends it for their benefit so as to make them stronger and more productive believers (cf. Isa 40:1-2; 1 Pet 1:5-7).

◆ I. The Doom of Nineveh Declared (1:2-15)

A. First Rhetorical Question (1:2-6)

²The LORD is a jealous God,
filled with vengeance and rage.
He takes revenge on all who oppose
him
and continues to rage against his
enemies!

³The LORD is slow to get angry, but his
power is great,
and he never lets the guilty go
unpunished.
He displays his power in the whirlwind
and the storm.
The billowing clouds are the dust
beneath his feet.

⁴At his command the oceans dry up,
and the rivers disappear.

The lush pastures of Bashan and
Carmel fade,
and the green forests of Lebanon
wither.

⁵In his presence the mountains
quake,
and the hills melt away;
the earth trembles,
and its people are destroyed.

⁶Who can stand before his fierce
anger?
Who can survive his burning
fury?

His rage blazes forth like fire,
and the mountains crumble to dust
in his presence.

NOTES

1:2 a jealous God, filled with . . . rage. The English words translate two interesting Hebrew phrases: *'el qanno'* [TH410A/7072, ZH446/7868] and *ba'al khemah* [TH1167/2534, ZH1251/2779] (lit., "possessor of wrath"). The names of the Canaanite gods El and Baal are immediately apparent. Cathcart (1973a:38-39) follows the lead of Albright in suggesting that their use here, together with the common characteristic jealousy of the Canaanite deities, may indicate Nahum's adoption of Canaanite hymnody. As Roberts (1991:43) points out, however, *ba'al* [TH1167, ZH1251] is often compounded with other nouns without any necessary connection with deity. In any case, there is no need to see wholesale adoption of a Canaanite composition dedicated to Baal, as some suggest (cf. Gaster 1961:143). At most, Nahum may simply be displaying his literary skill in utilizing old poetic themes to give a veiled attack against the rampant Baalism initiated by King Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:3). Yahweh (not Baal) is the true Lord of the universe (cf. 1:3b-5) and will execute his righteous anger against sin and rebellion.

vengeance . . . revenge. In the Hebrew text "vengeance" occurs three times; twice sandwiched between the words for jealousy and rage and a third time with the thought of taking "revenge" (NLT) on the adversary. This is a key to unlocking the door of understanding to Nahum's prophecy. In reading of God's vengeance, however, one must not think of the familiar human vindictiveness condemned in the Scriptures (cf. Deut 32:35 and Prov 25:21-22 with Rom 12:19-20; Lev 19:18 with Matt 19:19). Although God may delegate the operation of vengeance to constituted authority (Num 31:1-2; Josh 10:13; Esth 8:13), it primarily belongs to him (Deut 32:35-43; Heb 10:30-31).

continues to rage. Like the Syriac *netar*, the underlying Heb. verb here (*natar* [TH5201A, ZH5757]) means basically to "keep," "guard," or "maintain," and hence has the same semantic range as *natsar* [TH5341, ZH5915] (cf. Old Aramaic *nesar* with classical Aramaic *netar* [TA10476, ZA10476]) and also *shamar* [TH8104, ZH9068] with which it occurs in parallel in Jer 3:5; (cf. Amos 1:11, Syriac). In addition, *natar* appears to more clearly employ the meaning "be angry" or "bear a grudge" in several contexts (e.g., Lev 19:18; Ps 103:9; Jer 3:5, 12). Thus, some scholars have suggested that both verbs have a second root signifying "rage" (cf. HALOT 2.695). The meaning, however, may be better understood as contextually derived and not as the result of another root.

all who oppose him . . . his enemies! The nouns here (*tsar* [TH6862A, ZH7640] and *'oyeb* [TH341, ZH367]) are recognized poetic parallels (Yoder 1971:475-476).

1:3 The LORD is slow to get angry. Some critical scholars (e.g., J. M. P. Smith) have suggested that v. 3a be treated as a gloss, possibly supplied from Numbers 14:18, so as to soften the force of God's wrath. However, as Cathcart (1973a:46-47) points out, the essential integrity of vv. 2-3a is supported by the heaping up of the consonants nun and qoph (six times each) and the combination of the ideas of strength/wrath and gentleness/mercy found in extrabiblical literary sources such as the Babylonian *Ludlul Bel Nemeqi*, in which Marduk is described as one whose "anger is irresistible, his rage is a hurricane, but his heart is merciful, his mind forgiving." (For the full text of *Ludlul Bel Nemeqi*, see Lambert 1960:30-62.)

his power. The thought might parallel that of Ps 147:5: "How great is our LORD! His power is absolute!"

whirlwind . . . storm. Both nouns occur in Isa 29:6 in a context of judgment. Watson (1986:196) may be correct in suggesting that the use of the two words for "storm" here is an example of hendiadys. He translates the line, "In the tempestuous whirlwind his road." Yahweh's power over the storm could be viewed as a veiled denunciation of both the Canaanite Baal (who was often worshiped in poetic lines of similar sentiment and whose worship was even then rampant in Judah) and Hadad, the Assyrian storm god.

billowing clouds. The image is reminiscent of such phrases as “him who rides the clouds” (e.g., Ps 68:4), “he rides across the heavens” (Deut 33:26), and “riding on a swift cloud” (Isa 19:1). Similarly, the storm god Hadad appears in the Ugaritic literature as “lord of the storm clouds” and in the Atrahasis Epic as the one who “rode on the four winds, (his) asses.” (For the term “the Rider on the Clouds,” see Patterson 1985:37.)

1:4 oceans . . . rivers. “Sea” and “river” are persistent players in the Canaanite mythological texts and appear as parallel pairs in both Ugaritic texts and the OT. (See the full discussion in Cooper 1981:369-383.)

Bashan . . . Carmel . . . Lebanon. The mention of Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon is reminiscent of Isa 33:9. All three were noted for being places of special fertility. Bashan (south of Mount Hermon on the east side of the Jordan) was fabled for the productivity of its land and therefore its fine cattle (Mic 7:14); Carmel (the promontory along the Mediterranean Sea in central Canaan south of the Bay of Acre) was prized for its beauty and fruitfulness (Song 7:5; Jer 50:19); and Lebanon (home of the lofty mountains of coastal Syria) was famed for its great cedars (1 Kgs 5:14-18; Isa 2:13). The conquering Mesopotamian kings frequently boasted of traveling to the forests of Lebanon. (See Sennacherib’s penetration of this area as recorded in Luckenbill 1926:161-162. Sennacherib’s boast is also noted in 2 Kgs 19:23.) Robertson (1990:67) adds, “In the graciousness of God, Israel was promised that they would experience a return some day to the fruitfulness of Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon (Isa 33:9-10; 35:2; Jer 50:18-19).”

fade . . . wither. For the unusual word *’umlal* [TH535, ZH581] (wither), which occurs twice in this verse, see Isa 24:4. Roberts (1991:44) suggests emending to some form of the verb *dalal* [TH1809, ZH1937] (become little) so as to restore the missing dalet of the acrostic (cf. Isa 19:6). Such an emendation could be justified for one of the occurrences since the ancient versions uniformly use two different words in translating the Hebrew text. However, the scroll of the Minor Prophets from Wadi Murabba’at supports the MT. Moreover, Joel uses *’umlal* together with *yabesh* [TH3001, ZH3312] (“dry up”; Joel 1:10, 12). Nahum may be adopting Joel’s language here. If scholars argue for an acrostic in vv. 2-10 (see Introduction, endnote 2), they must settle for a broken one at best and one whose succeeding letter does not always occur in the initial position in its line. Such a broken alphabetic acrostic occurs in Pss 9–10, where the letter dalet is likewise missing.

1:5 mountains quake . . . hills melt away. For the NLT’s “melt away,” the NEB reads “swell,” and the NJB “reel.” Support for such renderings comes not only from the parallel with the quaking mountains but from the ancient versions: LXX *esaleuthēsan* [TG4531, ZG4888] (are shaken, sway) and Peshitta *’etparaq* (be rent, be broken). Possible etymological support may also be found in Arabic *maja* (surge). This thought is supported further by such thematic parallels as Ps 18:7; Jer 4:24; Hab 3:6. Conversely, the more usual translation of *mug* [TH4127, ZH4570] as “melt” is favored by a comparison with Ps 97:5; Mic 1:4.

its people are destroyed. The NLT thus renders the emphasis of the verbless second clause of the original text. The Hebrew for the full line reads, “The earth quakes before him, even the world and all who dwell in it” (my translation). The parallel nouns *’eret* [TH776, ZH824] (earth) and *tebel* [TH8398, ZH9315] (world) appear together elsewhere (cf. 1 Sam 2:8; Isa 18:3; 24:4; 26:9, 18; 34:1). Another proposal comes from Moran (1965:71, 83), who links the *we-* [TH2050.1, ZH2256] (and) of the form *wekol-* [TH3605, ZH3972] (and all) with *tebel* and points it as a verb *tebalu* (from *’abal* [TH56, ZH61], thus viewing it as a remnant of an ancient *taqtulu[na]* form): “all its inhabitants mourned.” However, the MT is sufficiently clear as it stands.

1:6 fury. The figure of wrath is continued in this verse. It is a wrath that burns so intensely that even usually impenetrable rocks are broken up before it (cf. Deut 32:22; 1 Kgs 19:11; Jer 4:26; 23:29; 51:26; Mic 1:4). The Hebrew word *khemah* [TH2534, ZH2779] that occurs here forms an *inclusio* with 1:2, thus bracketing 1:2-6 together.

COMMENTARY

Nahum began his prophetic oracles with a poem featuring two themes. Verses 2-6 are formed largely from texts commemorating the Exodus, while verses 7-10 are built around declarations that the Lord is a sovereign and righteous God who deals justly with all people. After giving his opening thesis (1:2), each section begins with a statement concerning the Lord, cast as a verbless sentence: (1) "The LORD is slow to get angry" (1:3a) and (2) "The LORD is good" (1:7a), which is followed by several descriptive assertions (1:3b-5, 7b-8) and a rhetorical question and closing declaration (1:6, 9-10). The whole poem proceeds around a general description of the Lord's sovereign power toward both the faithful and those who oppose him. Nahum wanted to underscore two truths: (1) Although the Lord is long-suffering, he will assuredly judge the guilty with all the force that a sovereign God can muster (1:3-6); and (2) although the Lord is good and tenderly cares for the righteous (particularly in times of affliction), he will destroy those who plot against him (1:7-10). The full poem provides the basis for Nahum's subsequent oracles.

Nahum initially declares (1:2-3) that God is a God of justice who will not allow his person or power to be impugned. He will deal justly with the ungodly. The theme of judgment is balanced by the knowledge that God is "slow to get angry." His judicial wrath is not always immediate. At times, he holds back his wrath against his foes until the proper occasion. God's government, including his judicial processes, is on schedule, even though to a waiting humanity his timing may seem to lag.

Indeed, his justice may be "slow" in coming, for he is a God of infinite patience who has an overriding concern for the souls of people (cf. 2 Pet 3:9-15). Far from being an omnipotent sovereign who executes justice with rigid disinterest, God is a God of truth and love who, because he longs to bring people into a relationship with himself, abounds in forbearance toward those who deserve only judgment.

Despite his abundant patience, a God of truth and justice (Pss 9:9; 31:5) will not acquit the guilty but must ultimately confront unrepented sin so that justice triumphs in the punishment of the guilty (Exod 34:7; Num 14:17-18; Deut 28:58-68; Joel 3:4-8, 19). Moreover, as an omnipotent sovereign he has the inherent strength to effect his justice: He is "great in power." The theophany portrayed in the metaphor of verse 3b is a familiar one in the Old Testament: Yahweh is the God of the storm. The figure is often utilized for contexts dealing with judgment (e.g., Isa 29:6; 66:15; Zech 9:14). In contrast to the impotent pagan storm gods, the Lord is in control of the natural world, as well as the affairs of mankind (Job 37:1-42:6; Ps 104; Acts 17:24-28).

Nahum's description of God's omnipotence and sovereignty is in harmony with mainstream Hebrew orthodoxy and is phrased in familiar imagery: God is in the whirlwind and the storm (Ps 83:15 [16]; Isa 29:6); he treads the lofty clouds under his feet (cf. Exod 19:16-19; Pss 68:4 [5]; 97:2; 104:3; Matt 24:30; 26:64; 1 Thess 4:17; Rev 1:7); he controls the rivers and seas (cf. Exod 14:21-22; 15:8; Pss 66:6; 77:16; Hab 3:15); he can make desolate the most luxurious of lands (e.g., Bashan and Carmel); the mountains and earth quake and collapse at his

presence (cf. Hab 3:6, 10) so that the world and its inhabitants are helpless before him—even the most impenetrable of rocks lies shattered before his fiery wrath.

Nahum thus gives a graphic picture of the limitless and invincible power of God. Accordingly, he can ask whether any could stand in the face of such an almighty one when he executes his wrath. The answer is “No one, no one at all!” By implication, this response anticipates the subject of his prophecy: Not even mighty Nineveh, home of the Assyrian world empire, would be able to withstand the sovereign God of all nature. The creator, controller, and consummator of this world and its history is the same one who will not leave the guilty unpunished.

◆ B. Second Rhetorical Question (1:7–10)

⁷The LORD is good,
a strong refuge when trouble comes.
He is close to those who trust
in him.

⁸But he will sweep away his enemies
in an overwhelming flood.
He will pursue his foes
into the darkness of night.

⁹Why are you scheming against
the LORD?

He will destroy you with one blow;
he won't need to strike twice!

¹⁰His enemies, tangled like thornbushes
and staggering like drunks,
will be burned up like dry stubble
in a field.

NOTES

1:7 *refuge*. Lit., “for a refuge.” The unexpected preposition before the noun has been variously treated either as (1) a comparative particle, “better than” (NJB), (2) an asseverative particle, “yea,” “indeed” (Christensen 1975:22), or (3) intended for an omitted noun, understood on the basis of the LXX so that the line reads, “The Lord is good to those who wait upon him, a place of refuge in the day of affliction” (Roberts 1991:42-45). Despite the difficulty, the MT is defensible—the preposition explained as one providing logical connection, meaning “with respect to” (Gen 17:20; 41:19). This explanation yields the rendering, “The Lord is good as a refuge.” The NLT renders the sense adequately.

He is close. Several suggest an expanded use of *yada'* [TH3045, ZH3359] here, such as “care for” (NIV, NEB) or “recognize” (NJB). Because this verb has a wide semantic range when used of divine knowledge, however, it is perhaps better to translate “and he knows” and leave the precise nuance to the expositor.

1:8 *his enemies.* The Hebrew reads “its/her place” (cf. NASB; Keil 1954). The NLT follows the lead of the Septuagint and several scholars in repointing the consonants so as to read “those who rise up against him,” hence, “his enemies.” Roberts (1991:42, 45; following Rudolph) repoints the consonants as an abstract noun and translates, “He totally annihilates the opposition.”

into the darkness of night. The NLT renders the phrase according to the sense. The word “night” does not occur in the Hebrew text, however, so other possibilities for understanding “darkness” include the land of death—the final end of the wicked (a thought found in such texts as Job 10:20-22; 17:13; 18:18; Ps 35:6, 8, 10-12), or simply as an idiom for God’s relentless pursuit that brings the final extermination of his foes (Isa 8:22; Zeph 1:15). Robertson (1990:72) observes, “*Darkness* in Scripture symbolizes distress, terror, mourning, perplexity, and dread. A combination of all these experiences will be the final fruition of Nineveh for all the years that she oppressed and brutalized other nations.”



Habakkuk

RICHARD D. PATTERSON

INTRODUCTION TO

Habakkuk

HABAKKUK felt deeply the injustice of his society. He took his case to God, who explained his purposes to the prophet with the result that Habakkuk placed his faith solely in God (3:15-19). As today's believers struggle with the problems of evil and godless societies, they, like Habakkuk, can be assured that God is in control. And they, like Habakkuk, must place their faith in the Lord.

AUTHOR

The identity of the prophet Habakkuk remains a mystery. As for his name, some have seen etymological relationships to an Assyrian plant called the *hambaququ* (e.g., Roberts 1991, Rudolph 1975) or to the Hebrew verb *khabaq* [TH2263, ZH2485] ("embrace"; cf. Bailey 1999). The former would suggest, as in rabbinic tradition, that Habakkuk may have lived and been educated in Assyria (Nineveh), while the latter could be taken to indicate that he was the son of the Shunammite woman who received Elisha's promise that in the following year she would "be holding a son" (2 Kgs 4:16). The first suggestion is specious at best, and the second is historically impossible since Habakkuk would then have been born two centuries too early. The reading in one Septuagintal tradition of the first-century BC addition to Daniel titled *Bel and the Dragon* claims that Habakkuk was the "son of Jesus of the tribe of Levi" lacks historical validity. Indeed, other editions of this work fail to mention this relationship, and in the apocryphal *Lives of the Prophets* (ch 12), Habakkuk is linked with the tribe of Simeon. In any case, these books are late intertestamental works, and, as Craigie (1985:77) remarks, "There is little of historical value that can be drawn from this later reference." Equally improbable is the conjecture some make by relating Habakkuk 2:1 with Isaiah 21:6, that the "watchman" Habakkuk is Isaiah's prophetic successor.

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

Habakkuk's prophecy has been variously assigned to dates between the ninth century BC and the Maccabean period. Although critical scholars are divided as to late preexilic or exilic dates, evangelical scholars traditionally have favored the preexilic era. Taken at face value, Habakkuk's short prophecy is set in a time of national upheaval characterized by gross social injustice (1:2-4) and by the imminent advent of the Babylonians (Chaldeans) as the foremost international power (1:5-11). These factors suggest a preexilic setting. A key factor in the discussion is the precise

force of 1:5-6 (see commentary). There the Lord tells Habakkuk that he is going to raise up the Chaldeans as his agents of judgment. If this is to take place in the near future and to Habakkuk's amazement, this would seem to imply that Habakkuk's ministry is set in the early days of Josiah's reign or slightly earlier. If the Chaldeans were already a power to be reckoned with, Habakkuk's astonishment would not be as great.¹ Admittedly, Habakkuk could simply be amazed that God would use such a ferocious people.

Among evangelical scholars, three major positions have been articulated. (1) The majority date the prophecy to the time of Jehoiakim, whose godless disposition (2 Kgs 24:1-3; Jer 26:20-23) occasioned prophetic utterances of condemnation together with the threat of a Babylonian invasion (Jer 25). (2) Others (e.g., Pusey 1953) opt for a date in the reign of Josiah before the discovery of a copy of the law in 621 BC. Supporting this proposal as a time of social ills such as those Habakkuk describes is the apostasy that Josiah was called upon to correct from the earliest days of his reign (2 Chr 34:1-7), as well as the fact that the Temple's restoration called for the king's special attention. Indirect evidence comes from the widespread reforms and revival that followed upon finding the Book of the Law in 621 BC (2 Chr 34:23-35:19). (3) Still others (e.g., Keil 1954) defend a date in the time of Judah's most wicked king, Manasseh. They cite the degraded moral and spiritual level of that time (2 Kgs 21:1-26; 2 Chr 33:1-10), an era whose debauchery was so pronounced that it drew God's declaration that he would effect a total "disaster on Jerusalem and Judah" (2 Kgs 21:12). Supporting the third alternative is the clear scriptural indication of extreme wickedness during the reign of Manasseh. According to 2 Kings 21:1-18 and 2 Chronicles 33:1-9, that evil king not only reinstated the loathsome Canaanite worship practices of Asherah and Baal (which Hezekiah, his father, had done away with) but also introduced a state astral cult. He built pagan altars in the outer courts and priests' courts and placed an Asherah pole within the Temple itself. He also indulged in sorcery, divination, and witchcraft, as well as the abominable rites of infant sacrifice. A date for Habakkuk during Manasseh's reign, which is supported by Jewish tradition, would be particularly attractive if it could be demonstrated that both Zephaniah and Jeremiah knew and utilized Habakkuk's prophecy (cf. Hab 1:8 with Jer 4:13; 5:6; Hab 2:12 with Jer 22:13-17; Hab 2:13 with Jer 51:58; Hab 2:20 with Zeph 1:7). According to this scenario—in which Manasseh was carried away into captivity in the later part of his reign and subsequently repented and initiated several religious reforms—a date for the book shortly before the western campaigns of King Ashurbanipal of Assyria (652 BC and thereafter) would be a good estimate.

Although final certainty as to the date of the book is elusive, Habakkuk's prophecies would seem to have had their greatest force either in the early period of Josiah's rule or in the time of Manasseh. The former would make Habakkuk and Zephaniah contemporaries; the latter would have the prophet contemporary with Nahum. Either view would date the prophecy in the time of the reign of King Ashurbanipal (668-626 BC), during the *Pax Assyriaca* of the Neo-Assyrian era (see Introduction to Nahum).

with that unholy instrument, but meanwhile the righteous person is to live a life of faith (2:4) and devotion (2:20), being mindful of God's ultimate purposes (2:14).

A theme woven in with Habakkuk's spiritual quest is the necessity of prayer. Indeed, as Thompson (1993:53) points out, "It is surely significant that so much of the book of Habakkuk is expressed in the terms and language of prayer. . . . It is as if for this prophet the prophetic and woe oracles serve a somewhat subservient function to those prayers that are employed to express what are the most significant parts of the prophet's burden."

Habakkuk's doubts had led him to come to God and share his thoughts and perplexities with him. A caring and patient God answered his prophet's perplexities and communicated to him something of his parameters of operation (2:4) and even allowed him to see something of the Lord's dynamic dealing with injustice and oppression—whether in fresh theophany, in contemplation of an earlier appearance of God handed down in epic tradition, or both. Here, once again, one finds the dynamic theme of the Divine Warrior (3:3-15), who, in triumphing over evil, gives victory to his followers so they may live secure and faithful lives (3:16-19).⁸

THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Habakkuk told his readers certain facts concerning God's person and work. He informed his readers that the everlasting (1:12; 3:3, 6) God of glory (2:14; 3:3-4) is sovereign over all individuals and nations (1:5, 14; 2:6-20; 3:3-15), guiding them according to his predetermined purpose to bring glory to himself (2:14). God is a God of holiness (1:12-13; 2:20; 3:3) and justice (1:12-13; 2:4) who, although he judges godlessness and injustice (1:2-11; 2:5-19; 3:12-15), mercifully tempers his righteous anger against sin (3:2, 8, 12).

A God of omnipotence (3:4-7, 8-15), he works for the deliverance and salvation of his people (3:13, 18). A God of revelation (1:1; 2:2-3), he hears the cries and prayers (1:2-4, 12-17; 2:1; 3:1-2) of his own and answers them (1:5-11; 2:4-20; 3:3-15). As a result of these dialogues, Habakkuk came to learn that the issues of life and death rest with God. Similarly, the righteous individual will, by faith (2:4-5), come to realize that God is sufficient for every situation (3:16-19).

OUTLINE

Superscription (1:1)

- I. The Prophet's Perplexities and God's Explanations (1:2–2:20)
 - A. First Perplexity: How Can God Disregard Judah's Sin? (1:2–4)
 - B. First Explanation: God Will Judge Judah through the Babylonians (1:5–11)
 - C. Second Perplexity: How Can God Employ the Wicked Babylonians? (1:12–2:1)
 - D. Second Explanation: God Controls All Nations according to His Purposes (2:2–20)

1. Preliminary instructions and guiding principles (2:2-4)
 2. The first taunt: the plundering Babylonians will be despoiled (2:5-8)
 3. The second taunt: the plotting Babylonians will be denounced (2:9-11)
 4. The third taunt: the pillaging Babylonians will be destroyed (2:12-14)
 5. The fourth taunt: the perverting Babylonians will be disgraced (2:15-17)
 6. The fifth taunt: the polytheistic Babylonians will be deserted by their idols (2:18-20)
- II. The Prophet's Prayer and God's Exaltation (3:1-19)
- A. The Prophet's Prayer for the Redeemer's Pity (3:1-2)
 - B. The Prophet's Praise of the Redeemer's Person (3:3-15)
 1. The Redeemer's coming (3:3-7)
 2. The Redeemer's conquest (3:8-15)
 - C. The Prophet's Pledge to the Redeemer's Purposes (3:16-19)

Subscription

ENDNOTES

1. Thus Vasholz (1992:50-52), for example, opts for a date before the accession of Nabopolassar in 626 BC.
2. R. K. Harrison (1969:271) includes the words of the pronouncement of the second-century BC *baraita* contained in the Talmudic tractate *Bava Batra*: "The order of the prophets is Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, the Twelve (Minor Prophets)." For full discussion of the early canonicity of all of the prophets, see Beckwith (1985:138-180).
3. See Albright 1950:1-18. Although the list of authors who have worked on this portion of Scripture is filled with the names of many prestigious scholars, a critical consensus as to its reading and interpretation is far from being reached. The difficulties of the text have challenged the efforts of exegetes of all theological persuasions.
4. See Wurthwein 1979:146. W. Brownlee (1959:146) lists 19 of these as major variants.
5. Sweeney (1991:80) points out that "it is clear that Hab. iii functions as a corroborating conclusion that responds to the issues raised in Hab. i-ii," and therefore concludes that "the book has a coherent structural unity." It may be added that distinct opening formulae and careful stitching can be seen in the first two chapters. For details, see Patterson 1990:18-20.
6. For a consideration of Habakkuk's literary features, see Patterson 1987:163-194; 1991:119-126; see further Thompson 1993:33-53.
7. Merling (1988:138-151) stresses that as a messenger of judgment, justice, and salvation, Habakkuk was unique in his role of communicating the message of the righteousness that comes by faith.
8. Regarding the Divine Warrior, see the commentary on Habakkuk 3:8-15. It may be added that in Habakkuk 3, Herman (1988:199-203) sees Yahweh portrayed not only as the Divine Warrior but also as the Lord of nature whose victories imply his coming as Divine King.

COMMENTARY ON
Habakkuk

◆ Superscription (1:1)

This is the message that the prophet Habakkuk received in a vision.

NOTES

1:1 *message*. See the note on Nah 1:1.

vision. Lit., “the message which Habakkuk the prophet saw.” The prophet stressed his own participation in the revelatory process. Yet he would have his readers understand that his words contain the actual communication of God to his hearers. The particular verb employed (*khazah* [TH2372, ZH2600], “saw”) is appropriate, not only denoting what the prophet received and was passing on but also allowing for personal seeing of certain details, such as the theophany of 3:3-15.

COMMENTARY

Habakkuk began his prophecy with a firm declaration that God is a God of revelation and that he, God’s messenger, had received God’s word. What he would transmit was the record of God’s dealing with him and God’s communication to others. Today’s preacher would do well to be certain that his message, likewise, is that which *God* has laid upon his heart.

◆ I. The Prophet’s Perplexities and God’s Explanations (1:2–2:20)

A. First Perplexity: How Can God Disregard Judah’s Sin? (1:2–4)

²How long, O LORD, must I call for help?

But you do not listen!

“Violence is everywhere!” I cry,

but you do not come to save.

³Must I forever see these evil deeds?

Why must I watch all this misery?

Wherever I look,

I see destruction and violence.

I am surrounded by people
who love to argue and fight.

⁴The law has become paralyzed,
and there is no justice in the courts.

The wicked far outnumber the
righteous,
so that justice has become
perverted.

NOTES

1:2 *How long, O LORD, must I call for help?* The phrase “how long” indicates Habakkuk’s repeated cries to God. The form is typical of lament (cf. Ps 13:1-2). Habakkuk’s plea emphasizes his frustration and exasperation with the state of affairs at that time. The

prophet's concern was a long-standing one, so that his doubts and questionings were not those of a fault-finding, negative critic or a skeptic but rather the honest searchings of a holy prophet of God. The Hebrew word for "call" carries with it the idea of a cry for help. Something of the prophet's literary artistry surfaces here at the beginning of his prophecy, for the word *shiuwa'ti* [TH7768, ZH8775] probably forms an intentional alliterative chiasmus with the verb "save" (*toshia'* [TH3467, ZH3828]) at the end of the verse.

Violence. Regarding this term (*khamas* [TH2555, ZH2805]), see the commentary on Obad 1:10. The cry and the need for divine help are reminiscent of Job's lament (Job 19:7; see also Job 9:17-20; 16:12-14; 30:11-15). Jeremiah (Jer 6:7; 20:8) also complained of the violence and destruction of Judahite society, a charge echoed by Ezekiel (Ezek 45:9).

1:3 misery. The noun translated "misery" also occurs with the following noun "destruction" in Prov 24:2 in describing the evil machinations and corrupt words of wicked men.

1:4 law. Habakkuk declared that society must be based on God's law if righteousness is to prevail. To neglect God's law was to invite "the ruination of God's land and people" (Laetsch 1956:318).

no justice. Social justice forms a key consideration in Habakkuk's oracles (Marks 1987:219). The themes of justice and righteousness are central in the book and will reach a climax in 2:4. Their placement in the middle two lines of the chiasmic structure of the verse provides emphatic effect.

outnumber. The Hebrew word carries with it the sense of "encircle, surround"; here it is used with the connotation of hostile intent. Thus, Roberts (1991:90) remarks, "The use of the verb . . . suggests the imposition of severe limitations on the freedom of action of the encircled party, the frustration of the righteous man's plans and expectations."

perverted. This hapax legomenon is related to a root attested in Syriac (*'aqal*, "twist") and Arabic (*'aqqala*, "bend"); cf. Heb. *'aqalqal* [TH6128, ZH6824] (twisted); *'aqallathon* [TH6129, ZH6825] (crooked).

COMMENTARY

The nature of Habakkuk's complaint can be appreciated by the four words he used to describe Judah's social situation: violence, sin, misery, and destruction. All are strong words that contain moral and spiritual overtones. In order, they depict a society that is characterized by malicious wickedness (cf. Gen 6:11, 13; Ps 72:14), deceitful iniquity—both moral (cf. Job 34:36; Prov 17:4; Isa 29:20) and spiritual (cf. Isa 66:3)—oppressive behavior toward others (cf. Isa 10:1), and the general spiritual and ethical havoc that exists where such sin abounds (cf. Isa 59:7). It is little wonder that under such conditions, people love to "argue and fight" and the legal system becomes subverted.

In Habakkuk's eyes, then, Judahite society was spiritually bankrupt and morally corrupt. Because sin abounded, injustice was the norm. Habakkuk described the judicial situation in two ways: (1) Because of the basic spiritual condition, the operation of God's law was sapped of the vital force necessary for it to guide ethical and judicial decisions. Accordingly, righteousness did not characterize Judahite society, and justice was never meted out. (2) Because the society itself had become godless, wicked men could hem in the attempts and actions of the righteous so that whatever justice might exist became so twisted that the resultant decision was one of utter perversity.

These verses, then, underscore the prophet's consternation as to the seeming divine indifference to all the debauchery he saw around him. Habakkuk was disturbed also by God's silence with regard to his repeated cries for help and intervention. Additional understanding on this latter point may be gained by considering the relation of Habakkuk's words to the well-known "call-answer" motif. This theme is used often in the Scriptures to assure believers that they may call upon God for refuge and protection in times of trouble and distress (Pss 17:6-12; 20:6-9; 81:6-7; 102:1-2; 138:8). Further, the believer may find guidance from God (Ps 99:6-7; Jer 33:2-3) and experience intimate communion with him both in this life and in the next (Job 14:14-15; Ps 73:23-26). The motif also touches upon God's future plans for Israel, which include full restoration to divine fellowship (Isa 65:24; Zech 13:7-9).

Unfortunately, this motif has its negative side, as well. It teaches that when sin is present, God does not answer the one who calls on him (Ps 66:18). The believer must honor God (Ps 4:1-3) and call upon him in truth (Ps 145:17-20). Where there is godless living (Isa 56:11-12), unconcern for the needs of others (Isa 58:6-9), or indifference to the clear teachings of the Word of God (Jer 35:17), there is danger of divine judgment (Zech 7:8-14). Thus, the unanswered call becomes a sign of broken fellowship. The careful believer will call on the Lord with confidence and thus experience the satisfaction that comes from being in full fellowship with his sovereign God (Ps 91:14-16).

◆ B. First Explanation: God Will Judge Judah through the Babylonians (1:5-11)

⁵The LORD replied,

"Look around at the nations;
look and be amazed!"

For I am doing something in your
own day,
something you wouldn't believe
even if someone told you about it.

⁶I am raising up the Babylonians,*
a cruel and violent people.

They will march across the world
and conquer other lands.

⁷They are notorious for their cruelty
and do whatever they like.

⁸Their horses are swifter than
cheetahs*
and fiercer than wolves at dusk.

Their charioteers charge from
far away.

Like eagles, they swoop down
to devour their prey.

⁹"On they come, all bent on
violence.

Their hordes advance like a desert
wind,
sweeping captives ahead of them
like sand.

¹⁰They scoff at kings and princes
and scorn all their fortresses.

They simply pile ramps of earth
against their walls and capture
them!

¹¹They sweep past like the wind
and are gone.

But they are deeply guilty,
for their own strength is
their god."

1:5 Greek version reads *Look you mockers; / look and be amazed and die*. Compare Acts 13:41. 1:6 Or *Chaldeans*. 1:8 Or *leopards*.

NOTES

1:5 look. The verb used here (*nabat* [TH5027, ZH5564]) had formed a critical part of Habakkuk's complaint (1:3), and God used the same word in his reply. It thus serves as a literary "hook" between the first two sections. It will figure in the next portion as well (1:13). Further hooks in this section can be seen in the words for justice (1:4, 7, though not reflected in the NLT) and violence (1:2, 9).

the nations. MT, *baggoyim* [TH1471, ZH1580]. The LXX reads "O despisers," perhaps reflecting *bogedim* [TH898, ZH953] (treacherous ones), a reading followed by Paul in his address at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:41).

I am doing. The personal pronoun is omitted in the Hebrew text, as is frequently done in cases where the subject has already been mentioned or is sufficiently clear from the context. The same construction occurs in 2:10 with the omission of the second pronoun.

in your own day. Robertson (1990:146) appropriately observes, "Swiftness in the execution of judgment is characteristic of the Lord's activity throughout the ages. Although extremely patient and forbearing with rebellious sinners, the Lord is not slow to act once he has determined that the iniquity of the people is full, and the time for judgment has arrived."

1:6 I am raising up. The construction found here is often used to refer to future events, the details of which God is about to set in process.

Babylonians. MT, *kasdim* [TH3778, ZH4169] (Chaldeans). This is also the reading of 1QpHab (2:11) among the DSS, although the term is then interpreted to refer to the Kittim (i.e., the Romans). By the time of the Neo-Assyrian era, the term "Chaldea" was used of those tribes that lived in southernmost Mesopotamia. Many of them were designated by the word *bit* (house of), such as Bit Yakin, which was situated on the Persian Gulf. One of the most famous Chaldean kings was Merodach-baladan, the perennial enemy of Assyria, who sent his emissaries to Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:12-19). By 705 BC at the latest, Merodach-baladan took the title "King of Babylon," with the result that the terms "Chaldean" and "Babylonian" were used interchangeably in the OT (cf. Isa 13:19; 47:1, 5; 48:14, 20).

cruel and violent. The two adjectives are alliterated in the Hebrew text (*hammar wehanninhar* [cf. TH4751/4116, ZH5253/4554]) and reflect the ideas of ferocity/bitterness and speed. As it is the Babylonians' disposition that is being characterized here, the NLT rendering perfectly reflects their ruthless and violent nature.

march across the world. Robertson (1990:150-151) notes the worldwide brutality envisioned in this phrase and then remarks: "Interestingly, Rev 20:9 echoes precisely the LXX rendering of this phrase. Satan goes out to deceive the nations. His troops are like the sand of the seashore in number. . . . This awesome army 'marched across the breadth of the earth.'"

1:7 do whatever they like. The Babylonians know no other law, whether human or divine, than themselves and their own might (cf. 1:11). The word *mishpat* [TH4941, ZH5477] (justice) appears in this verse, forming a literary link with 1:2-4 and serving as a key stitchword through 2:1. As Robertson (1990:152) remarks, "This nation shall not look to God for a criterion for righteousness; it shall determine its own standard of truth."

1:8 swifter than cheetahs. Cf. NLT mg, "leopards." Roberts (1991:96-97) appropriately observes: "The various comparisons of the Babylonian horses to leopards, wolves, and a vulture rushing toward food all convey the idea of the speed with which the Babylonian cavalry reaches its objective, but the choice of these animals of prey as the terms of comparison already intimates the nature of that objective."

eagles. Many commentators suggest the translation "vultures" here. Although such a translation is admissible and serves the line well, if the image of "coming from afar" is carried

through, the more traditional rendering here is perhaps better (cf. Deut 28:49). The far-reaching Babylonians are also compared to eagles in Jer 4:13; 48:40; 49:22.

1:9 *Their hordes advance.* Lit., “the totality of their faces is toward the east.” The clause is a difficult one. Ward (1911:9) gives it up as “untranslatable” and adds: “It is a corrupt intrusion; or possibly represents the remnant of a member of a lost couplet.” Textual uncertainty is already evident in the ancient versions, whose attempts to translate *ad sensum* produced widely varying results. Modern efforts have proved no more convincing (see, e.g., the discussions in Hulst 1960:248-249 and in Dominique Barthélemy, *Preliminary and Interim Report on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1980], 5:352-353). The chief difficulties center on the first and third words of the Hebrew phrase. The former is a hapax legomenon and is generally considered to be derived from the root *gamam* [TH4041, ZH4480] (“be abundant/filled”; cf. HALOT 1.545). The precise nuance of the word has, however, been variously understood, some opting for the idea of eagerness (NASB mg) on the part of the Babylonians or the endeavor etched on their faces; others for the thought of totality (NEB). Accordingly the first two words are rendered “hordes” (NIV) or “horde of faces” (NASB).

The final decision as to the translation of the first word is tied to that of the third word, which has been related to the idea of advancing, hence “moving forward” (NASB), or to the figure of the east wind (NJB), a suggestion found already in 1QpHab 3:9 (cf. Vulgate). The latter solution is favored by the following figure of the gathering of captives like sand. The NLT attempts to retain both meanings with the third word and translates according to the flow of the passage.

1:10 *ramps of earth.* The building of siege mounds as a battle tactic is widely attested both in the Scriptures (e.g., 2 Sam 20:15; 2 Kgs 19:32; Jer 32:24; Ezek 17:17) and in the extra-biblical literature of the ancient Near East. (Note, for example, Sennacherib’s report of using “well-tempered (earth) ramps” for his third campaign; see Luckenbill 1927:2.120.)

1:11 *sweep past like the wind.* The underlying Hebrew of this verse is variously understood, with many proposed solutions and emendations. Some suggest that the word translated “wind” should be rendered “spirit,” whether of the personified Babylonians (KJV, “mind”) or of God’s revealing spirit. The NLT simply translates according to the sense of the context.

guilty. Roberts (1991:97) points out that nearly all exegetes regard the form of the word in question as corrupt, although he himself retains the Masoretic reading by viewing the word as a first-person verb from *shamem* (“be atonished”): “It [the spirit] departed, and I was astonished.” Ward (1911:11) decides that the clause yields no reasonable sense and is corrupt. Keil (1954:59) takes *’ashem* [TH816, ZH870] as a verb and translates it “offends.” Others take the form to mean “become guilty” (e.g., R. L. Smith). 1QpHab 4:9 reads *wysm*, which has been understood by some as a form derived from *sim* [TH7760, ZH8492] (to set) and by others as being from *shamem* [TH8074, ZH9037] (“be desolate”; Driver, Brownlee 1959). The NLT captures the force of the context—the whole sentence perhaps bearing the nuance, “But he whose strength is his god is/will be held guilty” (cf. NASB, NJB).

COMMENTARY

In his reply to Habakkuk, God seized upon the very words Habakkuk had used. The prophet had complained that he constantly had to behold evil all around him. And God himself had seen it all—apparently with unconcern, because he had done nothing to correct either the people or the condition. God now tells Habakkuk to look—to look at the nations, to take a good look. God was already at work in and behind the scenes of earth’s history to set in motion events that would change the

whole situation. And when Habakkuk learned what would happen, he would be utterly amazed. In fact, he probably would not be able to believe it.

The reason for Habakkuk's projected astonishment becomes apparent in verse 6: God would raise up the Babylonians (an empire that was to reach its height of power under Nebuchadnezzar II [605–562 BC] and last until it experienced a crushing defeat at the hands of the Persians in 539 BC). Since God's prophet would be surprised at his announcement about the Babylonians, God reinforced their identity with a brief resume of their character and potentially devastating power (1:6-11). They were fierce, cruel people who never tired in pursuit of their goal of conquest. Their successes struck fear into the hearts of all who stood in their path. A terror and dread to all, they arrogantly acknowledged no law but themselves.

Skilled military tacticians, their cavalry could cover vast distances quickly in their insatiable thirst for conquest and booty. Moreover, their well-trained and battle-seasoned army could move forward with such precision that the whole striking force would march as one to achieve its objectives, at the same time taking many captives. No wonder, then, that enemy rulers were merely a joke to them. With disdain they laughed at them and moved against their cities, however strongly fortified. Using siege techniques, they captured them. Although the language is hyperbolic throughout, in light of the ancient records, it is not inappropriate (see Wiseman 1956:61, 67). Long years of contact with the Assyrians must have served the Chaldeans well in terms of military knowledge. Delaporte (1970:73-74) is doubtless correct in saying that "the Babylonian army must have been organized much like the Assyrian army in the last days of the Sargonids' empire."

The picture of Babylonian armed might is thus complete. Its armies have been portrayed as the finest and fiercest in the world, being capable of moving swiftly across vast stretches of land to strike the enemy. Babylon was an arrogant bully who contemptuously mocked all its foes and knew no god but strength. Habakkuk was informed, however, that God's avenging host was not without accountability. When nations make themselves and their own strength their only god rather than acknowledging the true God, who is their sponsor, they will be held guilty for their actions.

God's answer to his prophet's first perplexity emphasizes three important truths. First, God is a righteous judge who is aware of all that takes place in the world. When sin occurs it will be punished, even if it is the sin of God's own people (cf. 1:9 with Deut 28:41; Prov 14:34). How crucial it is for all people and nations to remember Paul's pronouncement: "For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

Second, God is sovereignly active in the affairs of earth's history, even though that may not be evident to human observation. This point underscores the familiar scriptural truth that God is the sovereign governor of the world and its destiny (Pss 22:28; 47:8; 103:19; 113:4-9; Isa 40:21-24, 28; 65:17-19; 66:22; Dan 4:34-35; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:15; 2 Pet 3:5-7). Accordingly, believers who ignore the will of God actually

deny God his rightful place in their lives, preferring rather to play God themselves. If they believe that God is, as he has revealed himself to be, the sovereign creator, controller, and consummator of the universe (1 Chr 29:11-12; Acts 17:24-26), then surely the believers' part is to trust God in full commitment to him and let God truly be God in all of life's activities (Prov 3:5-7).

Third, God does hear and answer prayer, even though his answer may be something other than what is expected. Too often, believers come to God with the answer they want. Because of our own finitude and our own set manner of dealing with things, it is all too easy at times either to be unable to see things from God's point of view or to presume to instruct God as to the way he should act (cf. Jas 4:3). While it is not wrong to share one's desires as to the outcome of a given petition, it must be done with the realization that God's ways are not necessarily ours (Isa 55:8-9). His way, however, is always the best.

◆ C. Second Perplexity: How Can God Employ the Wicked Babylonians? (1:12-2:1)

¹²O LORD my God, my Holy One, you who are eternal—
surely you do not plan to wipe us out?

O LORD, our Rock, you have sent these Babylonians to correct us,
to punish us for our many sins.

¹³But you are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil.
Will you wink at their treachery?
Should you be silent while the wicked swallow up people more righteous than they?

¹⁴Are we only fish to be caught and killed?
Are we only sea creatures that have no leader?

¹⁵Must we be strung up on their hooks

and caught in their nets while they rejoice and celebrate?

¹⁶Then they will worship their nets and burn incense in front of them.
"These nets are the gods who have made us rich!"
they will claim.

¹⁷Will you let them get away with this forever?
Will they succeed forever in their heartless conquests?

CHAPTER 2

¹I will climb up to my watchtower and stand at my guardpost.
There I will wait to see what the LORD says
and how he* will answer my complaint.

2:1 As in Syriac version; Hebrew reads *l*.

NOTES

1:12 my Holy One. This phrase, with its inclusion of "my," occurs only here in the OT. Therefore, some editions of the Hebrew text suggest reading, "my Holy God." But the title "Holy One" here anticipates its use in the epic psalm of the third chapter (3:3). It is also appropriate as a basis for the ethical dimension of the present context. A similar title, "the Holy One of Israel," is used often in Isaiah.

eternal. The Hebrew form means lit., "from aforesaid" but is usually employed in the sense of (1) "from of old" (Neh 12:46; Ps 77:11; Isa 45:21; 46:9), (2) "from most ancient times"



Zephaniah

RICHARD D. PATTERSON

INTRODUCTION TO *Zephaniah*

ZEPHANIAH FORESAW the ravages of the Day of the Lord. Zephaniah not only proclaimed the details of God's judgment, but he also conveyed that God's faithful people would one day live in a world of righteousness and experience the everlasting peace, prosperity, and joy that God has prepared for all who love him.

AUTHOR

The prophet Zephaniah traces his patrilineage four generations back to a certain Hezekiah. Jewish (e.g., Ibn Ezra, Kimchi) and Christian (e.g., Walker) commentators alike have commonly identified this Hezekiah with the king by that name. Although Laetsch (1956:254) is doubtless correct in stating that "Zephaniah's royal descent cannot be proven," the unusual notice concerning four generations of family lineage indicates, at the very least, that Zephaniah came from a distinguished family.

Zephaniah was a man for his times. Not only was he aware of the spiritual debauchery and materialistic greed of his people, as well as of world conditions, but God's prophet was a man of deep spiritual sensitivity who had a real concern for God's reputation (1:6; 3:7) and for the well-being of all who humbly trust in him (2:3; 3:9, 12-13).

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

Although Zephaniah dates his ministry to the reign of Josiah (640–609 BC), a question remains as to the specific period within the Judean king's reign.¹ Some scholars (e.g., Feinberg, Keil) suggest that Zephaniah's denunciation of Judah's apostasy and immorality becomes more dramatic if delivered after the recovery of the Book of the Law (2 Kgs 22:8) in 621 BC and the subsequent Josianic reforms (2 Kgs 23:1-27; 2 Chr 34:29–35:19). Others (e.g., Pusey, Laetsch) decide for the earlier period, before the boy king was able to deal with the ruinous effects of Judah's two preceding wicked kings, Manasseh and Amon (2 Kgs 21).

Several conclusions drawn from Zephaniah's message seem to favor the earlier period in Josiah's reign: (1) Religious practices in Judah were still plagued with Canaanite syncretistic rites such as characterized the era of Manasseh (1:4-5, 9); (2) many failed to worship Yahweh at all (1:6); (3) the royalty were enamored with wearing the clothing of foreign merchants (1:8; see NASB, NIV) who had

extensive business enterprises in Jerusalem (1:10-11); and (4) Judahite society was beset by socioeconomic ills (1:12-13, 18) and political and religious corruption (3:1-4, 7, 11). All this sounds like the same sort of wickedness that weighed heavily on the heart of Habakkuk. Moreover, several of the specific sins (e.g., 1:4-5, 9; 3:4) would have been corrected in Josiah's reforms.

Accepting such a date means that the historical setting has advanced little beyond that of Nahum and Habakkuk. Externally, the *Pax Assyriaca* held sway. Of that great era W. W. Hallo observes that, in addition to the Assyrian rulers' attention to administrative matters and details related to extensive building projects, literature and learning also came into their own, and the vast library assembled by Ashurbanipal at Nineveh is only the most dramatic expression of the new leisure. In spite of their protestations to the contrary, the later Sargonid kings were inclined to sit back and enjoy the fruits of empire.²

Ashurbanipal's preoccupation with the *belles lettres* inspired him to collect ancient texts, particularly those dealing with traditional wisdom and religious matters.³ Ashurbanipal's more leisurely lifestyle is reflected not only in his literary interests but in various interests in matters other than the affairs of state. As a result of this attitude, the empire began to show signs of the decay that would hasten its demise a scant generation after his death in 626 BC.⁴ Already by Zephaniah's day, an uneasy consciousness of impending disaster hung over the empire. The whole ancient Near East was in the grip of climactic change, as the balance of power in the Near Eastern world shifted radically from what it had been for nearly 300 years. Assyria's death throes were fast approaching.

Under such conditions, it is small wonder that Josiah was increasingly free to pursue his reform policies, extending them even to the former northern kingdom. In addition, Judah would know a political and economic resurgence that it had not experienced since the days of Hezekiah. When one considers that Josiah was only eight years old when he ascended the throne in 640 BC and that his reforms were not instituted until the twelfth year of his reign (628 BC), four years after his initial spiritual awakening (2 Chr 34:3), Zephaniah's prophetic activities may have had a salutary effect in the reformation of that era. Thus, a date of 635-630 BC is not unlikely.

Granted the conclusions reached above, the occasion for Zephaniah's prophecy lies in the deplorable spiritual and moral condition of Judahite society in the early days of Josiah's reign. Cognizant of the spiritual conditions that would surely spell the end of Judah itself, Zephaniah spoke out for God and against wickedness. He wrote to inform and warn his people of God's coming judgment, not only against all the world (1:2-3), especially the nations that had oppressed God's people (2:4-15), but also against Judah and Jerusalem (1:4-6; 3:1-7). In so doing, he exposed (1) the false worship practices that included the veneration of Baal and the astral deities and the syncretistic rites that emerged from attempting to blend their worship with that of Yahweh (1:4-6, 9; 3:2, 4) and (2) the corruption of Judahite society (3:1, 3, 5), especially its leaders and merchants (1:8, 10-13, 18; 3:5).⁵

Zephaniah also wrote to inform the people about God's future program. On the one hand, he tells of the fearsome events of the Day of the Lord (1:14-16) that must come because of man's sins (1:17-18) and, on the other, of the Lord's undying concern for his people (3:5, 7), especially those who are of a humble and contrite heart (2:3; 3:12). Zephaniah therefore wrote to exhort and admonish the people to surrender to God (1:7) and to repent and seek him (2:1-3), not only to avoid the force of the Lord's fiery blast but also in anticipation of that glorious time when a redeemed and purified people will rejoice in the salvation and delights of God's love (3:14-17).

AUDIENCE

Zephaniah's prophecies were delivered to a Judahite society beset by spiritual, socioeconomic, and moral corruption. Thoroughly at home in Jerusalem and aware of conditions there (1:10-13), this prophet of keen spiritual sensitivity and moral perception decried the apostate and immoral hearts of the people, especially those who were in positions of leadership (1:4-6, 9, 17; 3:1-4, 7, 11).⁶ If, as suggested previously, Zephaniah was a man of social prominence and therefore had the ear of Judah's leadership, it reminds all of us who read his messages that God uses people of all social strata. Zephaniah's life and ministry are a testimony that one soul, yielded wholly to God, can effect great things.

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

Although critical concern has been expressed as to the authenticity of Zephaniah, its canonicity has never been called into question. It was known to the author of *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* (as attested in line 7 of a Coptic Sahidic fragment [Frag. B]), accepted by Philo and Josephus, and included in the early-church canonical lists. Jesus appears to have drawn upon Zephaniah 1:3 in his parable concerning the end of the age (Matt 13:41), as did John (cf. Rev 6:17 with Zeph 1:14-18; Rev 14:5 with Zeph 3:13; Rev 16:1 with Zeph 3:8). In addition, the Talmud (*b. Sanhedrin* 98a) and early Christian Fathers (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Augustine) cited Zephaniah as authoritative in their condemnations of pride and idolatry.

As for the text of Zephaniah, while it is true that the Masoretic Text is difficult to understand in places (e.g., 1:2, 14; 2:14), it may be safely affirmed that the Masoretic Text is the best form of the text available. Roberts (1991:163) appropriately remarks: "The text of Zephaniah is in relatively good condition. It has its text-critical problems, like many other prophetic books, but they are comparatively minor. . . . In general the book may be taken as a clear statement of the message of Zephaniah."

LITERARY STYLE

Zephaniah, like several other Old Testament books, is arranged as a bifid—that is, it has a two-part structure.⁷ This conclusion is reinforced by considering its structural components. (1) The section 1:1–2:3 comprises an *inclusio* formed by the

THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Zephaniah is best remembered for his presentation of God as the sovereign judge of all (1:2-3, 7, 14-18; 3:8), punishing the wickedness of people (1:8-9, 17; 3:7, 11) and nations (2:4-15; 3:6), particularly those who have opposed his people (2:8, 10).

Zephaniah also has much to say about the human condition. Zephaniah focuses on the basic problem of pride (2:15), which engenders a spirit of wickedness (1:3-6, 17; 3:1, 4). Such wickedness causes people to reason that God does not intervene in human affairs (1:12) and so to go on in their violence and deceit (1:9). Further, their greed occasions the oppression of those around them (1:10-11, 13, 18; 3:3). C. K. Lehman observes that "this book has gone to the greatest depths in its exposure of sin and man's sinfulness."¹⁰

These teachings are characteristically entwined in the Day of the Lord theme. As King (1995) shows, the day of the Lord's universal sovereignty and superiority is one both of judgment and salvation, at times invoked as a matter of covenant implementation. VanGemeren (1989:674-679) notes the highly developed theological features of the Day of the Lord. He points out that it is (1) the day of Yahweh's intrusion into human affairs, (2) the day of God's judgment on all creation, (3) a day that is both historical and eschatological, (4) a day in which all creation must submit to God's sovereignty (willingly or unwillingly), (5) a day which does not discriminate in favor of the rich and powerful but between the wicked and the humble, and (6) a day of deliverance, vindication, glorification, and full redemption of the godly.

Zephaniah holds out the hope that God will be receptive to everyone who repentantly surrenders to him (2:1-2). Such spiritual virtues as righteousness, humility, faith, and truth receive commendation and reward from Zephaniah (2:3; 3:12-13). The Lord has a plan for the humble and faithful remnant of his people (2:2-3, 9; 3:11-13).¹¹ He will purify them (3:9-10), gather and restore them to their land (3:20), and give them victory over their enemies (2:7, 9). Jerusalem will be a blissful place (3:11, 18) because Israel's saving God (3:17) will bless his people (3:14-17) and in turn make them a channel of blessing to all (3:19-20).

OUTLINE

Superscription (1:1)

- I. The Announcement of the Day of the Lord (1:2-2:3)
 - A. Pronouncements of Judgment (1:2-6)
 - B. Warnings Based on Judgment (1:7-13)
 - C. A Description of the Coming Judgment (1:14-18)
 - D. An Exhortation in Light of the Judgment (2:1-3)
- II. Additional Details concerning the Day of the Lord (2:4-3:20)
 - A. Further Pronouncements of Judgment (2:4-3:7)
 1. Pronouncement on the nations (2:4-15)
 2. Pronouncement on Jerusalem (3:1-7)

- B. Instructions Based on Judgment (3:8)
- C. A Description of the Coming Deliverance (3:9-13)
- D. Final Exhortation (3:14-20)

ENDNOTES

1. See the excellent discussion by M. A. Sweeney (1991). An occasional voice of protest has been heard regarding the Josianic setting of the book, however, from some authors (e.g., Smith and Lacheman 1950:137-142) who see Zephaniah as the work of an apocalypticist and opt for a date of c. 200 BC.
2. W. W. Hallo and W. K. Simpson, *The Ancient Near East* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 141.
3. One must not assume, however, that Ashurbanipal's interests were not much more diverse. Indeed, his famed library probably held texts representative of every type of Akkadian literature, as well as business and administrative documents and correspondence. Ashurbanipal also gave attention to great building projects and the *beaux arts*. See further A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968), 489-503.
4. Some ancient sources indicate that Ashurbanipal himself grew increasingly degenerate; see W. Maier, *The Book of Nahum* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 129.
5. Many have seen in Zephaniah's condemnation of the rich a special concern for the poor. Not only are some materially poor, according to this theory, but also poor in spirit and hence shut up by faith to the provision of God, whereas the proud rich have cut themselves off from Israel's covenantal benefits. See, for example, S. M. Gozzo, "Il profeta Sofonia e la dottrina teologica del suo libro," *Antonianum* 52 (1977):3-37; C. Stuhlmüller 1986:385-390; J. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 146.
6. Klaus-Dietrich Schunck ("Juda in der Verkündigung des Propheten Zefanja," *Alttestamentliche Glaube und Biblische Theologie: Festschrift für Horst Dietrich Preuss zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. J. Hausmann and Hans-Jürgen Zobel [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992], 174-179) identifies several passages where Zephaniah addresses his message specifically to Judah, so that the prophet's ministry included not only Jerusalem but a wider Judean perspective.
7. For details, see Patterson 1990:20-22.
8. For details, see Patterson 1991:281-289.
9. See the Introduction to Joel.
10. C. K. Lehman, *Biblical Theology: Old Testament* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1971), 346.
11. Anderson (1977-1978:11-14) points out that the remnant motif can logically exist only in a context of judgment; thus, doom and hope are not incompatible prophetic elements. He stresses the fact that the idea of a remnant means more than mere existence; it is a "promise that those who, by the mercy of God, survive the judgment will by their very existence be a pledge of restoration and of God's continuing purpose of good for his people."

COMMENTARY ON *Zephaniah*

◆ Superscription (1:1)

The LORD gave this message to Zephaniah son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Josiah son of Amon when Josiah son of Amon was king of Judah. Zephaniah was the son of Cushi, Hezekiah.

NOTES

1:1 *The LORD gave this message.* Lit., “The word of the Lord that came.” This common formula in the OT lays stress on the source and authority of Zephaniah’s prophecy and authenticates him as God’s spokesman.

Zephaniah. The meaning of the prophet’s name has been traced to the root *tsapan* [TH6845, ZH7621] and most likely means either “Yahweh has hidden/protected” (Roberts 1991) or “Yahweh has treasured” (Opperwall-Galluch in ISBE 4.1189). The name “Zephaniah” is a common one both in the OT and the extrabiblical inscriptions (Patterson 1991:298). Despite Pusey’s (1953:225) suggestion, there is no demonstrable designed correspondence between the prophet’s name and the message of the book.

son of Hezekiah. See the discussion under “Author” in the Introduction. Some Hebrew mss and the Syriac Peshitta read “Hilkiah.” A certain Hilkiah was overseer of King Hezekiah’s household (2 Kgs 18:37). While this reading has its advocates, the plain reading of the long genealogy would seem to favor Zephaniah’s royal ancestry.

COMMENTARY

Like several other prophets (e.g., Hosea, Joel, Micah), Zephaniah declares that what he is about to deliver is not the message of men but the word of the Lord. He can do this because God is a God of revelation, and Zephaniah is his authoritative messenger. The Christian doctrines of revelation and inspiration find direct support in the prophet’s opening words.

◆ I. The Announcement of the Day of the Lord (1:2–2:3) A. Pronouncements of Judgment (1:2–6)

²“I will sweep away everything
from the face of the earth,” says
the LORD.

³“I will sweep away people and
animals alike.

I will sweep away the birds
of the sky and the fish in
the sea.

I will reduce the wicked to heaps
of rubble.*

and I will wipe humanity from the face of the earth," says the LORD.

⁴"I will crush Judah and Jerusalem with my fist and destroy every last trace of their Baal worship.

I will put an end to all the idolatrous priests, so that even the memory of them will disappear.

⁵For they go up to their roofs and bow down to the sun, moon, and stars.

They claim to follow the LORD, but then they worship Molech,* too.

⁶And I will destroy those who used to worship me but now no longer do.

They no longer ask for the LORD's guidance or seek my blessings."

1:3 The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain. 1:5 Hebrew *Malcam*, a variant spelling of Molech; or it could possibly mean *their king*.

NOTES

1:2 I will sweep away. Here the Hebrew text puts together, in emphatic sequence, two verbs from two different roots: *'asap* [TH622, ZH665] (gather/remove) and *sup* [TH5486, ZH6066] (come to an end), hence "I will utterly/totally sweep away." Many suggestions for emending or reconstructing the text have been put forward because constructions such as these are more often built on a duplication of the same root in Hebrew.

Two arguments in defense of the MT are as follows: (1) The use of mixed roots is attested elsewhere (e.g., Isa 28:28; Jer 8:13); and (2) the skilled Masoretic scribes would hardly make such a "blunder" if it were unintelligible. Not only does the difficulty of the MT argue for its retention (Würthwein 1979:113-119), but the LXX already recognized the incongruity, rendering the phrase *ekleipsei eklipetō* [IG1587, ZG1722] (lit., "it will give out, let it fail" — hence, "let there be a complete failure"). Moreover, as Keil (1954:126-127) points out, the two verbs have a "kindred meaning," the compatibility of the ideas of "gathering up things" so as to "put an end to them."

from the face of the earth. The phrase is reminiscent of the warnings connected with the Flood (Gen 6:7; 7:4; 8:8, MT).

1:3 birds . . . humanity. Zephaniah's dependence on the creation account may be seen in his list of the objects of divine judgment in the reverse order of their creation (Gen 1:20-26). It seems unlikely, however, that either reversing the creative order to pre-creation conditions or canceling man's dominion over the lower creatures is being announced (De Roche 1980:104-109; Hannah 1978:1525). Indeed, the order of creation with man at its head is fixed by God and guaranteed in perpetuity (cf. Ps 8:5-9), a reality ultimately realized in Christ (Col 1:15-20; Heb 2:5-9).

reduce . . . to heaps of rubble. As Sabottka (1972:8) remarks, the latter phrase (only one word in Hebrew) has been "for translators a true stone of stumbling." The NLT reading is mirrored by that of the NIV. Alternatively, the word involved may be translated, "the things that cause the wicked to stumble" (cf. Roberts 1991:166) or "the stumbling blocks along with the wicked" (Berlin 1994:73).

1:4 last trace. Lit., "the remnant." The LXX reads, "the names of Baal," probably in anticipation of "the names of the pagan (idolatrous) priests" in the succeeding line.

all the idolatrous priests. The term "idolatrous priests" is rendered "temple guardians" by the Vulgate, but the Peshitta transliterates the word and the LXX omits it altogether. The English versions have handled it variously: "idolatrous priests" (NASB, NKJV, NRSV), "the pagan . . . priests" (NIV), "priests" (NJB), "Chemarims" (KJV). Despite its presence in the Semitic languages as a term for priest, it occurs only twice elsewhere in the OT:

(1) in Hos 10:5 of priests who officiated in the calf worship at Bethel, and (2) in 2 Kgs 23:5 of priests who led in rites associated with Baal and astral worship. In all three cases, then, the term refers to priests outside the established priesthood of Israel, each having a connection to Baalism.

1:5 Molech. Lit., “their king.” At least three renderings have been given to the Hebrew consonants found here (*mlkm*): (1) Many understand the form to refer to Milcom (cf. 1 Kgs 11:5-7), the detested Ammonite deity (cf. Vulgate, Peshitta, NASB, NKJV, NJB, NRSV; so also Roberts 1991:168). (2) Some (e.g., Robertson, Sabottka, Sweeney) follow the pointing of the MT and understand “their king” (Hulst 1960:253), especially as an epithet of Baal, whose worship was a continued syncretistic fascination for Israel (2 Kgs 23:5-10). (3) Others take the form to be Molech (NIV), understanding the noun either as the name of a particular deity or as a divine epithet associated with the ritual passing of children through fire. The NLT has followed the last alternative. Sweeney (2000:502-503) proposes that the reference to Yahweh and their king reflects the fact of their close relationship in Jewish thinking (cf. Pss 2:2, 7-9, 12; 89:26-27; Isa 8:21).

1:6 those who used to worship. Lit., “those who turn back.” Although the verbal root of this Hebrew word is used of natural movement (cf. Arabic *sa’ga*, “go and come”), the verb itself is commonly employed of vacillating or faithless behavior toward people (Jer 38:22) or God (Ps 53:3[4]). When it occurs in the Niphal stem (as here), it denotes a willful turning of oneself away or back from someone or something. When that someone is God (cf. Isa 59:12-13), it is a deadly condition.

ask . . . seek. The first verb lays stress on personal emotion in seeking or asking someone; the latter emphasizes the person’s concern in the inquiry and hence is often used in prophetic encouragements to repentance (cf. Amos 5:4-6). The two verbs occur in parallel elsewhere in contexts dealing with seeking the Lord (e.g., Deut 4:29; 2 Chr 20:3-4; Ps 105:4).

COMMENTARY

Zephaniah begins his messages with God’s doubly reinforced declaration: God will destroy everything upon the face of the earth, sweeping away all life before him whether on land, in the air, or in the water; and God will wipe away all humanity. The pronouncement is solemn—its phraseology reminiscent of the Noahic flood (cf. Gen 6:17; 7:21-23). The disaster envisioned here, however, is more cataclysmic, for although every living thing that lived on the land or inhabited the air died at that time, the fish remained.

Zephaniah’s catalog of victims is arranged in inverse order to God’s creative work: man, beast, the creatures of the air, those of the sea (cf. Gen 1:20-27). The order of creation found its climax in man, who was made in God’s image and appointed as his representative. The coming destruction will begin with man, who has denied his Creator (1:6) and involved in his sin all that is under his domain. Man’s sin is thus weighty, involving not only himself but his total environment (1:2-3).

The judgment that begins with man also concludes with man. All that alienates people from their Creator and Lord will be swept away, and each person will be left alone to face God. Last of all, people will be cut off from the land that has given them sustenance. Though the language is hyperbolic, it emphasizes the seriousness of sin and the universal extent of God’s judgment.

God’s announced purpose to sweep away everything in his just judgment is

continued with an indication of his ultimate intentions (1:4-6). He will stretch out his hand of chastisement against Judah and Jerusalem. The motif of the outstretched hand of God emphasizes God's omnipotence (Jer 32:17) and is also used in connection with his creative power and sovereign disposition of history (Isa 14:26-27; Jer 27:5). It is especially used concerning God's relations with Israel, whether in deliverance (Exod 6:6; Deut 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 26:8; 2 Kgs 17:36; Jer 32:21; Ezek 20:33-34) or in judgment (Isa 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4; Jer 21:5). It is the latter of these that is in view here. God's people needed to be reminded that the God of the universe and of all individuals and nations is Israel's God in particular. To him they owed their allegiance. When such was not forthcoming, when sin and apostasy set in, Israel could expect God's outstretched hand of judgment.

Both Judah's leadership and its people were guilty of gross sin in pursuing paganism, while feigning worship of the Lord. Sadly, Judah displayed little interest or concern for the Lord who redeemed his people (cf. Jer 2:13, 32-35; 3:6-10; 5:2-13; etc.). Outright apostasy is bad enough, but when hypocrisy and apathy hold sway, those involved are in grave spiritual danger. All too often it begins with a spirit of self-sufficiency and grows into indifference toward spiritual matters. As Zephaniah pointed out, such people will not commune with God. How vastly different the experience of the faithful believer who fellowships with God (see Pss 63:4-5; 73:23-28; 84:1-4).

◆ B. Warnings Based on Judgment (1:7-13)

⁷Stand in silence in the presence of the Sovereign LORD,
for the awesome day of the LORD's judgment is near.

The LORD has prepared his people for a great slaughter
and has chosen their executioners.*

⁸"On that day of judgment,"
says the LORD,
"I will punish the leaders and princes
of Judah
and all those following pagan
customs.

⁹Yes, I will punish those who
participate in pagan worship
ceremonies,
and those who fill their masters'
houses with violence and deceit.

¹⁰"On that day," says the LORD,
"a cry of alarm will come from the
Fish Gate

and echo throughout the New Quarter
of the city.*

And a great crash will sound from
the hills.

¹¹Wail in sorrow, all you who live in
the market area,
for all the merchants and traders
will be destroyed.

¹²"I will search with lanterns in
Jerusalem's darkest corners
to punish those who sit complacent
in their sins.

They think the LORD will do nothing
to them,
either good or bad.

¹³So their property will be plundered,
their homes will be ransacked.

They will build new homes
but never live in them.

They will plant vineyards
but never drink wine from them.

1:7 Hebrew *has prepared a sacrifice and sanctified his guests*. 1:10 Or *the Second Quarter*, a newer section of Jerusalem. Hebrew reads *the Mishneh*.

NOTES

1:7 Stand in silence. See note on Hab 2:20 regarding the word *has* [TH2013A, ZH2187].

day of the LORD's judgment. See commentary on 1:14-18 and Joel 2:28-31.

a great slaughter. Lit., "a sacrifice"; so also in 1:7b (cf. NLT mg). The sacrificial terminology used here of the Lord's slaughter of those enacting pagan rites is not otherwise developed and is probably built around a type of fellowship offering (cf. Lev 7:11-21). Several instances of such sacrificial banquets occur in the OT (e.g., 1 Sam 9:22-24; 2 Sam 15:11; 1 Kgs 1:9-10, 24-25; cf. TDOT 4.25-26). The invited guests have commonly been held to be "the pagan conquerors (mainly Babylon)" (Bailey 1999:427) but could also be God's people. (The NLT rendering "chosen their executioners" reflects the former understanding.) If the latter understanding is accepted, there could be an analogy here with the occasion when Jehu invited the ministers of Baal as his guests for a sacrifice to Baal (2 Kgs 10:18-29) and they became both the guests and the sacrificial victims. Likewise Zephaniah's prophecy, which is followed by a warning concerning the punishment of God's offending people (vv. 8-13) and subsequently by a prophecy relative to the Day of the Lord (vv. 14-18) may suggest that "those invited might also be the victims of the sacrifice" (Sweeney 2000:504), namely, God's own people (cf. NJB). The Day of the Lord is elsewhere associated with a sacrificial banquet (Isa 34:6; Jer 46:10; Ezek 39:17-20).

1:8 I will punish. Though the Hebrew verb *paqad* is often translated "visit," it must be contextually nuanced. In many cases, it is employed where a superior takes action for or against his subordinates. In contexts involving hostility, it connotes punishment (Jer 11:22; Hos 1:4; Amos 3:2, 14).

leaders. The Hebrew noun used here refers to officials at various levels, frequently coming from leading tribal families and forming powerful advisory groups throughout Israel's history (cf. Exod 18:13-26; 1 Kgs 4:2-6; 2 Kgs 24:12; 2 Chr 35:8). The term may designate the chieftains of Israel (Num 21:18), court officials (1 Chr 22:17), district supervisors (1 Kgs 20:14-15), city officials (Judg 8:6), military leaders (1 Kgs 2:5; 2 Kgs 1:9-14; 5:1; 25:23, 26), or even religious leaders (Ezra 8:24). The importance of such leaders in Zephaniah's day is underscored not only in their mention before the members of the royal family here, but also in their prominence in the enumeration of the levels of Judahite society during the reign of Josiah (Jer 1:18; 2:26; 4:9). Jeremiah emphasized their importance and responsibility, using the term more than three dozen times.

princes of Judah. Lit., "sons of the king." J. M. P. Smith (1911:196) rightly points out that "the reference here cannot be to the sons of Josiah, the eldest of whom was not born until six years after Josiah assumed the crown . . . and was not old enough to have wielded any influence until well toward the close of Josiah's long reign." If the date for Zephaniah adopted in the introduction is correct, the reference must be principally to the sons of the deceased King Amon.

those following pagan customs. Lit., "those clad in foreign clothes." As in the case of the following line in v. 9, the NLT brings out the implications of this phrase in a context of idolatrous practice. In this line, however, it may be only rich clothes supplied by merchants that are in view (cf. 1:11), an idea that would elaborate on the well-to-do status of the princes of Judah mentioned in the previous line.

1:9 those who participate in pagan worship ceremonies. Lit., "those who leap over the threshold." The citizens of Judah and Jerusalem perpetuated the custom of avoiding contact with the threshold of a temple by leaping over it. The practice had originated among the priests of Dagon during the incident of the collapse of his statue before the Ark of the Lord (1 Sam 5:1-5). The Targum renders the phrase, "all who walk in the laws of the Philistines." The NLT reading suggests that this practice may be representative of yet other pagan

religious activities. Less likely are the views that suggest that this phrase has to do with those who force their way into houses to confiscate the property of the poor (an interpretation in medieval Jewry) or that the custom has to do with mounting the podium which held the god's statue (Sabottka 1972).

1:10 *New Quarter.* The Hebrew term used here is commonly translated "the second quarter" and was perhaps an addition to the upper Tyropoeon Valley.

1:11 *market area.* The term has been variously understood. Among the ancient versions, the Septuagint tradition renders it three different ways, the Vulgate translates it "pillars," the Peshitta transliterates it as a proper noun, and the Targum identifies it as the Brook Kidron. Among modern versions, one may find "mortar" (NASB, NRSV, *La Sacra Biblia*), "hollow" (NJB), "market district" (NIV), "mill" (*Die Heilige Schrift*), or simple transliteration (KJV, *La Sainte Bible*, Cohen). Due to its derivation from *kathash* [TH3806, ZH4197] (to pound), it has been understood as a hollow or a place pounded out, and related to a commercial district, probably a functional rendering rather than an attempt at a geographical or etymological identification.

all you who live in the market area. Lit., "all the people of Canaan." The noun "Canaan," like the adjective "Canaanite," may often be translated "merchant" due to the Canaanites' (especially the Phoenicians') established reputation as traders (cf. Isa 23:8; Ezek 16:29; 17:4; Hos 12:7-8). This NLT rendering combines the thought of this line in the MT with that of the next (lit., "all who weigh out the silver will be cut off").

1:12 *I will search with lanterns.* J. M. P. Smith (1911:201) likens God's diligent searching of Jerusalem to that of Diogenes equipped with a lantern in his quest for truth. This is not a search for truth, however. Smith is on target when he goes on to observe that "the figure expresses the thought of the impossibility of escape from the avenging eye of Yahweh. . . . The figure is probably borrowed from the custom of the night-watchman carrying his lamp and may involve also the thought of the diligent search of Jerusalem that will be made by her conquerors in their quest for spoil."

those who sit complacent in their sins. Lit., "the men who are thickening on their lees." The image, drawn from wine left too long on its lees, portrays those who are indifferent to spiritual matters. The imagery envisions an indifference that goes beyond the smug self-satisfaction suggested by the word "complacency" to an attitude that has hardened into deliberate disregard for the Lord and his standards. Rose (1981:193-208) proposes that the affluent class had become so entrenched in its wealth that it assumed God must be supportive of its lifestyle. Thus wealth was interpreted as a sign of divine favor.

1:13 Willis (1987:74) calls attention to Zephaniah's use of parallelism here (in an A-B-A-B structure) to emphasize that "divine punishment is able to thwart the apparent prevalence of human achievements (cf. Ezek 27:33; 28:9; Amos 5:11)."

COMMENTARY

Having delivered God's pronouncement of judgment against all humanity and especially his covenant people, Zephaniah turns to exhortations. In view of the certainty and severity of coming judgment, God's prophet has some advice: "Be silent!" "Hush!" It is a call for submission, fear, and consecration.

While Yahweh is Judah's God, he is also the master of its destiny. Judah has perpetuated Israel's sin (2 Kgs 17:18-20) in following Baal and other pagan practices. In doing so, it has forsaken its rightful master to follow another master (Baal). The folly of such conduct would become apparent. Judah's true master was about to

demonstrate the powerlessness of him who was no master at all. The last remnants of Baalism would be cut off.

Zephaniah also reminded his hearers that they stood in the presence of the living God whose all-seeing eye (Jer 32:19) had observed all their evil deeds and would reward them (Job 24:22-24; 34:21-22; Ps 66:7; Amos 9:8). Judah's idolatry was loathsome in his eyes (Jer 16:17). They had lost sight of the truth that God was the unseen observer in Israel, not only on occasions of religious ceremony, but also in every activity of life, and had strayed from the resulting mandate that their lives were to reflect his holy character in every facet (cf. Lev 19:2; 20:7, 22-24). Contrary to their foolish thoughts that either God had not seen their wickedness or did not care to intervene, their day of judgment was at hand.

Zephaniah's great concern for his people was underscored by his realization of the imminence of God's coming judgment. The Day of the Lord was near. As employed by the prophets, the "Day of the Lord" refers to that time when, for his glory and in accordance with his purposes, God intervenes in human affairs to execute judgment against sin and/or deliver his people (see King 1995:16-32). That time could be in the present (Joel 1:15), be in the near future (Isa 2:12-22; Jer 46:10; Ezek 13:5; Joel 2:1, 11; Amos 5:18-20), be future-eschatological (Isa 13:6, 9; Ezek 30:2-3; Mal 4:1-6), or be primarily eschatological (Joel 3:14-15; Zech 14:1-21; cf. 1 Thess 5:1-11; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Pet 3:10-13). Zephaniah's urgent warning spoke of imminent judgment.

God's prophet went on to call that day the day of the Lord's sacrifice (see note on 1:7). The metaphor of the sacrificial banquet is a poignant one. The sacrifice itself is Judah and Jerusalem. But who are the guests? If one sees in the metaphor a second reason for the call for silence, the guests could be understood as the citizens of Judah and Jerusalem. Thus, the call for silence (= submission to the Lord) is issued (1) because of the awesome day of the Lord's judgment and (2) because that day can be survived only by genuine believers in Yahweh. The metaphor of the banquet (1:7) also strengthens the previous two lines while giving unity to the whole verse. The sacrifice was to be held in the presence of Yahweh, was imminent, was hosted by Yahweh himself, and was to be attended by his guests.

So construed, the metaphor of the sacrificial banquet reinforces the announcement of the Day of the Lord and provides a ray of hope in the clouds of doom. As guests called to a sacrificial feast were to come with their uncleanness removed, so the Judahites were urged to respond to the invitation of Yahweh their host. Although judgment was coming, there was still time. By acknowledging God as their master and responding in fear to the prospect of judgment, God's people could join a believing remnant and come to the feast as guests acceptable to him. There was yet hope.

The figure of the sacrificial banquet, however, also entailed a further word of caution because the alternative of being unfit for attendance carried with it an ironic twist: Guests who remained unrepentant, and hence unclean, would be disqualified and would, like those in Jehu's day (2 Kgs 10:18-28), discover that their

invitation to the banquet also entailed their role as sacrificial victims. God had summoned others (the Babylonians) who would destroy both Judah and Jerusalem and the unrepentant people who inhabited them (1:8-13).

The call for the merchants to wail (1:11) was also especially dramatic. Their wealth would be taken away. Though one could hope for the lamenting that leads to repentance, such was unlikely. Rather, these people would lament their lost wealth. Ironically, Zephaniah told them to go ahead and wail, for such would suit their lot.

The money-loving merchants were also labeled for what they were: Canaanites and money-grubbers. The metaphor was an apt one, for like their Canaanite precursors they worshiped pagan gods and spent their lives trafficking in commercial pursuits. The merchants of Judah were no better than those of Israel (cf. Ezek 16:29; Hos 12:7), and both betrayed their Canaanite ancestry (Ezek 16:3). Jesus would also warn of the perils of the pursuit of wealth (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:19-31), and Paul would caution the church's leaders against being money-lovers (1 Tim 3:3). Lamentably, the temptation to make merchandise of the ministry must be mastered in every generation (cf. 2 Cor 2:17). Whereas money and wealth can be a useful resource for the advancement of the Lord's work and the rightful enjoyment of life, it must never become an end in itself (1 Tim 6:10; Heb 13:16).

No less revealing is the announced judgment on the citizens of Jerusalem (1:12-13). God will punish those whose greed and self-satisfaction has grown into a settled indifference toward God and his standards. Like wine left on its dregs so long that it has become sickeningly sweet and then spoiled, so also many of Jerusalem's citizens had remained in their apostate lifestyle so long that they had become satisfied with it and then grown indifferent to genuine piety.

If not in theory, then at least in practice, the people of Judah behaved like full-fledged pagans. They proclaimed that God does neither good nor harm to individuals or society (cf. Isa 41:23; Jer 10:5). To their surprise, God would demonstrate his intervention in human affairs. Not an absentee God, he would send an invading force that would search out and plunder Jerusalem. The implementation of the Lord's proclamation would come so quickly that all who had lived in pursuit of ill-gotten gain would not survive to enjoy their wealth. All that for which they had labored so hard and long would fall into the hands of others. In their preoccupation with self and riches, they would lose them both (cf. Luke 12:16-21). Thus, God's righteous standards would be upheld (Lev 26:27-33; Deut 28:30, 39). As they had been applied to Israel (cf. Amos 5:11; Mic 6:15), so they would be applied to Judah and Jerusalem.

Whereas today's believer may applaud Zephaniah's warnings to his fellow countrymen as necessary (due to the apostasy, immorality, and injustice of that time), it is another matter for one to apply them to oneself. But such conduct is no less culpable now than it was then. Indeed, a far more insidious danger lurks today. Apathy and inactivity abound, and these will ultimately take their toll. Where these attitudes form the dominant force in society, those who display them should not be

surprised when they are caught up with evildoers in the very things that lead to the deterioration and destruction of that society. Craigie (1985:114) concludes, "Zephaniah's words on indifference touch the conscience of multitudes, those who are not guilty of unbelief, but are equally never overwhelmed by belief. . . . The way things are is partly because that is the way we have allowed them to become. We can sit back, smug and somnolent in a desperate world, but we cannot at the same time absolve ourselves from all responsibility, and we shall eventually be caught in the very chaos we permit."

◆ C. A Description of the Coming Judgment (1:14-18)

¹⁴ "That terrible day of the LORD is near.
Swiftly it comes—
a day of bitter tears,
a day when even strong men will
cry out.

¹⁵ It will be a day when the LORD's anger
is poured out—
a day of terrible distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and desolation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness,

¹⁶ a day of trumpet calls and battle
cries.

Down go the walled cities
and the strongest battlements!

¹⁷ "Because you have sinned against
the LORD,
I will make you grope around like
the blind.

Your blood will be poured into the
dust,
and your bodies will lie rotting
on the ground."

¹⁸ Your silver and gold will not save you
on that day of the LORD's anger.
For the whole land will be devoured
by the fire of his jealousy.
He will make a terrifying end
of all the people on earth.*

1:18 Or *the people living in the land.*

NOTES

1:14 *near*. This is the first of more than a dozen terms found in vv. 14-18 that regularly occur in oracles dealing with the terrors of coming judgment (note especially Joel 2:1-11; see Patterson 1991:320-325).

Swiftly it comes. The adverbial flavor of the infinitive absolute here (from the root *mhr*) is little improved by attempts to relate the phrase to an Egypto-Semitic term for soldier. (For good discussions, see Sabottka 1972:50-52; R. L. Smith 1984:129. Sabottka calls attention to the Phoenician/Punic personal names *mhrb'l* and *b'lmhr*, which he understands as "[soldier] hero of Baal" and "Baal is the hero," respectively.) The repetition of the idea of nearness is not redundant; rather, the intentional emphasis underscores both the fact and the impending arrival of the Day of the Lord.

a day when even strong men will cry out. The word "cry" (*tsoreakh* [TH6873, ZH7658]) has been viewed as a verb (cf. Akkadian *sarahu*, "cry out, lament") as in Isa 42:13. A noun (*tserakh* [TH6873.1, ZH7659] "shriek, [battle] cry"; see NIDOTTE 3.844) has been conjectured for Jer 4:31; Ezek 21:27 but is uncertain at best. For translation problems relative to the last line of 1:14, see Roberts (1991:182).

1:15 *anger*. The term for "anger" here is suggestive of the overwhelming nature of the divine anger against sin.



Haggai

ANDREW E. HILL

INTRODUCTION TO *Haggai*

THE PROPHET HAGGAI was a champion for the “homeless”—in this case, the “homeless” God of the Hebrew people. The Jerusalem Temple had been sacked and plundered by the Babylonians nearly 70 years earlier. Sadly, it still lay in ruins nearly two decades after the Hebrews had returned to Judah from exile in Babylon. Haggai’s task was that of a herald sounding a wake-up call to a community that was spiritually “asleep.” Haggai was quick to point out the disparity between the desolation of the Temple precinct and the comfortable homes occupied by his audience. Surely God deserved better! His message was an exhortation to “get up and go to work”—that is, get to work rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple. The book of Haggai is a “success story”—a rarity among the Old Testament prophets. The people obeyed (1:12), worked (1:14), and eventually completed rebuilding the Lord’s Temple in Jerusalem four years later, in 515 BC (cf. Ezra 6:15).

AUTHOR

The book is silent on the issue of authorship, although it is assumed that the prophet Haggai penned his own oracles on the basis of the prophetic word formula (“the LORD gave a message through the prophet Haggai”; 1:1). The Hebrew name Haggai means “festal” and is related to the Hebrew word *khag* [TH2282, ZH2504] (procession, festival). This is a fitting name for the prophet who called the Hebrews to rebuild the Temple of God (which had been destroyed by the Babylonians) and to reinstate the festal worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. The Bible records no biographic information for Haggai, but his prophetic ministry in postexilic Jerusalem is attested by Ezra (Ezra 6:14). Two expressions identify Haggai as a “spokesperson” for God. He is called “the prophet” (1:1; 2:10-11; Ezra 6:14), and he is labeled “the LORD’s messenger” (1:13). Both titles verify the prophet’s divine commission.

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

The date formula in 1:1 (cf. NLT mg) serves to root the speeches of Haggai in a specific historical context: the early years of the great Persian Empire (539–330 BC). The speeches of Haggai are dated precisely to the day, month, and year of the rule of Darius I, king of Persia. King Darius I (Hystaspes) ruled Persia from 522–486 BC. The equivalents for the date formulas are listed below:

SPEECH	DATE IN DARIUS'S REIGN	MODERN EQUIVALENT
Haggai 1:1	Year 2, month 6, day 1	August 29, 520 BC
Haggai 2:1	Year 2, month 7, day 21	October 17, 520 BC
Haggai 2:10	Year 2, month 9, day 24	December 18, 520 BC
Haggai 2:20	Year 2, month 9, day 24	December 18, 520 BC

It seems likely the book was written sometime between Haggai's challenge to rebuild the Temple (520 BC) and the completion of its reconstruction (516/515 BC), since the prophet does not mention that event. The immediate occasion prompting the speeches of Haggai was very likely a severe drought affecting the province of postexilic Judah (1:11). It is this event that prompted God's messenger to address the more important occasion for his oracles—the continued desolation of God's Temple despite the return of the Hebrews from Babylonian captivity (1:4). A second issue related to the prophet's concern for the rebuilding of the Temple is the public affirmation of the leadership of the Judean state in the blessing of Jeshua (2:4, or "Joshua," NLT mg) and Zerubbabel (2:23).

A decree issued in 538 BC by Cyrus the Great, the first of the Persian kings, permitted conquered people groups who had been deported to Mesopotamia by the Babylonians to return to their homelands. The royal edict was issued on a clay cylinder, the famous Cyrus Cylinder. This pronouncement naturally included the Jews, although they are not named on the cylinder. The first wave of emigrants to Jerusalem numbered 42,360, along with 7,337 servants (Ezra 2:64-65). They were led by Sheshbazzar, a prince of Judah and the first governor of the restoration community in postexilic Judah (Ezra 1:5-11). The foundation for a new Temple was laid during the early stages of his administration, sometime in 538 or 537 BC (Ezra 5:16). The meager project was soon abandoned, however, and the construction site lay neglected for nearly two decades. Not until the preaching of Haggai in 520 BC did the initiative to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple resume (1:14). The second Temple was completed in March of 515 BC (cf. Ezra 6:15) under the auspices of the Persian king, Darius I. The monies granted for the rebuilding probably took the form of "tax rebates" to Judah from the Persian royal treasury.

AUDIENCE

Haggai's first two oracles (1:1-15 and 2:1-9) are specifically addressed to Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua, the high priest—the two leaders of postexilic Jerusalem. As a part of these pronouncements, the prophet also spoke a word of encouragement to the people of Judah (1:13; 2:5). Haggai's third speech is directed to the priests (2:10-19), while the fourth prophecy is spoken exclusively to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah (2:20-23). We also learn that Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the people obeyed the words of Haggai and applied themselves to rebuilding God's Temple (1:14).

salem to reprioritize community life. Haggai directed the leadership of the Judean province to move out of their self-absorption by focusing on the restoration of proper worship of God (by means of the Temple liturgy) instead of focusing on the ease and security of their own "luxurious houses" (1:4).

The second message (2:1-9) assured the postexilic Hebrew community that God had not forgotten those previous promises of blessing and restoration made by earlier prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. It was important for community morale to understand that Haggai stood in the revered train of those prophetic predecessors. By his word of blessing and promise of restoration, he confirmed the continuity of his message with previous prophetic utterances concerning God's plan for the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile. These were not just more empty words of "hope deferred" to bolster a beleaguered remnant, these were the words of God's promise to his chosen people.

Ritual purity (both for the priests and the people) is the dominant theme of the third message (2:10-19). Haggai reminded his audience that the injunctions of the Law of Moses are still operative. God expected his people to be holy, even as he is holy (Lev 11:44-45).

Haggai's final, and perhaps most important message (2:20-23), reestablished the prominence of the Davidic line in the religious and political life of the nation of Israel. The Davidic dynasty was singled out as the key to the restoration of the Hebrew people after the Babylonian exile (cf. Jer 23:5; 33:15; Ezek 37:24). Tragically, God was forced to pronounce the curse of judgment upon King Jehoiachin (and the line of David) at the time of the Exile (Jer 22:24-30). Haggai's last speech overturns that curse of judgment upon the lineage of David and reinstates that ancient covenant of David as the vehicle by which God intended to make good on his promises of blessing and restoration to Israel (note especially the echo of the "signet ring" in Jer 22:24 and Hag 2:23; cf. Wolf 1976:54-55).

OUTLINE

- I. First Message: Haggai's Challenge to Covenant Renewal (1:1-15)
 - A. The Call to Reconsider Priorities (1:1-6)
 - B. The Call to Rebuild the Temple (1:7-11)
 - C. The Response of the Remnant (1:12-15)
- II. Second Message: The Promise of Restoration (2:1-9)
- III. Third Message: The Call to Holiness (2:10-19)
- IV. Fourth Message: Zerubbabel—Davidic Servant and "Signet Ring" (2:20-23)

ENDNOTES

1. See B. A. Jones, *The Formation of the Book of the Twelve: A Study in Text and Canon*, SBL Dissertation Series 149 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 43-54.
2. For example, see D. A. Schneider, "The Unity of the Book of the Twelve." (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1979), 144-149.

COMMENTARY ON

Haggai

◆ I. First Message: Haggai's Challenge to Covenant Renewal (1:1-15) A. The Call to Reconsider Priorities (1:1-6)

On August 29* of the second year of King Darius's reign, the LORD gave a message through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Jeshua* son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

²"This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: The people are saying, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.'"

³Then the LORD sent this message through

the prophet Haggai: ⁴"Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins? ⁵This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Look at what's happening to you! ⁶You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!

1:1a Hebrew *On the first day of the sixth month*, of the ancient Hebrew lunar calendar. A number of dates in Haggai can be cross-checked with dates in surviving Persian records and related accurately to our modern calendar. This event occurred on August 29, 520 B.C. 1:1b Hebrew *Joshua*, a variant spelling of Jeshua; also in 1:12, 14.

NOTES

1:1 *the LORD gave a message*. Lit., "the word of the LORD came." The combination of the verb "to be" (*hayah* [TH1961, ZH2118]) and the phrase "the word of the LORD" (*debar-yhwh* [TH1697/3068, ZH1821/3378]) constitutes the prophetic word formula. The formula introduces a report of a prophetic revelation in the oracular speech of the OT.

through. This preposition translates *beyad* [TH871.2/3027, ZH928/3338] ("by the hand of") and denotes writing or speaking, a genitive of authorship (Waltke and O'Connor 1990:9.5.1c).

the prophet Haggai. The word *nabi'* [TH5030, ZH5566] (prophet) designates Haggai as an emissary, one who speaks with the authority of the commissioning agent.

Jeshua. The MT actually gives the name "Joshua" throughout Haggai, of which "Jeshua" is a variant (also in 1:12, 14; 2:1, 4). Both names are derived from the Hebrew root *yasha'* [TH3467, ZH3828], which means "to save, deliver." The NLT has opted to use the spelling "Jeshua" in Haggai (and elsewhere, e.g., Zech 3:3-9) to make a distinction between this high priest and the much earlier (and better known) leader of Israel by the same name, Joshua son of Nun (cf. Deut 31:1-8; Joshua).

1:2 *This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says*. This Hebrew construction (*koh 'amar* [TH3541/559, ZH3907/606] *yhwh tseba'oth*) constitutes the messenger formula in prophetic speech and signifies the oral transmission of a message by a third party. The term suggests the divine assembly or council of the gods in ancient Near Eastern thought. The messenger of the council stands as an observer in council sessions and then reports what he has heard as an envoy of the council to others (cf. ABD 2.214-217).

LORD of Heaven's Armies. This title for God is prominent in prophetic literature. It is Haggai's favorite designation for God (found 14 times, 1:2, 5, 7, 9, 14; 2:4, 6, 7, 8, 9[2], 11, 23[2]). The expression is often understood as a construct-genitive: "the LORD of Hosts." More precisely the construction is one of absolute nouns in apposition, perhaps conveying a verbal force: "Yahweh creates [angel] armies" (cf. TDOT 5.515). In either case, the epithet emphasizes "the invincible might behind the Lord's commands" (Baldwin 1972:39).

the time has not yet come. The NLT follows the LXX here, perhaps understanding the noun "time" ('*eth*, in the construction *eth-bo'* [TH6256/935, ^{ZH}6961/995]) as the adverb "yet" ('*attah* [TH6258, ^{ZH}6964], "now, yet"; cf. Baldwin 1972:39-40).

1:3 Then the LORD sent this message through. The repetition of the prophetic word formula and the genitive of authorship (see v. 1 above) underscore the importance and divine source of the message and the urgency of the hour.

1:4 Why . . . ? The rhetorical question is an emphatic device in prophetic literature requiring agreement with the expected answer to the question rather than a formal reply (Waltke and O'Connor 1990:40.3.b; cf. 2:3, 19 in MT).

luxurious houses. This understanding of the word *sepunim* [TH5603, ^{ZH}6211] (often rendered "paneled") assumes that the contrast is between the elaborate homes of the people and the ruined Temple. Alternately, the contrast may be between the "finished" homes of the people and "the unfinished and thus unusable House of Yahweh" (Meyers and Meyers 1987:23).

ruins. The word *khareb* [TH2720, ^{ZH}2992] seems to be a deliberate echo of Jer 33:10-12, the promise of restoration for the "ruins" of Jerusalem.

1:5 Look at what's happening to you! The repetition of this clause in the imperative mood (1:5, 7; 2:15) calls attention to the issue of volition or will—the people must choose to reflect and act upon the prophet's message. The positive imperative further stresses the urgency of the hour and demands an immediate and specific response on the part of the addressee(s) (Waltke and O'Connor 1990:34.4a).

1:6 eat . . . drink . . . put on clothes. The form of the Hebrew verb used in each case is the infinitive absolute conveying continuous action (cf. *The Message*, "you keep filling your plates . . . you keep drinking and drinking . . . you put on layer after layer of clothes.").

pockets filled with holes! Lit., "to a pierced bag," a purse with holes. The image emphasizes the instantaneous loss of a portion of wages earned (cf. Meyers and Meyers 1987:26). It is unlikely that a laborer's wages were paid in coinage at this early period. Baldwin (1972:41) suggests that the moneybag would have contained discs or wedges of copper, silver, or the like, approximately defined in value by weight.

COMMENTARY

Each of Haggai's four messages includes a date formula assigning the speech to the precise day and month in the second year of King Darius's rule over Persia. This practice has its precedent in the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (cf. Jer 1:2-3; Ezek 1:1). Unlike their preexilic predecessors, exilic prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel were unable to consistently date their revelations according to the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah. Instead, they keyed their oracles to the year of Babylonian exile. The prophet Jeremiah had indicated that this banishment from the land of promise for punishment of covenant violations would last 70 years (Jer 25:11; 29:10). The exilic year-date formula thus served as a "covenant time clock" of sorts, marking the

duration of the curse of captivity and counting down (with anticipation and hope) toward the promised blessing of release and restoration (cf. Jer 52:31; Ezek 20:1).

The postexilic prophets Haggai and Zechariah dated their prophecies to exact dates during the days of Persian rule because earlier Isaiah foresaw the importance of King Cyrus and the Persians to the fortunes of elect Israel (Isa 45:1-13). It seems likely that both Haggai and Zechariah were also influenced by Ezekiel's vision of the Temple (Ezek 40-48). The rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple was understood as the cornerstone event of the long-awaited messianic age. The chronological precision attached to their oracles served as an important reminder of Yahweh's faithfulness to his covenant promises (Ps 111:9) and his good intentions to restore unified kingship in Israel under the prince of David (cf. Ezek 37:15-28).

Haggai's audience had assumed that the time had not yet come to rebuild the Lord's Temple (1:2). Apparently, the restoration community in Jerusalem was still struggling to establish itself politically and economically. The degree of self-sufficiency attained was understood to be sub-par, at least to the extent that the people calculated that it was unwise to siphon off already meager resources for the sake of investing in a high profile campaign like rebuilding Yahweh's Temple. Haggai's contemporary, Zechariah, also discerned that the real issue was one of self-interest when he proclaimed, "aren't you eating and drinking just to please yourselves?" (Zech 7:6). The episode calls to mind the words of Jesus in the New Testament: "Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need" (Matt 6:33).

Those who argued for fiscal responsibility knew that the realities of an economic recession meant it was no time to take on the funding of "special projects" (cf. Zech 8:10, "Before the work on the Temple began, there were no jobs and no money to hire people. . . . No traveler was safe."). Yet Haggai knew, like Hosea, that "now is the time to seek the LORD" (Hos 10:12).

Implicit in Haggai's rhetorical question that compares the "living quarters" of the people of Judah with those of their God (1:4) is the issue of priority in the stewardship and distribution of resources. The people of Haggai's time consciously chose personal well-being over the well-being of God as manifest in the worship and service associated with his Temple. This pattern of attempting to satisfy religious obligations with half-hearted worship and second-rate offerings persisted into Malachi's time with the presentation of inferior animal sacrifices (Mal 1:8). Haggai inferred that the things of God should be our highest priority and that God is worthy of the very best that we might offer him in worship and service. This is true simply because he alone is God (Isa 45:5-6). This is also true because as Creator, God "owns" everything anyway (Pss 24:1; 50:11-12). And this was especially true for the Hebrews because of the mandate to present "choice" or "best" samples of the agricultural firstfruits to God (Exod 23:19; 34:26). Ultimately, even the biblical injunction to offer God our best is but an external symbol of an internal reality. God is far more interested in our hearts than he is in receiving our "choice offerings" or even a "palatial abode" as a result of our labors. King David understood this when he said,

"The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God" (Ps 51:17). Likewise, the Apostle Paul urged the faithful to establish a similar spiritual platform for expressing devotion to God: "give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable" (Rom 12:1).

The Old Testament prophets often interpreted current events affecting the corporate life of the Israelites through the lens of covenant blessings and curses (cf. Deut 28). Haggai proves no exception, as he understood the calamity of drought (or perhaps blight, 1:6) as the hand of the Lord Almighty at work in the realm of nature (cf. Zech 10:1, "he makes the storm clouds"). The law of Moses forecasts just such a scenario for the people of Israel should they violate Yahweh's covenant. The catalog of divine punishments for disobedience includes drought, such that "all your work will be for nothing" (Lev 26:19-20).

God's intent in all of this was not capricious judgment for the purpose of destruction, since he affirmed he would not cancel his covenant with Israel (Lev 26:44-45). Instead, God would speak to his people through the economic circumstances of "supply and demand" in order to restore them to right relationship with himself. The poor standard of living experienced by the postexilic community (further eroded by inflation, cf. Mason 1977:16) was designed to instruct the people in the matter of priorities (cf. Verhoef 1987:57ff). Divine punishment may be disciplinary (sometimes severe but deserved), as Jeremiah recognized (Jer 30:11; 31:18). Haggai was also aware that on occasion God must discipline Israel like a father who must punish his wayward son, but always with love (cf. Jer 31:20; Heb 12:5-11).

Haggai's call to rebuild the Temple of Yahweh should not be construed as some kind of "magical incantation" holding the promise of a remedy for the many problems facing the postexilic Hebrew community. God cannot be manipulated into showering material blessings upon his people because of the works of their hands (1:5-6; cf. Achtemeier 1986:98-99). Nor should Haggai's message be viewed in contradiction to the words of warning pronounced by Jeremiah concerning misplaced trust in the physical structure of the Temple (Jer 7:4). Rather, Haggai summoned the people to the proper worship of God in contrast to blind faith in a "sacred building."

The appropriate attitudes of reverence and humility and a genuine posture of obedience to the law of God identified explicitly in Zechariah (e.g., Zech 7:4-10) are implicit in Haggai. The prophet knew the "Temple theology" of King Solomon's prayer of dedication—God does not dwell in houses made with human hands (1 Kgs 8:23ff). The prophet also knew the "worship theology" of his predecessors—God desires mercy, not sacrifice (Hos 6:6; Mic 6:8). Haggai understood that reviving the flow of God's covenantal blessings to Israel was contingent upon the people's careful and heartfelt obedience to the commandments of Yahweh's covenant—not merely the rebuilding of the Jerusalem sanctuary (cf. Deut 28:1-2, 9, 13).

◆ B. The Call to Rebuild the Temple (1:7-11)

⁷"This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Look at what's happening to you! ⁸Now go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild my house. Then I will take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. ⁹You hoped for rich harvests, but they were poor. And when you brought your harvest home, I blew it away. Why? Because my house lies in ruins, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies,

while all of you are busy building your own fine houses. ¹⁰It's because of you that the heavens withhold the dew and the earth produces no crops. ¹¹I have called for a drought on your fields and hills—a drought to wither the grain and grapes and olive trees and all your other crops, a drought to starve you and your livestock and to ruin everything you have worked so hard to get."

NOTES

1:7 The Hebrew of this verse is an exact repetition of v. 5, minus the introductory adverb "now" (*'attah* [TH6258, ZH6964]).

Look at what's happening to you! The exhortation to reflect upon current conditions in Judah anticipates the prophet's cause-and-effect argument in 2:15-19.

1:8 Now go up into the hills, bring down timber. Meyers and Meyers (1987:28) suggest this verse refers to procuring lumber for construction equipment (like ramps, ladders, scaffolds, etc.), not the actual building materials. It is presumed that the local stands of trees around postexilic Jerusalem would have been insufficient to meet the demands of the Temple project, given the deforestation of the Jerusalem area during the Babylonian siege of the city and the timber required for the subsequent rebuilding of the city after the return from exile. See further the discussion in Taylor and Clendenen 2004:129, who suggest that the precedent of superior lumber from places like Lebanon for the construction of the first Temple may have been an issue as well.

be honored. See the discussion of this verb (*kabed* [TH3513, ZH3877]), which occurs here in its Niphal stem (possibly preserving a rare subjunctive ending—"that I may be glorified"), in Meyers and Meyers 1987:28.

1:9 but they were poor. The NLT agrees with the ancient versions (LXX, Syriac, Targum), understanding *hinneh* [TH2009, ZH2180] ("behold," cf. NASB) as the infinitive absolute *hayoh* [TH1961, ZH2118] ("they were," NLT). The meaning is roughly the same in either case.

And when you brought your harvest home. This may refer to the bulk of the grain harvest kept by the worshiper after the firstfruits sacrifices had been made at the altar (which had been rebuilt and put to use immediately by the restoration community during the reign of Cyrus; Ezra 3:2-3). Meyers and Meyers (1987:3, 29) translate this as "what you have brought to the House" and understand the expression as a reference to the firstfruits offerings themselves.

my house lies in ruins. The repetition of this clause completes an envelope construction, or *inclusio*, linking 1:4 and 1:9.

says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. The divine utterance formula (*ne'um yhw' tseba'oth* [TH5002, ZH5536]) is a nominal exclamation and is usually a closing formula in the prophets (Waltke and O'Connor 1990: 40.2.3a; cf. v. 13).

1:10 the dew. The NLT retains the MT's *mittal* ("from dew"), reading the noun *tal* [TH2919, ZH3228] (few), with a partitive *min* [TH4480, ZH4946] (from) prefixed to it (Waltke and O'Connor 1990:11.2.11e). Cf. BHS, which proposes "rain" (*matar* [TH4305, ZH4763], so NJB).

1:11 drought. Note the wordplay with "drought" (*khoreb* [TH2721, ZH2996]) and "ruin" (*khareb* [TH2720, ZH2992], 1:4).



Zechariah

ANDREW E. HILL

INTRODUCTION TO *Zechariah*

ZECHARIAH is classified as a type of prophetic writing, albeit a later iteration of that literary genre. The preaching of the postexilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and perhaps Joel) has affinities to the sermons of the earlier classical prophets (e.g., Amos, Hosea, Isaiah) in that they all tend to be narrated in third person, contain oracles alternating between first- and third-person speech, and call their audiences to repentance. Like their earlier counterparts, the postexilic prophets emphasize the ethical teaching of the Torah, but tend to appeal to the rhetorical device of applying earlier Scripture (especially prophetic literature) in an authoritative way to new situations (cf. 1:4). Finally, the postexilic prophets had a predilection to generalize the promises of the earlier prophets and cast them into a less specific, but not far distant, future (cf. Petersen 1977:13-16; Mason 1990:233-234). Mason (1990:234) summarizes the ministry of the postexilic prophets as one of preaching “the hopes of the [earlier] prophets to a people who could have easily become cynical about their lack of fulfillment, assuring them of both the present degree to which they had been and were being fulfilled and the certainty of their ultimate triumph.”

The second half of the book (chs 9–14) is sometimes identified as apocalyptic literature, an offshoot of Old Testament prophetic literature given to the interpretation of current events and the prediction of future events by means of symbolic language, ciphers, and codes—usually accompanied by angelic mediation. The vivid imagery and the angelic mediation (e.g., 1:9) of the night visions (chs 1:7–6:15) give this portion of Zechariah a similar character. It seems best to characterize Zechariah as later Hebrew prophetic literature containing certain proto-apocalyptic features. In this sense, Zechariah may represent a stage of development in the literary shift from prophecy to apocalyptic literature in later Jewish writings of the intertestamental period. (See further “Literary Style” below.)

Three types of messages are usually associated with the visionary literature of the Bible. The first is a message of encouragement to the oppressed; the second, a warning to the oppressor; and the third, a call to faith for those wavering between God’s truth and human wisdom. Zechariah’s message to the oppressed people of God in postexilic Judah assured them of God’s love for Jerusalem and his sure plans to once again live there with his people (1:14; 8:3). Zechariah’s warnings include a word of admonition to his own people not to repeat the sins of the past

that led to exile (1:6; 7:11-14). He also pronounced a word of judgment to the oppressing nations that God would repay them in full measure for their mistreatment of Israel (1:18-21; 12:9; 14:12). Finally, Zechariah's exhortation to those wavering between God's truth and human wisdom includes a call to repentance and a charge to practice justice in the land by obeying the commandments of Yahweh's covenant (1:3; 8:15-17).

AUTHOR

The book is silent on the issue of authorship, although it is assumed that the prophetic word formula ("the LORD gave this message to the prophet Zechariah," 1:1) signifies that Zechariah penned his own oracles. The name "Zechariah" means "Yah(weh) has remembered." This summarizes Zechariah's basic message to post-exilic Judah: The Lord has remembered his covenant with Israel and plans to restore the fortunes of his people. The title "prophet" classifies Zechariah as a divinely commissioned spokesperson for God (1:1).

We learn from Ezra that Haggai and Zechariah were contemporary prophets of the early postexilic period (Ezra 5:1). The date formulas in the two books indicate that Zechariah began preaching in Jerusalem about two months after Haggai's brief, four-month ministry began (cf. 1:1; Hag 1:1; 2:20). Haggai and Zechariah were also complementary prophets in that Haggai exhorted the people to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple and Zechariah summoned the community to repentance and spiritual renewal. His task was to prepare the people for proper worship in the Temple once the building project was completed.

The book's superscription (1:1) identifies Zechariah as the son of Berekiah and the grandson of Iddo. The records of Ezra confirm Zechariah as a descendant of Iddo (Ezra 5:1; 6:14—the word "son" in this context simply designates "a descendant"). Nehemiah informs us that Zechariah's grandfather, Iddo, returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylonia with Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Neh 12:4). Nehemiah also lists Zechariah as the head of the priestly family of Iddo (Neh 12:16). This suggests that Zechariah was a member of the tribe of Levi and that he served in Jerusalem as both a priest and a prophet.

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

Three of Zechariah's speeches are dated to specific years and months (and sometimes days) of the reign of Darius I, king of Persia (cf. NLT mg at 1:1, 7; 7:1). The modern equivalents for the date formulas are listed below:

SPEECH	DATE IN DARIUS'S REIGN	MODERN EQUIVALENT
Zech 1:1-6	Year 2, month 8	Oct/Nov 520 BC
Zech 1:7-6:8	Year 2, month 11, day 24	15 February 519 BC
Zech 7-8	Year 4, month 9, day 4	7 December 518 BC

It seems likely that this first portion of the book (chs 1–8) was written sometime between 520 and 515 BC, since Zechariah makes no reference to the completion and dedication of the Jerusalem Temple in 515 BC (cf. Ezra 6:13-22). Zechariah's preaching was prompted by the prophet Haggai's message to begin reconstruction of the Lord's Temple delivered to Jerusalem on August 29, 520 BC (Hag 1:1).

Scholarly opinion is sharply divided over the authorship and date of the final two oracles in the book of Zechariah (chs 9–11, 12–14). Some biblical scholars assign chapters 9–11 to a "Second Zechariah" and chapters 12–14 to a "Third Zechariah." These alleged and anonymous writers were supposed to have lived and prophesied in Jerusalem sometime from the fourth to second centuries BC. It is often suggested that these two anonymous oracles, along with the book of Malachi, were added as an appendix to Zechariah 1–8 to complete the sacred number of the Twelve Prophets (i.e., the Minor Prophets; cf. "Canonicity and Textual History" below). According to this view, the final written form of Zechariah is assigned to the Maccabean period (c. 160 BC). The evidence typically offered in support of multiple authorship includes the perceived differences in style, tone, theology, and historical situation between the two parts of the book (chs 1–8 and chs 9–14). Notable among the arguments are the reference to Greece (9:13, which is considered an allusion to the Hellenistic period) and the distinctively apocalyptic character of chapters 12–14.

A remarkable literary continuity between chapters 1–8 and 9–14 exists, however; this can be seen via careful analysis of linguistic and grammatical features in Zechariah (cf. Hill 1982:105-134; Radday and Wickman 1975:30-55). An examination of the literary features in light of archaeological discoveries and socio-political considerations confirms an early Persian period date for Zechariah 9–14 (see Meyers and Meyers 1993:52-55). Finally, both Jewish and Christian tradition concerning the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament clearly associate Zechariah 9–14 with the prophet Zechariah and with chapters 1–8 of his book. The two undated oracles (chs 9–11 and 12–14) were most likely composed by the prophet Zechariah later in his life. Linguistic data retrieved from the Hebrew text of Zechariah suggest that the final draft of the book was probably completed sometime between 500 and 470 BC.

The setting for Zechariah's preaching, like that of Haggai's, was the reign of Darius I, king of Persia (522–486 BC). Although the Hebrews had returned to the land of Israel after the Babylonian captivity, the economic situation of the community was bleak; the people languished in apathy, despair, and hopelessness.

In response to this distress, God raised up two prophetic voices for the purpose of initiating programs for the physical rebuilding and the spiritual renewal of postexilic Jerusalem. The prophet Haggai was commissioned to exhort and challenge the Hebrew community to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. He preached for only four months late in the year 520 BC. The people responded favorably to Haggai's message, and the reconstruction of the Lord's Temple began that year (Hag 1:12-15).

The prophet Zechariah complemented Haggai's message by calling for the spiritual renewal of God's people (1:3-6; 7:8-14). His ministry began just two months after Haggai's, and Zechariah's last dated message was delivered in 518 BC.

the created order, and the long-awaited kingdom of the Lord will be established over all the earth (14:9). As a result, all peoples will worship the King, the Lord Almighty (14:9, 16, 21).

Zechariah admonished the people that God must be given the freedom to accomplish his purposes for the good of Israel in his way and time. This is reflected in his exhortation to the prophet not to “despise . . . small beginnings” (4:10). Zechariah reminded his audience that God had acted in the past for the ultimate good of his people, even in the judgment of Babylonian exile (7:12-14; cf. 14:3). The people of Israel can take courage in the present and have hope for the future because God can be trusted to keep his word and fulfill the promises made through Zechariah the prophet (4:9). For this reason, all humanity is to be silent before the Lord, “for he is springing into action from his holy dwelling” (2:13).

OUTLINE

- I. Prelude: A Call to Return to the Lord (1:1-6)
- II. Zechariah's Visions (1:7-6:15)
 - A. A Man among the Myrtle Trees (1:7-17)
 - B. Four Horns and Four Blacksmiths (1:18-21)
 - C. Future Prosperity for Jerusalem (2:1-5)
 - D. The Exiles Are Called Home (2:6-13)
 - E. Cleansing for the High Priest (3:1-10)
 - F. A Lampstand and Two Olive Trees (4:1-14)
 - G. A Flying Scroll (5:1-4)
 - H. A Woman in a Basket (5:5-11)
 - I. Four Chariots (6:1-8)
 - J. The Crowning of Jeshua (6:9-15)
- III. Zechariah's Messages (7:1-8:23)
 - A. A Call to Justice and Mercy (7:1-14)
 - B. Promised Blessing for Jerusalem (8:1-23)
- IV. Zechariah's Oracles (9:1-14:21)
 - A. First Oracle (9:1-11:17)
 1. Judgment against Israel's enemies (9:1-8)
 2. Zion's coming king (9:9-17)
 3. The Lord will restore his people (10:1-11:3)
 4. Good and evil shepherds (11:4-17)
 - B. Second Oracle (12:1-14:21)
 1. Future deliverance for Jerusalem (12:1-14)
 2. A fountain of cleansing (13:1-6)
 3. The scattering of the sheep (13:7-9)
 4. The Lord will rule the earth (14:1-21)

COMMENTARY ON *Zechariah*

◆ I. Prelude: A Call to Return to the Lord (1:1-6)

In November* of the second year of King Darius's reign, the LORD gave this message to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah and grandson of Iddo:

²"I, the LORD, was very angry with your ancestors. ³Therefore, say to the people, 'This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.' ⁴Don't be like your ancestors who would not listen or pay attention when the earlier prophets

said to them, 'This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Turn from your evil ways, and stop all your evil practices.'

⁵"Where are your ancestors now? They and the prophets are long dead. ⁶But everything I said through my servants the prophets happened to your ancestors, just as I said. As a result, they repented and said, 'We have received what we deserved from the LORD of Heaven's Armies. He has done what he said he would do.'"

1:1 Hebrew *In the eighth month*. A number of dates in Zechariah can be cross-checked with dates in surviving Persian records and related accurately to our modern calendar. This month of the ancient Hebrew lunar calendar occurred within the months of October and November 520 B.C.

NOTES

1:1 *November of the second year of King Darius's reign.* This date formula serves to root the message of Zechariah in a specific historical context: the early years of the great Persian Empire (539–330 BC). King Darius I (Hystaspes) ruled Persia from 522–486 BC.

the LORD gave this message. Lit., "the word of the LORD came." The combination of the verb "to be" (*hayah* [TH1961, ZH2118]) and the phrase "the word of the LORD" (*debar-yhwh* [TH1697/3068, ZH1821/3378]) constitutes the prophetic word formula. This formula commonly introduces a report of prophetic revelation in the oracular speech of the OT.

the prophet Zechariah. The word "prophet" (*nabi*' [TH5030, ZH5566]) designates Zechariah as an emissary, one who speaks with the authority of the commissioning agent—in this case, God himself.

1:3 *This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says.* This construction (*koh 'amar yhwh tseba'oth*) constitutes the messenger formula in prophetic speech and signifies the oral transmission of a message by a third party. The phrase suggests the divine assembly or council of the gods found in ancient Near Eastern thought. The picture is that the messenger of the council (i.e., the prophet) has stood as an observer in the council's session and is now reporting to others what he (as an envoy of the council) has heard (cf. ABD 2.214-217).

1:4 *earlier prophets.* This is a reference to the prophets of God who ministered during the preexilic period and were active in calling the kingdoms of Judah and Israel to repentance. The language of Zechariah seems to reflect especially the influence of the exilic prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel (see Boda 2004:178-79).

Turn. In contexts expressing covenant relationship, the word *shub* [TH7725, ZH8740] (turn) expresses a change of loyalty on the part of Israel or God. Typically the term is understood as “repentance,” a complete change of direction back to God, a total reorientation toward Yahweh. The imperative form of the verb conveys a sense of urgency and places a demand for immediate response on the audience. Baldwin (1972:90) notes that the preposition “from” indicates the prophet’s admonition “is a call first of all to turn from evil ways” as a first step in their return to God.

evil ways . . . evil practices. The word pair “ways” (*derek* [TH1870, ZH2006]) and “practices” (*ma’alal* [TH4611, ZH5095]) often denotes a lifestyle in prophetic literature: The dispositions of the people’s hearts and minds, as well as their actions, were bent toward evil (cf. Jer 4:18; 17:10; 32:19; Hos 4:9; 12:3; see the discussion in Boda 2004:179).

1:5 ancestors. This is a reference to the people of Israel (2 Kgs 17:13-14) and Judah (2 Chr 36:15-16) who were swept into exile because they were stubborn and refused to believe the word of the Lord. The same expression is found in King Hezekiah’s “Passover Letter” calling the people of Israel and Judah to return to the Lord (2 Chr 30:7).

1:6 servants the prophets. The word “servant” (*’ebed* [TH5650, ZH6269]) was a title for Moses, the archetype of the OT prophet (Deut 34:5; cf. Deut 18:15; Mal 4:4). The true servant obeys the instructions of the overlord. A key trait of the OT prophets was their obedience to God’s word (a fact that makes the story of Jonah all the more unusual; cf. Jonah 3:3). Jesus Christ, the ultimate Prophet, demonstrated this same obedient relationship to his Father (John 5:19-20; 12:49-50).

happened to your ancestors, just as I said. The term behind this expression (*hissigu* [TH5381, ZH5952], “overtake”) alludes to the covenant curses of the Mosaic law pursuing and overtaking those who refuse to obey God’s commands (Deut 28:15, 45).

COMMENTARY

The prelude to the book of Zechariah (1:1-6) includes the superscription (1:1) and a prologue (1:2-6). The superscription (1:1) is a formal statement that serves to classify biblical literature by genre (in this case as an oracular or prophetic text) and to identify the author, audience, date, and sometimes the occasion prompting the message from God. It is understood as distinct from an introduction in that the superscription stands outside the body of literature it prefaces.

The superscription to the book of Zechariah calls attention to two important theological truths. First, the date formula, rooting the prophet’s message in time and space, affirms God as the sovereign ruler of history. He is the one who determines the course of world events and removes and establishes kings (Dan 2:21). Secondly, we learn that God willingly communicates with humanity by giving messages to particular individuals who “publish” this divine revelation through speeches and writings. God’s ability to communicate with human beings sets him apart from the idols of false religions, which cannot hear or speak (cf. Isa 46:5-7). His omniscience makes him unique, alone as God and without rival (Isa 43:10-13).

The prologue (1:2-6) contains multiple layers of quoted material from earlier Old Testament prophets (1:4). Boda (2004:176) observes that “although difficult to follow, it [the prologue] reflects a rhetorical trend in later prophecy in which Yahweh is emphasized as the source of prophetic speech, even if that is at the expense of flow.” The prelude to Zechariah (1:1-6) is widely recognized as an introduction to the first

half of the book (chs 1–8), if not the book of Zechariah as a whole (cf. Baldwin 1972:87; Petersen 1984:110-111; Meyers and Meyers 1987:98; Boda 2004:181).

The Old Testament prophets were not averse to ascribing anger and wrath to God, as Zechariah does in 1:2 (“very angry”; *qatsap* . . . *qatsep* [TH7107/7110, ZH7911/7912]). God is a personal being, capable of love and anger. The emotion of God’s anger is often described as an inward fire that erupts and burns with an unquenchable intensity (cf. Jer 4:4; 23:19). God’s anger proceeds from his holiness, the essential attribute of his character (Ps 93:5; Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). The objects of God’s wrath are those who oppose him and those traveling the path of wickedness (Ps 1:4-6). Since God is also righteous, his anger is just (Ps 11:7; Isa 1:27; 5:16). Ultimately, God’s wrath is divine retribution against sins committed by humanity. This means God’s anger is not capricious or arbitrary, but rather it is a “legitimate reaction to the transgression of known stipulations” (Eichrodt 1967:260). The covenantal context of Zechariah’s call to repentance alludes to the use of this word for anger in Deuteronomy 29:28 and Jeremiah 21:5, where God’s anger burned against the Israelites because they broke faith with the Lord and worshiped other gods. The Lord is a jealous God: He will not give his glory to another (Deut 32:16, 21; Isa 42:8; 48:11). Thankfully, the Lord is also a merciful and gracious God, patient, and slow to anger (Exod 34:6; Nah 1:3). It is worth noting, according to Zechariah, that the people acknowledged that they had received what they “deserved” (1:6).

In contexts expressing covenant relationship, the word “return” (*shub* [TH7725, ZH8740], 1:3) is the Old Testament term for repentance. It signifies an “about-face” or a complete turnabout on the part of the person repenting. The expression connotes a change or shift in loyalty away from sin and self toward God, a reorientation to Yahweh and his covenant demands. The imperative form of the verb conveys a sense of urgency and places a demand for immediate and specific action on the part of those so addressed. The threefold repetition of the word “return” or “turn” (1:3-4) serves to heighten this sense of urgency. The liturgical formula in the prophetic summons to repentance (“return to me, and I will return to you”) is repeated in Malachi 3:7 and has a precursor in Isaiah’s plea to Jerusalem to “return to me [God], for I have paid the price to set you free” (Isa 44:22). The language of the liturgical formula may be rooted in the penitential prayers of the psalms (e.g., Pss 80:3, 7, 14, 19; 85:4-8; cf. Petersen 1984:131). (See the commentary on Mal 3:6-12 for more on the theology of repentance.)

On the human side of the ledger, returning to God and turning away from evil was essential for the forgiveness of sin. Naturally the “inward conversion of the heart in prayer and confession of sin” was assumed in this process of returning to God (Eichrodt 1967:472-473). On the divine side of the ledger, God promises to “return” to those who respond to the prophet’s message by turning to him (1:3). This means that God, in his great love and compassion, accepts the repentant person by forgiving sin and restoring that individual to full covenant relationship with him (Jer 31:20; Hos 14:1-2). This reconciliation with God stays his anger, averts judgment, and brings healing to those who had broken covenant relationship with

Yahweh (Jer 4:1-2; Hos 14:4). The Hebrews returned to the land after the Babylonian exile, but they had not returned to God. As Baldwin (1972:92) has aptly observed, "on exactly the same terms as had been offered to their fathers, young and old alike are invited to return to God. If they do so, the covenant relationship will be renewed, and spiritual restoration will accompany the material restoration of the Temple." (See the discussion of the word "return" or "repent" in W. L. Holladay, *The Root Šûbh in the Old Testament*. [Leiden: Brill, 1958].)

Zechariah's rhetorical, even ironical questions (1:5) emphasize the eternal nature of God's word in contrast to the mortality of those who heard as well as those who delivered that divine revelation. The prophet reminded his audience that God's word was also a sure or true word since the things the prophets predicted happened just as the Lord had said (1:6). Petersen (1984:128) has identified those repenting and speaking in 1:6 as the audience of Zechariah, not their ancestors (as in the NLT). It seems quite clear in light of the context, however, that Zechariah refers to the ancestors of his audience in their admission of guilt, the justice of God, and their repentance after the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Lam 1:18; 3:28-30, 37-40).

◆ II. Zechariah's Visions (1:7–6:15)

A. A Man among the Myrtle Trees (1:7–17)

⁷Three months later, on February 15,* the LORD sent another message to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah and grandson of Iddo.

⁸In a vision during the night, I saw a man sitting on a red horse that was standing among some myrtle trees in a small valley. Behind him were riders on red, brown, and white horses. ⁹I asked the angel who was talking with me, "My lord, what do these horses mean?"

"I will show you," the angel replied.

¹⁰The rider standing among the myrtle trees then explained, "They are the ones the LORD has sent out to patrol the earth."

¹¹Then the other riders reported to the angel of the LORD, who was standing among the myrtle trees, "We have been patrolling the earth, and the whole earth is at peace."

¹²Upon hearing this, the angel of the LORD prayed this prayer: "O LORD of Heaven's Armies, for seventy years now you have been angry with Jerusalem and the

towns of Judah. How long until you again show mercy to them?" ¹³And the LORD spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.

¹⁴Then the angel said to me, "Shout this message for all to hear: 'This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: My love for Jerusalem and Mount Zion is passionate and strong. ¹⁵But I am very angry with the other nations that are now enjoying peace and security. I was only a little angry with my people, but the nations inflicted harm on them far beyond my intentions.

¹⁶"Therefore, this is what the LORD says: I have returned to show mercy to Jerusalem. My Temple will be rebuilt, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, and measurements will be taken for the reconstruction of Jerusalem.*"

¹⁷"Say this also: 'This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: The towns of Israel will again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem as his own!'"

1:7 Hebrew *On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius*. This event occurred on February 15, 519 B.C.; also see note on 1:1. 1:16 Hebrew *and the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem*.



Malachi

ANDREW E. HILL

INTRODUCTION TO *Malachi*

MALACHI'S SERMONS were directed to a tough audience. Among those in his congregation were the disillusioned, the cynical, the callous, the dishonest, the apathetic, the doubting, the skeptical, and the outright wicked. What does a preacher say to this kind of crowd? As a sensitive pastor, Malachi offered the "valentine" of God's love to a disheartened people. As a lofty theologian, he instructed the people in a basic doctrinal catechism—emphasizing the nature of God as universal King, faithful Suzerain, and righteous Judge. As Yahweh's stern prophet, Malachi rebuked corrupt priests and warned of the coming day of God's judgment. As a spiritual mentor, he called his audience to a more sincere life of worship and challenged the people to incarnate the ethical standards of the Mosaic covenant. But above all, Malachi was Yahweh's messenger and his vital word to Israel was profoundly simple—"I have always loved you," says the LORD" (1:2).

AUTHOR

The book of Malachi is silent on the issue of authorship, although it is assumed that the prophetic word formula ("This is the message that the Lord gave to Israel through the prophet Malachi," 1:1) signifies that Malachi penned his own oracles. Based on the translation of Malachi 1:1 in the Septuagint ("by the hand of *his messenger*") and the etymology of the name Malachi, some scholars have taken the word "Malachi" to be a title for an anonymous prophet, perhaps a play on words with 3:1, "my messenger" (*mal'aki* [TH4401, ZH4858]; see 1:1 NLT mg).

The fact that "Malachi" stands as a unique proper noun in the Old Testament should not disqualify its use as a personal name since both Habakkuk and Jonah are also exceptional among the names of the Hebrew prophets. The name "Malachi" may be translated "my messenger" or "my angel" and serves as a fitting name for a prophet of God. The name Malachi also fits a pattern of other Hebrew names ending in "i" like Beeri (Hos 1:1) and Zicri (Exod 6:21). The Bible records no biographic information for Malachi. His inclusion among the Old Testament prophets both identifies Malachi as spokesperson for God and verifies his commission as a divine messenger.

DATE AND OCCASION OF WRITING

Typically the book of Malachi is dated between 450 and 430 BC. It is often assumed that Malachi was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah because he addressed the same religious concerns and social ills confronted by these two postexilic reformers.

For example, Malachi denounced mixed marriages and divorce, a lax and corrupt priesthood, liturgical decay (including neglect of the tithe), and social injustice—the same abuses corrected during the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah. A careful typological study of the language of Malachi’s oracles, however, reveals that the Hebrew text of the book has great affinity to the books of Haggai and Zechariah (see Hill 1998:395-400). On the basis of this evidence, it seems much more likely that Malachi was a slightly later contemporary of these two postexilic prophets of Yahweh’s second Temple (who preached c. 520 BC). It is even possible that the battle between the Persians and Greeks at Marathon (c. 490 BC) was the occasion prompting Malachi’s message. The prophet may have interpreted that titanic struggle between East and West as at least a partial fulfillment of Haggai’s prediction that God was about “to shake the heavens and the earth” and “overthrow royal thrones” (Hag 2:21-22).

The following timeline should be helpful in placing the writing of Malachi:

DATE	EVENT
538? BC	Return of Hebrews from exile led by Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:11)
522? BC	Return of Hebrews from exile led by Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2)
520 BC	Haggai preaches (Hag 1:1, 15; 2:1, 20)
520–518 BC (and later?)	Zechariah preaches (Zech 1:1, 7; 7:1)
515 BC	Second Temple completed (Ezra 6:15)
490 BC	Battle of Marathon, Malachi preaches
483–472 BC	Esther in Persia (Esth 1:3; 2:16; 3:7)
458 BC	Ezra arrives in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:7-9)
445 BC	Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (Neh 2:1)
432 BC	Nehemiah recalled to Babylon (Neh 13:6)

To understand the occasion of writing we need to understand the historical background. A decree issued in 538 BC by Cyrus the Great, the first of the Persian kings, permitted conquered people groups who had been deported to Mesopotamia by the Babylonians to return to their homelands. The royal edict was issued on a clay barrel, the famous Cyrus Cylinder. This pronouncement naturally included the Jews, although they are not named on the cylinder. The first wave of emigrants to Jerusalem numbered 42,360, along with 7,337 servants (Ezra 2:64-65).

These emigrants were led back by Sheshbazzar, a prince of Judah and the first governor of the restoration community in postexilic Judah (Ezra 1:5-11). The foundation for a new Temple was laid during the early stages of his administration, sometime in 538 or 537 BC (Ezra 5:16). The meager project was soon abandoned, however, and the construction site lay neglected for two decades. Not until the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (520–518 BC) did the initiative to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple resume (cf. Hag 1:14). The second Temple was

completed in March of 515 BC (Ezra 6:15). It was erected under the auspices of the Persian King, Darius I, and the monies granted for the rebuilding probably took the form of "tax rebates" from the Persian royal treasury.

Malachi addressed Jews in the recently formed province of Yehud (or Judah) in the Persian satrapy of Eber-Nahara during the reign of King Darius I (522–486 BC). His audience included expatriates resettled in Judah and the descendants of those Hebrews who survived the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem but had not been deported to Mesopotamia.

Politically, Judah struggled for identity amid a sea of hostile neighboring satrapy provinces. The office of provincial governor was still in its infancy, and the provincial bureaucracy was in an embryonic stage of development. Any deference shown to Judah by the Persian overlords, religious or otherwise, was largely a matter of political pragmatism since the Persian army needed a base of operations for the conquest and control of Egypt. Religiously, the Second Temple had been completed, but it paled in comparison to its Solomonic predecessor. Temple worship was in a sorry state, as worshipers cheated God in their sacrifices and tithes. The priesthood was also in need of reform, as the ministry of the apathetic priests was actually leading people into sin—not out of it!

The hopes raised by Haggai and Zechariah for a revival of the Davidic dynasty rooted in the figure of Zerubbabel seem to have disappeared by the time of Malachi. The priests and the Levites were the "power-brokers" when he preached to Judah. Socially, Malachi confronted a population given to religious cynicism and political skepticism. The disillusionment of the postexilic Jewish community was prompted by several theological misunderstandings, including the expectations for wealth that Haggai had promised once the Second Temple was rebuilt (Hag 2:7, 18-19), the restoration of the Davidic covenant predicted by Ezekiel (Ezek 34:13, 23-24), and the implementation of Jeremiah's "new covenant" (Jer 31:23, 31-33). In the minds of many in Malachi's audience, God had failed his people.

AUDIENCE

Malachi's first oracle (1:1-5) was addressed generally to the Hebrew community living in postexilic Jerusalem and environs. The prophet's second oracle (1:6–2:9) is aimed specifically at the priests and Levites serving in the Second Temple. The final four oracles of Malachi's prophecy (including the call to repentance, 3:6-12) are once again directed broadly to the inhabitants of postexilic Judah (2:10-16; 2:17–3:5; 3:6-12; 3:13–4:3), although the Levites are specifically mentioned again in the fourth oracle or disputation (cf. 3:3-4). The righteous Hebrews within the restoration community are singled out and contrasted with the wicked in the final oracle (cf. 3:16-18).

CANONICITY AND TEXTUAL HISTORY

Malachi is the twelfth book in the collection known as the Minor Prophets (or Book of the Twelve in the Hebrew Bible). The Twelve Prophets are usually grouped with the Latter Prophets and without exception are found in the earliest delineations of

the covenant of marriage (2:14, "marriage vows," NLT) within the context of the covenant between God and Israel (2:10; cf. Hugenberger 1998:27-47). This explains his censure of easy divorce and the exhortation to remain loyal to one's marriage vows (2:16). In one way, Malachi's teaching anticipates the more rigid instruction of Jesus and Paul on divorce (cf. Matt 19:9-11; 1 Cor 7:1-16). In context, the prophet's prescriptive treatment of divorce may be a reaction against the "exclusivist" tendencies of postexilic Judaism to reestablish the ethnic purity of Israel diluted by intermarriage. Malachi's eschatology conforms to the conventional prophetic paradigm of threat and promise. Like Zechariah, Malachi pictures divine judgment as both punishment for sin and a call to repentance (3:7). The goal of God's judgment is purification and restoration of the faithful of Israel (3:3-4). The New Testament understands that the work of the "messenger," or forerunner, who prepares the way for the Lord's appearance at his Temple, was realized in the ministry of John the Baptist (3:1; 4:5-6; cf. Matt 11:14). Malachi also made an original contribution to Old Testament eschatology with his reference to the "scroll of remembrance" in which the names of the righteous are recorded (3:16; cf. Dan 12:1; Rev 20:12).

OUTLINE

Superscription: Malachi, Yahweh's Messenger (1:1)

- I. First Disputation: Yahweh's Love for Israel (1:2-5)
- II. Second Disputation: Indictment of the Corrupt Priesthood (1:6-2:9)
- III. Third Disputation: Indictment of Faithless People (2:10-16)
- IV. Fourth Disputation: Yahweh's Messenger of Justice and Judgment (2:17-3:5)
- V. Fifth Disputation: The Call to Serve Yahweh (3:6-12)
- VI. Sixth Disputation: The Coming Day of Judgment (3:13-4:3)
- VII. Appendix: Appeals to Ideal Old Testament Figures (4:4-6)

COMMENTARY ON
Malachi

◆ **Superscription: Malachi, Yahweh's Messenger (1:1)**

This is the message* that the LORD gave to
Israel through the prophet Malachi.*

1:1a Hebrew *An Oracle: The message.* 1:1b *Malachi* means "my messenger."

NOTES

1:1 *the message.* Lit., "An oracle: the word of the Lord." The word "oracle" (*massa'* [TH4853A, ZH5363]) impregnates Malachi's message with a certain urgency; the audience is expected to pay attention and respond.

the LORD gave. The phrase "the word of the LORD" (*debar-yhwh* [TH1697/3068, ZH1821/3378]) comprises one element of the prophetic word formula. The second element of the formula, the verb "to be" (*hayah* [TH1961, ZH2118]), is omitted here (but assumed in the NLT rendering "gave"). The formula commonly introduces a report of a prophetic revelation in the oracular speech of the OT. See further the notes for Hag 1:1.

through. The expression "by the hand of" (*beyad* [TH8712/3027, ZH928/3338]) can denote the act of writing or speaking, a so-called genitive of authorship (Waltke and O'Connor 1990:9.5.1c).

prophet. The word "prophet" is an expansion of the NLT; the MT simply says "by the hand of Malachi." Typically, the title designates an emissary, one who speaks with the authority of the commissioning agent—in this case, Malachi speaking for God.

COMMENTARY

The literary form of the opening verse is that of superscription. A superscription is a statement of classification prefixed to a literary work. It is unclear whether these superscriptions were added by the author or by later editors during the process of collecting and arranging the contents of the Old Testament canon. Here, Malachi is classified as a prophetic text and an "oracle" or "message" (NLT). Typically the superscriptions prefixed to the prophetic books identify author, audience, date, and sometimes the occasion prompting the prophet's sermons and visions, as well as the source of the prophetic revelation—God himself. In some cases the superscription may provide the title for a composition. The superscription is understood as distinct from an introduction in that it stands outside or independent of the body of literature it prefaces.

◆ I. First Disputation: Yahweh's Love for Israel (1:2-5)

²"I have always loved you," says the LORD.

But you retort, "Really? How have you loved us?"

And the LORD replies, "This is how I showed my love for you: I loved your ancestor Jacob, ³but I rejected his brother, Esau, and devastated his hill country. I turned Esau's inheritance into a desert for jackals."

⁴Esau's descendants in Edom may say, "We have been shattered, but we will rebuild the ruins."

But the LORD of Heaven's Armies replies, "They may try to rebuild, but I will demolish them again. Their country will be known as 'The Land of Wickedness,' and their people will be called 'The People with Whom the LORD Is Forever Angry.' ⁵When you see the destruction for yourselves, you will say, 'Truly, the LORD's greatness reaches far beyond Israel's borders!'"

NOTES

1:2 *loved*. When describing the relationship between the Lord and Israel, the word "love" (*ahab* [TH157, ZH170]) has covenant implications. The term may be equated with God's choice or election of Israel as his people. The message of Malachi indicates that the other dimensions of God's unconditional covenant love for Israel are still operative as well (e.g., his patient mercy, cf. 3:6, 17).

1:3 *rejected*. The word "rejected" (*sane'* [TH8130, ZH8533], "to hate") is the antonym of the verb "to love" noted above. The two terms are used as a polar word-pair in OT legal and prophetic texts (e.g., Deut 7:10; Amos 5:15). The expression describes "the hostility of a broken covenant relationship" (Andersen and Freedman 1980:525). Such is the case here as God has rejected Esau (and consequently his descendants the Edomites) because Esau despised and rejected the tokens of covenant relationship with Yahweh (cf. Gen 25:34; 26:34-35).

1:3 *Esau's inheritance*. Esau was the ancestor of the Edomite nation; the "inheritance" or territory of Edom was located on the southeastern rim of the Dead Sea and extended from the Brook Zered in the north to the Gulf of Aqaba in the south. The names Jacob and Esau are intended to call to mind the patriarchal traditions of Genesis concerning the rivalry of the twin brothers (Gen 25:23-26).

1:4 *the LORD of Heaven's Armies*. This compound name for God is prominent in OT prophetic literature and is variously translated "LORD of Hosts" (NRSV) or "LORD Almighty" (NIV). The title occurs 20 times in Malachi (1:6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14; 2:2, 4, 8, 16; 3:1, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 17; 4:1, 3). The Hebrew expression (*yhw h tseba'oth* [TH3068/6635, ZH3378/7372]) is often understood as a construct genitive, as is the case here. More precisely the construction is one of absolute nouns in apposition, perhaps conveying a verbal force: "Yahweh *creates* armies" (cf. TDOT 5.515). The term for "Heaven's armies" (*tseba'oth*) has military connotations and in this case refers to the angelic armies at God's disposal. In either case, the epithet emphasizes "the invincible might behind the Lord's commands" (Baldwin 1972:39).

1:4 *The Land of Wickedness*. The story of Esau is one of selfishness and contempt for the tokens of Yahweh's covenant (cf. Gen 25:34). The nation of Edom came to personify the pride of a self-centered existence (cf. Jer 49:16). The Edomites were allies of the Babylonians in the sack of Jerusalem (cf. Ps 137:7-9; Obad vv. 10, 12). They moved into the Negev after the area was wrested from Judah by the Babylonians (cf. 2 Kgs 24:8-17). The Edomites also occupied Judean villages well into the Persian period (cf. 1 Esdr 4:50). The exact date of Edom's collapse is still unknown, and the specific circumstances causing its demise are uncertain. By the time of Malachi's preaching (c. 500-450 BC), the Edomite kingdom was in ruins (Mal 1:2-4). Edom apparently remained largely independent of Babylonian influ-

ence until about 550 BC or so (cf. Jer 40:11). According to scholarly consensus, a coalition of Arab tribes gradually infiltrated, overpowered, and displaced the Edomites sometime during the fifth century BC. By 312 BC, inscriptional evidence indicates the Nabatean Arabs had overrun the region of Edom, making Petra their capital city. Surviving Edomites either moved to Idumea or were absorbed by the Nabateans.

COMMENTARY

The book of Malachi is essentially a theology of Yahweh, and more specifically a catechism on the topic of covenant relationship with Yahweh. The prophet's speeches are also dialectical in the sense that they represent a logical and systematic theological treatise. The instruction begins with the Lord's love for Israel, then moves to the priorities of worship and social justice as the appropriate responses to God's love, and concludes with the affirmation of Yahweh's covenant love for the believing remnant. The first speech act is directed to the postexilic community at large and is intended to persuade the audience of Yahweh's love for Israel. As with all of Malachi's disputations, the three-part formula of declaration (1:2a), refutation (1:2b), and rebuttal (1:2c-5) is readily discernible.

Malachi mentions four distinct covenants pertinent to his message to postexilic Jerusalem, including (1) the covenant of Abraham (1:2); (2) the covenant of Levi (2:5, 8); (3) the covenant of marriage (2:14); and (4) the Mosaic covenant (implicit in the numerous references to the instructions and commands of God's law—2:6, 8; 4:4). A covenant in the biblical world was a unilateral treaty or contract that established a relationship between two parties with attendant obligations and responsibilities. There are basically two types of covenants enacted in the Old Testament, the obligatory (binding one party to obey a specified set of decrees or laws) and the promissory (in which one party pledges to do something for the other, often as a reward for past obedience, and typically imposing stipulations for the ongoing maintenance of the relationship).

The promissory covenant God made with Abraham is foundational to all subsequent Old Testament covenants, joining Yahweh and Israel in an exclusive relationship (Gen 12:1-3). God's covenant love "is an act of election which makes Israel Yahweh's child" (Andersen and Freedman 1980:576-577). Naturally, divine election did not override Israel's responsibility to obey the stipulations of God's covenant(s) (cf. Gen 26:5). God's predisposition to choose one people group to bless all the nations is one of the great mysteries of biblical theology. God's election of Israel was certainly not because of any inherent merit in the Hebrews. Rather, it was just the opposite, as we learn from Moses's admonition to Israel after the Exodus; God chose Israel not because they were righteous, but in spite of their stubbornness (Deut 7:7-8; 9:4-6). God's design in choosing a small and stubborn people group as his special possession was to ensure his glory before the nations as the one who keeps his covenant promises and empowers Israel in their greatness (Deut 8:17-18; 9:5).

Malachi's first oracle makes reference to Jacob as the heir of the Abrahamic covenant with the declaration, "This is how I showed my love for you: I loved your ancestor Jacob" (1:2). Yahweh's love for and election of Israel as his "special

treasure" (3:17) was his free and unconditional choice as the Sovereign of creation. By contrast, God rejected Esau (1:3) despite his privilege of primogeniture. It should be noted, however, that God's rejection of Esau as the heir of the covenant promises was not capricious or arbitrary. The story of Esau is clearly one of selfishness and disdain for the tokens of Yahweh's covenant (Gen 25:34; 26:34-35; 28:8-9; cf. Heb 12:16).

The goal of Yahweh's covenant relationship with the Hebrews and the essence of Malachi's message was reciprocity in the sense that Israel's duty was "to reciprocate God's love, not in the original sense of emotion, but in the form of genuine obedience and pure devotion" (TDOT 1.115). The prophet's rhetorical refutation of the claim that Yahweh had not loved Jacob reveals the depth of the crisis of faith in postexilic Judah (1:2). Much like the audience of Malachi's earlier contemporary, Haggai, the people were still "looking for much and finding little"—and blaming God for their plight (Hag 1:6, 9). Mallone (1981:28) has observed that faith in crisis often needs the support of external evidence, "a sure footing outside our own individual experience, an objective signpost on which we can hang our mental convictions." Malachi offered his audience two external "proofs" of God's enduring covenant love for Israel. The first is the word of divine revelation, God's declaration that he still loves Israel (1:2). The second piece of supporting evidence forwarded by the prophet was more tangible if the people would only observe the current events swirling around them: God destroyed the nation of Edom (1:3-5). The event was actually an answer to the psalmist's prayer requesting that God judge the Edomites for their part in the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Ps 137:7). The psalmist reminds us that remembering God's work in history is still a potent antidote for those in a crisis of faith (e.g., Ps 73:2, 16-17).

◆ II. Second Disputation: Indictment of the Corrupt Priesthood (1:6–2:9)

⁶The LORD of Heaven's Armies says to the priests: "A son honors his father, and a servant respects his master. If I am your father and master, where are the honor and respect I deserve? You have shown contempt for my name!

"But you ask, 'How have we ever shown contempt for your name?'

⁷"You have shown contempt by offering defiled sacrifices on my altar.

"Then you ask, 'How have we defiled the sacrifices?'"

"You defile them by saying the altar of the LORD deserves no respect. ⁸When you give blind animals as sacrifices, isn't that wrong? And isn't it wrong to offer animals that are crippled and diseased? Try giving

gifts like that to your governor, and see how pleased he is!" says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

⁹"Go ahead, beg God to be merciful to you! But when you bring that kind of offering, why should he show you any favor at all?" asks the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

¹⁰"How I wish one of you would shut the Temple doors so that these worthless sacrifices could not be offered! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, "and I will not accept your offerings. ¹¹But my name is honored* by people of other nations from morning till night. All around the world they offer* sweet incense and pure offerings in honor of my name. For my name is great among

the nations," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

¹²"But you dishonor my name with your actions. By bringing contemptible food, you are saying it's all right to defile the Lord's table. ¹³You say, 'It's too hard to serve the LORD,' and you turn up your noses at my commands," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. "Think of it! Animals that are stolen and crippled and sick are being presented as offerings! Should I accept from you such offerings as these?" asks the LORD.

¹⁴"Cursed is the cheat who promises to give a fine ram from his flock but then sacrifices a defective one to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, "and my name is feared among the nations!

CHAPTER 2

"Listen, you priests—this command is for you! ²Listen to me and make up your minds to honor my name," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, "or I will bring a terrible curse against you. I will curse even the blessings you receive. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you have not taken my warning to heart. ³I will punish your descendants and splatter your faces

with the manure from your festival sacrifices, and I will throw you on the manure pile. ⁴Then at last you will know it was I who sent you this warning so that my covenant with the Levites can continue," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

⁵"The purpose of my covenant with the Levites was to bring life and peace, and that is what I gave them. This required reverence from them, and they greatly revered me and stood in awe of my name. ⁶They passed on to the people the truth of the instructions they received from me. They did not lie or cheat; they walked with me, living good and righteous lives, and they turned many from lives of sin.

⁷"The words of a priest's lips should preserve knowledge of God, and people should go to him for instruction, for the priest is the messenger of the LORD of Heaven's Armies. ⁸But you priests have left God's paths. Your instructions have caused many to stumble into sin. You have corrupted the covenant I made with the Levites," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. ⁹"So I have made you despised and humiliated in the eyes of all the people. For you have not obeyed me but have shown favoritism in the way you carry out my instructions."

1:7 As in Greek version; Hebrew reads *defiled you?* 1:11a *Or will be honored.* 1:11b *Or will offer.*

NOTES

1:6 *have shown contempt.* The repetition of the verb "show contempt, despise" (*bazah* [TH959, ZH1022]) in the prophet's second oracle (1:6, 7, 12; 2:9) sets the tone and the theme for the speech unit.

1:7 *defiled.* The word *ga'al* [TH1351, ZH1458] signifies ritual pollution or contamination that disqualifies or renders unfit in religious terms an object (or person) for service in the worship of Yahweh. This ritual pollution or contamination is the result of some violation of the holiness code specified in the law of Moses (in this case the laws concerning acceptable animal sacrifices, cf. Lev 22:17-25; Deut 15:21).

1:8 *governor.* The term (*pekhhah* [TH6346, ZH7068]) is a rather vague title for a government official, in this case designating the Persian-appointed overseer or governor of the province of Judah. The juxtaposition of "my altar" (1:7) and "your governor" (1:8) insinuates a confusion of loyalties on the part of the Levitical priesthood.

1:12 *dishonor.* Lit., "you are desecrating it" (i.e., desecrating God's name). The (Piel) participle of *khalal* [TH2490, ZH2725] describes an ongoing state of affairs. Ironically, the guardians of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh were habitually profaning his Temple with impure sacrifices.