The Threat from the North

by

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Preface

In the mid-9th century, a new superpower began to arise in the ancient Near East. Her name was Assyria. Since the bondage in Egypt, the Israelites had never faced such a formidable opponent. With eyes toward the riches of western Mesopotamia, the Levant and Egypt, this empire-builder began encroaching into the lands north of Israel, and of course, the two nations of Israel and Judah lay directly in her path toward the African continent. By the late 8th century, one of those nations, Israel, would succumb to the Assyrian war machine in 721 BC. The other, Judah, would eke out an existence for another century and a half before also expiring, this time to Assyria's successor, Babylon.

At the same time that the Mesopotamians were marching westward to seek new conquests in Palestine, the nations of Israel and Judah were repeatedly straying from their covenant obligations to Yahweh. Again and again they breached their sacred promises, and in view of their disobedience, God raised up prophetic voices to challenge them. The voices of Joel, Jonah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Nahum and Obadiah all preached about the coming invader from the north. To be sure, the lifetimes of some of these prophets spanned the transition from Assyria to Babylon, when the great Assyrian overlords overreached their capacity to maintain their own national security. They allowed the Babylonians to challenge, and eventually, overrun them. Nevertheless, though the northern threat changed identities, the prophets solemnly warned that if the people of Judah did not change their ways, they would be judged by the Mesopotamian empire-builders one way or another.

Such a threat was not to Judah alone, however. All the nations in the Levant faced the terror of siege warfare and the battering rams of the Assyrians, and after them, the Babylonians. The prophets in Judah did not ignore this larger threat but announced doom to the whole area. Surprisingly, one prophet, Jonah, actually preached in the Assyrian capital, inspiring a potent, but brief, repentance among the pagans. In the end, though, the Day of Yahweh's judgment was destined to fall upon all the nations, including Judah, her Palestinian neighbors, and the arrogant power brokers of Mesopotamia, too. This northern threat-which spelled out the historical consequences of breaking the Torah-occupies the oracles of the six prophets addressed in this short study.

Historical Background

The Prophets and the Kingdom of Judah

There are two biblical histories of the kings of Judah as descended from David. The earlier one, the Kings record, is part of a larger history that begins with the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, follows with the history of the period of the judges, details the rise of the monarchy under Saul, David and Solomon, and continues the history of the divided nations of Israel and Judah after Solomon's death until their respective exiles in 721 and 586 BC. The later history, the Chronicles record, concentrates on the dynasty of David beginning with David himself and tracing his descendents through the fall of Judah, the southern nation.

Both histories agree that the line of David yielded mixed results. Some kings, such as Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Uzziah, Hezekiah and Josiah were good. Others, like Abijah, Jehoram, Ahaz, Manasseh, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah were evil. This evaluation in both the Kings and Chronicles record is essentially a moral one. Either they "did what was good and right in the eyes of Yahweh, walking in the ways of David", or they did not. The biblical assessment of kingship was strictly in covenant terms. In addition to a modest lifestyle, the Torah instructed the kings to faithfully follow the law of God, reading it regularly and carefully leading the nation in covenant obedience (Dt. 17:14-20). Cultural progress was definitely secondary!

Alongside the kings, and as a balance of moral power to offset their repeated covenant failures, a company of independent voices was heard. They were the prophets. If David had his Nathan, then Asa had his Hanani, Ahaz his Isaiah and Jehoiakim his Jeremiah. To be sure, there were court prophets who simply mimicked the royal policies and offered no critique, but the genuine prophets were not simply supporters of the status quo. They stood boldly for the covenant, denouncing without favor the covenant violators, whether royal or otherwise. In keeping with the Deuteronomic curse (Dt. 28), they announced a judgment in history upon the whole nation if the people's covenant-breaking ways were not curtailed.

The Rise of Assyria

When the Israelites first established themselves in Canaan, the only superpower they confronted was Egypt. Egypt maintained a significant presence in

Canaan both before and after the exodus.[1] About 1200 BC, the Merneptah stele records the raids of the Egyptians on various Canaanite peoples, including Ashkelon and Gezer. Especially important is the inscription, "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not."[2] However, during the period of the judges and early monarchy, Egyptian influence in Canaan was minimal. David's kingdom was allowed to flourish without restriction, while Solomon, David's son, married an Egyptian princess, thus securing at least a temporary political alliance (1 Kg. 7:8; 9:24; 11:1; 2 Chr. 8:11). When Solomon died, however, Pharaoh Shishak invaded Jerusalem and demanded tribute (1 Kg. 14:25-26; 2 Chr. 12:2-9).[3] Thereafter, the Egyptian presence in Canaan remained minimal, and Israel, Judah and her Canaanite neighbors were left, more or less, to arrange their own political schemes without significant interference.

To the north, however, another superpower was on the rise. Assyria, named after the ancient city of Asshur, lay on the Tigris River in Mesopotamia (modern northern Iraq). After several centuries of mixed fortunes, the Assyrians began expanding westward. In the Battle of Qarqar, Shalmaneser III (859-824 BC) claimed to have defeated a coalition of a dozen Canaanite kings on the Orontes River in 853 BC. Among them was "Ahab, the Israelite," who brought to the conflict two thousand chariots and 10,000 infantry.[4] In a later campaign, Shalmaneser exacted heavy tribute from several western Asiatic states, including Israel under Jehu.[5] About a century later, Tiglath-Pileser III[6] exacted tribute from Mehahem of Israel (2 Kg. 15:19-20).[7]

When Mehahem of Israel died, his son was assassinated (2 Kg. 15:24-25). The kingdom of Israel was taken over by Pekah, his assassin. Once again, Tiglath-

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[1] Given the debate about the date of the exodus, it is beyond the scope of this study to address the precise relevance of the Amarna Letters (14th century BC), the Stele of Seti I and the Stele of Ramesses II (the latter two unearthed in northern Palestine). Nevertheless, all these material remains point to an Egyptian presence.

[2] J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958), p. 231.

[3] An Egyptian record of this invasion is also contained in the Karnak list at Thebes, where Shishak includes both Judah and Israel in the list of areas he raided.

[4] This battle is not recorded in the Bible, but an Assyrian monolith inscription gives details of the conflict, cf. Pritchard, pp. 188-190.

[5] On the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III is depicted Jehu of Israel bowing before the Assyrian suzerain with the accompanying inscription, "The tribute of Jehu, son (or successor) of Omri. I received from him silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king, and wooden [....]", cf. Pritchard, p. 192.

[6] He is named "Pul" in the Hebrew Bible, an alternative throne name for Tiglath-pileser also known from a Babylonian king list.

[7] Mehahem's tribute is also recorded in an Assyrian fragment, where it says, "[As for Menahem I over]whelmed him [like a snowstorm] and he...fled like a bird, alone, [and bowed to my feet(?)]. I returned him to his place [and imposed tribute upon him, to wit:] gold, silver, linen garments with multicolored trimmings...", cf. Pritchard, p. 194.

Pileser campaigned on his western frontier, conquering Palestinian cities and deporting their citizens (2 Kg. 15:29). He seems to have been the first Assyrian king to practice mass deportation. By relocating such peoples, he hoped to defuse any patriotic resurgence. The threat of Assyria drove Pekah of Israel to form an alliance with Rezin of Damascus. Together, they tried to intimidate Judah into forming a triple alliance with them to stem the Assyrian tide (2 Kg. 16; 2 Chr. 28:1-8; Is. 7). Ahaz of Judah, petrified at the threats of Pekah and Rezin and flatly ignoring the advice of Isaiah, sent envoys to Assyria for help (2 Kg. 16:7-9; 2 Chr. 28:16)! Tiglath-Pileser was only too happy to oblige, and he responded by crushing Damascus and deporting its citizens! When Pekah, also, was assassinated, Tiglath-Pileser set up Hoshea, his assassin, as a puppet-king (2 Kg. 15:30).[8] Hoshea, the last king of the northern nation, lasted less than ten years. When Tiglath-Pileser died in 727 BC, Hoshea looked southward to Egypt for help, betraying his Assyrian suzerain by allying himself with the Egyptian Pharaoh[9] and breaking off his tribute to Assyria. The new Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V, brought the Assyrian armies back to the west to punish his rebel vassal. Samaria was put to siege, and between Shalmaneser and his successor, Sargon II, the northern nation of Israel was wiped out and ceased to exist.

Now the kings of Judah stood alone with no buffer between themselves and the Assyrian war machine! Previously, Ahaz had cheerfully offered himself as a vassal to the Assyrian king. The status of his son, Jotham, is unknown, though likely he continued tribute to Assyria. Hezekiah, however, clearly determined to throw off the Assyrian yoke when Sargon II died (2 Chr. 18:7). He was not so foolish as to believe the Assyrians would not retaliate, however, and he began elaborate preparations to defend Jerusalem in case of siege (2 Kg. 20:20; 2 Chr. 32:2-5, 30).[10] With Hezekiah's rebellion, the Assyrian army once more mobilized to punish this disloyal king of Judah. Sennacherib and the Assyrian army crushed all the fortified cities of Judah (2 Kg. 18:13; 2 Chr. 32:1).[11] The most impressive

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[8] In the same Assyrian fragment mentioned previously, the inscription of Tiglath-Pileser reads, "They overthrew their king Pekah and I placed Hoshea as king over them. I received from them 10 talents of gold, 1,000 (?) talents of silver as their [tri]bute and brought them to Assyria," cf. Pritchard, p. 194.

[9] Probably Pharaoh Osorken IV (called Pharaoh So in 2 Kg. 17:4).

[10] Hezekiah's tunnel (1,748'), dug from opposite ends by two teams starting at the Gihon Spring on the east and the Pool of Siloam on the west, intended to supply the western part of Jerusalem with water during siege. The Siloam inscription, discovered about 20' inside the tunnel from the south end, details the project, cf. Pritchard, p. 212.

[11] An Assyrian account of this campaign appears on the Prism of Sennacherib, where it says, "As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered (them) by means of well-stamped (earth-) ramps, and battering-rams brought (thus) near (to the walls) (combined with) the attack by foot soldiers, (using) mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out (of them) 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered (them) booty. Himself {Hezekiah} I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest those who

siege was against the fortress city of Lachish.[12] To buy off Sennacherib and save Jerusalem, Hezekiah offered an enormous tribute (2 Kg. 18:14-16).[13] Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, later was taken to Assyria with a hook in his nose (2 Chr. 33:11).[14]

Finally, during the reign of Josiah of Judah, the great Assyrian Empire began to break apart. A series of raids in the west by Scythians and Cimmerians broke Assyria's hold west of the Euphrates River. A Chaldean named Nebopolassar conquered Babylon and broke Assyria's hold over southern Mesopotamia. Josiah, for his part, was left free to break Judah's Assyrian vassalship, and he lost no time in doing so. As Assyria weakened and Babylon became stronger, a definitive showdown was inevitable. Assyria, for her part, was supported by Egypt, who probably felt that Assyria was the lesser of two evils. In 612 BC, the Babylonians conquered Nineveh, Assyria's capital, and continued to push westward. Remnants of the Assyrian administration fled even further west and formed a refugee government in Haran. When Pharaoh Neco of Egypt marched northward to support the faltering Assyrians, Josiah of Judah, trying to prevent such a union, interposed the Judean army between the Egyptians and Assyrians. He was mortally wounded in the conflict at Megiddo and died shortly after (2 Kg. 23:29-30; 2 Chr. 35:20-24). Jeremiah was left to compose laments for his beloved king (2 Chr. 35:25).

The Rise of Babylon

Somewhat further east and south of the Assyrian heartland lay ancient Babylon on the bank of the Euphrates. While this city had a history as ancient as that of Assyria, including the significant Middle Babylonian Period under Nebuchadnezzar I in the 12th century BC, it was during the latter period of the Assyrian Empire that Babylon began to emerge as the next great empire builder. In the 8th century, Isaiah anticipated the terrible threat the Babylonians would eventually pose to Jerusalem after Hezekiah entertained an envoy from Merodach-Baladan of Babylon (Is. 39). Not much more than a century later, the Babylonians would begin their resurgence as the central power of Mesopotamia.

It was Nebopolassar (626-605 BC) who later began the Babylonian revolt

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were leaving his city's gate," Pritchard, p. 200.

[12] Sennacherib's siege of Lachish is well-documented in the bas-reliefs of his palace in Nineveh, excavated and now residing in the British Museum. Also, the city of Lachish has been excavated, and archaeologists have uncovered the Assyrian siege ramp, the Judean counter ramp, and a mass grave with over 1500 Jewish skeletons, cf. Hershal Shanks, "Destruction of Judean Fortress Portrayed in Dramatic Eighth-Century B.C. Pictures," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1984), pp. 48-65 and D. Usshishkin, "Defensive Judean Counter-Ramp Found at Lachish in 1983 Season," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1984), pp. 66-73.

[13] Sennacherib also records this tribute in the prism mentioned above, cf. Pritchard, pp. 200-201.

[14] Assyrian records also document Manasseh's tribute to Esarhaddon, cf. Pritchard, p. 201.

against Assyria that would end with Assyrian collapse. He attacked the Assyrian garrisons in northern Babylonia in 627 BC, and by 620 BC, he has driven the Assyrians out of his territory. When the Assyrians tried to reclaim their presence in lower Mesopotamia in 616-615 BC, Nebuchadnezzar II, the crown prince of Babylon, drove them back into Assyria proper, thus preparing the way for a full-scale Babylonian invasion. In 614 BC, the Babylonians followed their advantage by attacking and destroying Asshur, and two years later, in 612 BC, they sacked Nineveh as well. Now the Assyrians were forced to retreat to northwest Mesopotamia, where they formed a refugee government in Haran, but the Babylonians did not rest until they had confronted the Assyrian army and her ally, Egypt, at Haran in 609 BC. In 605 BC, the Egyptian armies marched north once more to try to revive what was left of the old empire, but Nebuchanezzar defeated them at Carchemish. Now, as the writer in 2 Kings 24:7 recorded, "The king of Babylon had taken all his territory, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Euphrates River."[15]

This, then, is the realpolitik that forms the background for the six prophets we shall now examine. For them, the political movements of Mesopotamia were no more than tools in the hands of Yahweh. The future would not be determined by the aspirations of the empire-builders, but rather, by the faithfulness of lack of faithfulness on the part of God's covenant people. It is to these prophetic voices that we now turn.

The Twelve

The traditional pattern has been to divide the prophets into "major" and "minor" categories. Such nomenclature has more to do with the length of the books than their significance, however. Originally, the writers of the minor prophets were collected in a single scroll in the Hebrew Bible called "The Twelve" (Sirach 49:10). The reason for their order seems to have been chronological, so that Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah belong to the period of the supremacy of Assyrian power, while Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah belong to the period of Assyrian decline. Last, of course, are those belonging to the Persian Period-Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.[16]

In the present treatment, we shall pass over the earlier 8th century prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah), which are better treated together because of their common themes of social justice, as well as the later voices from the Persian Period. Here,

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[15] D. Wiseman, *ISBE* (1979) I.385-386, 395.

[16] O.Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 383-384.

we will address those prophets whose oracles most directly confronted the Mesopotamian threat.

Joel

Background

Little is known about Joel ben Pethuel other than his name and his father's name (1:1). The name Joel is not unusual in itself (there are several other "Joels" in the Hebrew Bible), and its meaning, "Yahweh is God," is appropriate for the Israelite community. He seems to have lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem since, though he was not a priest himself (1:9, 13; 2:17), he possessed a detailed knowledge of temple life (1:13; 2:13-17).

The date of the book is widely debated. Unlike most of the other prophetic books which correlate the careers of the prophets with the kings of Israel and Judah, Joel is entirely devoid of any clear historical connections. The Israelites who first made the collection of The Twelve seem to have considered it to have been early, given their placement of it right after Hosea, which can be confidently dated to the 8th century BC (Ho. 1:1). That Judah still faced such enemies as the Philistines, Edomites, Egyptians and Phoenicians (3:4, 19) fits well with an earlier date. However, the remarkable reference to the Greeks (3:6) as the raiders of Jerusalem and Judah have persuaded many if not all scholars to adopt a late date, perhaps as late as the Greek expansion under Alexander the Great in the 4th century. This latter reference, however, may not refer to a full scale conquest, but rather, to the intermittent raids of Greek slave-traders who ventured as far as Palestine in search of quarry. In the end, no consensus on dating holds the field. Here, we shall follow the minority opinion and treat Joel as one of prophets who collectively addressed the Assyrian threat from the north, though admittedly this approach must be provisional.

Structure

The Book of Joel falls naturally into three parts, the *locust plague* (1:2-2:17), the *restoration* (2:18-27), and *Yahweh's salvation and judgment* to the nations (2:28-3:21). The clearest division is the introductory clause in 2:28, "And it will be after this..." It may be noted that in the Hebrew Bible the verse enumeration is different, with the English verses 2:28-32 appearing as 3:1-5 in the Masoretic Text, while chapter 3 in the English Bible corresponds to chapter 4 in the Masoretic Text.

The Locust Plague

The Locusts (1:2-12)

The opening of the book describes the horror of a locust invasion, an image also employed by Amos (7:1-3) and Jeremiah (51:14, 27). The desert locusts of the Levant mature in three stages, the *larva stage* in which the wingless creatures hop, the *walking stage* before the wings emerge from the sack, and the *flying stage* after the wings are functional. At all stages, the locusts are destructive, devastating the local vegetation.[17] Once started, a locust horde is impossible to stop until it has stripped the entire landscape.

Joel uses four names to describe the invaders as they came in successive waves to cover the land (1:2-4). While the four names clearly describe locusts, it is unclear how to differentiate between them. Some interpreters regard the terms as pointing to developmental stages of maturity, described above, while others simply see them as a rhetorical device intended to emphasize their destructive patterns.[18]

There is little doubt that Joel's oracle recalls the covenant curses for disobedience that were clearly spelled out in the Torah (Lv. 26:14ff.; Dt. 28:15ff.). In fact, locusts are one of the very judgments specified (Dt. 28:38, 42). Furthermore, in the deuteronomic curses the locusts of judgment are harbingers of a foreign invasion (Dt. 28:36-37, 41, 47-48). Just as locusts eat all the vegetation (1:6-7), so the foreign invaders would devour the crops of the land (Dt. 28:51). In the New Testament, John will borrow this locust imagery to describe the invasion of the earth by demons from the Abyss (Rv. 9:1-11).

While most interpreters agree that Joel probably envisions an actual plague of insects, there are several reasons why many interpreters believe his description is a metaphor for something more. In the first place, the prophet depicts the invader as "a nation" (1:6). Later, these hordes will be termed the northern army (2:20). In their invasion, they appear like horses, cavalry, chariotry and an army drawn up in battle formation (2:4-5). They scale the walls and charge the defenses (2:7-9). Of course, it is possible simply to read these descriptions as only metaphors for the locusts themselves, but if Joel preached as early as the late 8th century BC, then the locust plague may anticipate the Assyrian war machine. Already, the Assyrians had begun devouring the nations in the Levant. Syria, Tyre, Sidon, Israel and Judah all felt the sting of the Assyrian scourge. The citizens of Damascus were deported (2

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[17] G. Keown, *ISBE* (1986) III.149-150.

[18] The NIV translation as "locust swarm," "great locusts", "young locusts" and "other locusts" avoids any developmental precision. Other options are "cutting locust", "swarming locust", "hopping locust" and "destroying locust" (RSV); "cutter", "swarm", "grasshopper" and "devourer" (NAB); "locust", "swarm", "hopper" and "grub" (NEB).

Kg. 16:9). Eventually, Israel, Judah's immediate neighbor to the north, also would go into exile in 721 BC (2 Kg. 17). Furthermore, there is a change in verbal tense that should be observed. The locust plague in chapter one is described in the perfect tense (1:4, 6-7, 10-12). The alarm in chapter 2 anticipates something still to come and is developed in the imperfect tense. Therefore, it seems justified to interpret the locust plague of chapter 1 as a past event, a natural one, that anticipates another calamity, a political one.

In view of this terrible invasion, Joel urges the apathetic citizens of Judah to wake up (1:5)! They seem to be as oblivious to the tragedy as drunkards. They should lament this terrible plague that had ruined all resources for offerings at the temple (1:8-9, 16) and wiped out the entire agricultural economy (1:10-12, 17-20). More to the point, they must realize that this plague was only a sign of worse things on the horizon!

THE DAY OF YAHWEH

...the day of Yahweh has a broad semantic range. On the one hand, it can refer to a historical judgment as specific as the invasion by the Assyrians or Babylonians. On the other, it can refer to an indeterminate future far beyond the events of the exile. Isaiah in southern Israel could speak of the day of Yahweh as 'a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger' (Isa. 13:9). It would be a time of darkness and punishment for sin (Isa. 13:10-11), a day when God would bring low the arrogant power-brokers of the world (Isa. 2:12-21). A century later, Zephaniah, anticipating Babylon's attack upon Judah, similarly spoke of the day of the Lord as a period of darkness, gloom, invasion, and tragedy (Zeph. 1:14-18). Jeremiah (ch. 46) used the same metaphor to predict Pharaoh Neco's defeat by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish (605 B.C.), a defeat confirmed by the cuneiform Babylonian Chronicles. Ezekiel used "day of Yahweh" to refer to the fall of Israel (Ezek. 7:19), later to the fall of Jerusalem (Ezek. 13:5), and still later to the Babylonian invasion of Egypt (Ezek. 30:3-4). Obadiah saw it as the day of judgment upon all nations, but especially upon Edom because of its violence against Israel (Obad. 15; cf. Ps. 137:7).

Daniel J. Lewis, *Three Crucial Questions About the Last Days*

The Call to Repent (1:13-20)

The covenantal solution to the curses of judgment is always repentance. *If they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers-their treachery against me and their hostility toward me...I will remember my covenant...and I will remember the land* (Lv. 26:40-42; Dt. 30:1-10). We know from both the Kings record and the Chronicles record that Judah's history was a patchwork of covenant violations. Beyond that, archaeological excavations demonstrate Judah's propensity for syncretism with Canaanite religion.[19]

[19] Southern Judah, pithoi (storage jars) contain inscriptions describing Asherah as the consort of Yahweh, a clear

Joel now holds forth the covenantal call for repentance to which the priests, ministers and elders should lead the response (1:13-14).[20] What the nation had experienced in the locust invasion was only a harbinger of what they yet faced! What would come next was no mere natural calamity; it was the judgment of God in history. Like others before him (Am. 5:18-20; Is. 13:9), Joel calls this judgment the Day of Yahweh (1:15).

Yahweh's Army of Judgment (2:1-11)

If the plague of locusts was what had happened already, the Day of Yahweh was what was about to happen! The war trumpet, the *shophar*, was the signal for alarm and invasion.[21] Zion and the temple were in danger (2:1), for the Day of Yahweh was coming. Like Amos and Isaiah before him, Joel describes the Day of Yahweh as doomsday (2:2a). What had happened in the locust invasion was only the prelude to Yahweh's more thorough scourge of judgment, the invasion of a new and frightening enemy from the north that was unlike anything the Israelites had ever seen before (2:2b). The repeated mention of fire (2:3; cf. 1:19) may be only a metaphor for the destructive onslaught of this invading host, or, it may refer to the regular burning of cities during siege warfare.[22]

To be sure, Joel's description is hyperbolic. He describes chariots leaping over the mountains (2:5) and stellar bodies in decline (2:10, 31). This is typical poetic exaggeration. At the same time, the apocalyptic description concerning the sky, sun, moon and stars is one that resurfaces in several of the prophetic oracles regarding the Day of Yahweh (Is. 13:10; 24:18b-23; 34:4; Je. 4:23-24, 28; Eze. 32:7-8), and the imagery continues on into the New Testament in Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Mk. 13:24-25//Mt. 24:29//Lk. 21:25-26) and the Revelation of John (Rv. 6:12). This sort of language describes the appropriate response of the universe to the theophany of God. Since it is the Day of Yahweh, when he intervenes in history, the elements recoil at his manifested presence. Such language recalls the theophany of Yahweh at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:16-25), and it appears in various other oracles where theophanies are described (Ps. 18:7-15; 46:6; 68:7-8; 77:16-19;

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confusion of Ba'al worship and Yahweh worship, cf. Ze'ev Meshel, *BAR* (Mar/Apr. 1979), pp.24-35.

[20] Sackcloth (a rough fabric made of woven goat or camel hair) worn next to the skin and fasting were typically associated with public mourning and social protest in biblical times. Both were physical elements of discomfort symbolizing spiritual discomfort and repentance.

[21] The Bible distinguishes between two types of horns, the *shophar* or *qeren* (made from natural animal horns) and the *hasos'ra* (made from beaten metal). English translations frequently render them both "trumpets," thus confusing them. The *shophar*, as mentioned here, is essentially a signaling instrument, especially in war, to issue a call to arms, to warn of impending assault or to sound a retreat, cf. D. Foxvag and A. Kilmer, *ISBE* (1986) III.439.

[22] The regular discovery of layers of ash in the excavated tells of Israel testify to the frequency with which ancient cities were destroyed by burning them to the ground.

97:2-5; 104:32; Hab. 3:3-6).

This particular theophany was Yahweh, the *'ish milhamah* (= man of war), who once delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh and his armies at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:3). This time, however, he was not coming to deliver his people; he was coming to judge them by invasion (2:11). The fury of the coming invasion is graphically described (2:5-9), and at the head of this army is not the Assyrian monarch, but Yahweh himself (2:11a). Like Amos, when he warned the northern nation to prepare to meet God (Am. 4:12), and like Isaiah, who called the Assyrians the war club of Yahweh's anger (Is. 10:5), Joel now depicts the invaders as Yahweh's army. The dreadful Day of Yahweh was at hand, and the poignant question remained, "Who will survive?"

Returning to Yahweh (2:12-17)

An important Hebrew verb for repenting is *shuv* (= to turn, return, turn around). Because of the range of nuances, it lends itself to word plays, and Joel uses one here in his call for repentance. If the people of Judah will *turn* (2:12-13), then Yahweh will *turn* (2:14). They must turn to him with their whole hearts, however. Real repentance-the people of Judah's decision to turn from their covenant disobedience-was a matter of the heart. While gestures of repentance, such as fasting, lament and tearing one's clothes,[23] were appropriate, they meant nothing without an internal change of heart. Hosea, similarly, points out the emptiness of superficial repentance when he indicts the citizens of the north: "They do not cry out to me from their hearts but wail upon their beds" (Ho. 7:14). Hence, Joel urges that the people must "rend their hearts, not their garments" (2:13a). Yahweh, by his very nature, is merciful and forgiving.

Joel's quotation from the covenant theophany on Mt. Sinai that Yahweh is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (2:13b; Ex. 34:6-7) calls his audience to a personal recognition of God's willingness to forgive. Similarly, the prophet Ezekiel pointed out that Yahweh did not take pleasure in the deaths of the wicked, but rather, was pleased when the wicked turned from their ways (Eze. 18:23). So, Joel holds out the opportunity to avoid the disaster that threatens. If the people will turn back to Yahweh, he may turn back from the judgment that loomed and instead send a blessing (2:14).

Theologically, of course, this bold affirmation that God may announce a coming disaster and then withhold it in view of repentance is not unique to Joel.

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[23] In the ancient Near East, the act of tearing one's clothes was a cultural gesture of self-despair and consternation (and remains so today). Such actions typically were demonstrated upon the death of a relative or in the face of a great calamity (cf. Ge. 37:29; 44:13; 1 Sa. 4:12; 2 Sa. 13:31; Mt. 26:65), cf. *ISBE* (1979) I.725.

Jeremiah, in much the same way, remarks that even the prophetic word of judgment is not irreversible if the nation that is warned repents of its evil (Je. 18:7-10).

So, the call to turn is issued again in clarion terms. Once more, the *shophar* of warning is to be blown, signaling the threat from the north and calling the people to assemble for a solemn convocation of repentance (2:15a; cf. 2:1). In view of the dire necessity of a true change of heart, no one is exempt. Elders, children and those newly married-all must respond (2:16)!

Leading the way, the priests must intercede for the nation. The expression "between the porch and the altar" locates the place of intercession as in front of the entrance to the temple (2:17). The porch refers to the vestibule of the temple, an entrance in which the roof was supported by two huge columns (1 Kg. 6:3; 7:21-22; 2 Chr. 3:15-17). The altar, the place of burnt offerings, stood just outside the Holy Place. Here, in the court of the priests (2 Chr. 4:9), they must represent the nation, crying for mercy and expressing a deep change of heart. One of the sworn judgments of covenant violation was that Israel would become an object of scorn among the nations (Dt. 28:37). This disaster must be averted if possible, for if it happened, the disaster not only would affect the people of Judah, it would be a mark against God's own name (2:17b). The rhetorical question on the lips of the pagans, "Where is their God?", is in much the same mood as Ezekiel's indictment when he said that Judah had "profaned God's name among the nations" (Eze. 20:9, 14, 22; 36:20-23).

The Restoration

If the Day of Yahweh was an acronym for doomsday, it was also a bright promise of hope after judgment. Judgment was never Yahweh's final word. The blessings that had been withheld in judgment would be restored (2:18-19). The northern invaders would be driven away (2:20), the primary body pushed into the desert south of Judah with the flanks on either side perishing in the Dead Sea (i.e., "eastern sea") and the Mediterranean (i.e., "western sea"). Here, Joel clearly seems to revert back to the vision of locusts which, as in the locust plague in Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh, were pushed into the sea (cf. Ex. 10:18-19). The olfactory imagery of the stench of the locust carcasses is striking and vivid. However, the destruction of northern invading armies, after they have served as Yahweh's rod of punishment against Judah, is a repeating theme in several prophets and is applied in a much wider way than just for locusts (cf. Is. 14:24-27; Je. 30:16; Eze. 38:1-6; 39:1-6; Zec. 12:1-9). It is likely that Joel, too, envisions something much greater than a natural locust horde.

When the northern invaders have been overturned, the land once more will

produce the crops that the locusts destroyed (2:21-22). In this restoration, Yahweh would give to the nation a "*moreh* (= teacher or rain) of righteousness" (2:23a).[24] The coming teacher/rain would restore to the nation all that it had lost, repaying its citizens for the devastation of the locusts (2:23b-25). The shame of judgment would be removed, and a true covenantal relationship would flourish among the people (2:26-27).

It is hard not to be attracted to the expression "teacher of righteousness" as a prophecy of Christ. To be sure, there are two arguments against this interpretation. One is the linguistic option, based on context, that the phrase should be translated "rain of righteousness" rather than "teacher of righteousness." However, the Jews in the time of Jesus surely understood it in the messianic sense. The other argument against the christological interpretation is that no where is this passage appealed to in the New Testament as messianic. Would the apostles have overlooked such an obvious text? Of course, there is no reason to assume that Jesus or the apostles cited every messianic passage available to them. Jesus seems to have offered a whole litany of messianic correlations when "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27). Perhaps this passage in Joel may have been among them. Also, it may be that Jesus deliberately avoided the title "teacher of righteousness," because it might have been associated with the Jewish revolutionary movement. He seems to have avoided the title *messiah*, at least during his public ministry, for the same reason (cf. Mk. 1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). In the end, the issue cannot be pressed. Still, in the view of the present author, the messianic interpretation fits well with the succeeding passage about the outpouring of the messianic gift of the Spirit, and it is to be preferred.

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[24] The Hebrew spelling *moreh* is a homonym for the words "archer," "rain" and "teacher." In rendering the phrase "*moreh* of righteousness," the first choice makes no contextual sense. Many versions opt for the middle choice (so NEB, NASB, KJV, ASV, RSV), especially since the succeeding lines use the same word *moreh* along with g*eshem* (= rain shower) to describe the autumn and spring rains. It is curious to note that early editions of the NIV used "teacher" in the text and "rain" in the marginal note, but later editions reverse this order. The third alternative, "teacher," seems to have been the choice of the early Jewish community in a messianic sense, since this was the rendering in the Targums (so also, NAB, Vulgate, NASBmg), cf. L. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 92-93, note 26. The LXX, on the other hand, opted for "rain" as the correct rendering. The Qumran community may well have relied on the translation as "teacher" for the title of their famous "teacher of righteousness," since the exact words of Joel 2:23 are found several times in the Habakkuk commentary discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, cf. W. LaSor, *ISBE* (1979) I.892. For an extensive linguistic argument in favor of "teacher," see C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. J. Martin (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) I.205-207.

Yahweh's Salvation and Judgment to the Nations

The Blessing of Salvation and the Gift of the Spirit (2:28-32)

The opening of Joel's final section (2:28) is marked with the expression *'ahare-ken* (= after this). It is apparent that "after this" refers to what follows the restoration and the coming of the *moreh* of righteousness. Whatever the translation of *moreh*, such a restoration was clearly understood in a messianic sense, as voiced by the disciples when they asked the risen Christ, "Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Ac. 1:6). While the messianic interpretation of *moreh* of righteousness is debatable, the gift of the Spirit is not. At Pentecost, Peter clearly identified the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to be the direct fulfillment of this passage (Ac. 2:14-21). It is instructive to note that Peter even paraphrased Joel's "after this" to mean "in the last days" (Ac. 2:17a). Such an expression is typical of the semantic range of prophetic predictions.

The prophets seemed to have employed a technique that we call double entendre, that is, their statements sometimes embraced two meanings. The double meanings in their predictions might point to some well-defined event in the near future, but also some more ambiguous climax in the indeterminate future.[25] It is the prophets' penchant for double entendre that makes the words of Joel available for Peter to apply to the events at Pentecost. Obviously, the locust invasion (and the northern army) were threats in the ancient history of Israel. Still, the prophecies, especially the predictions of restoration, were not exhausted in ancient times. They stretched ahead to "the last days."

This future would see the gift of the Spirit poured out on all people, both men and women (2:28-29). Such a future also was envisioned by Isaiah, who saw the Spirit to be given first to God's coming Servant (11:2; 42:1; 61:1) and then to the people (32:15; 44:3; 59:21). Both Ezekiel (Eze. 11:19; 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29) and Zechariah (12:10) anticipated the gift of the Spirit as well. That the Spirit was for all, not merely specially chosen individuals, pointed to a new era. Old and young, sons and daughters, and people of all stations would be the benefactors!

This future would not be a time of blessing only, however. There would also be judgment, for it would be the eschatological Day of Yahweh. Once more (cf. 2:10), the images of apocalyptic judgment and the shaking of the universe are superimposed over the message of future salvation. Whether these images of doom are to be interpreted as predictions of literal events or simply exaggerated language typical of apocalyptic literature is debated.[26] What seems to be the clear

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[25] D. Lewis, *3 Crucial Questions About the Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 33-34.

[26] Some interpreters, of course, believe them to be actual historical events that will accompany the return of Christ,

understanding of the apostles, in any case, is that the promise of salvation to anyone who would call on the name of the Lord was fulfilled in the preaching of the Christian gospel to the nations (2:32; cf. Ro. 10:10-13; Ac. 2:21, 39). The Hebrew root *sh-r-d* (rendered in the word "survivors") is one of the classic descriptions of the remnant, those who are left over after the judgment. The remnant will be delivered in the salvation of the Lord (3:32; cf. Is. 59:20-21).[27] John draws from Joel's vision of salvation on Mt. Zion when he describes the 144,000 victors standing with the triumphant Lamb (Rv. 14:1).

The Judgment of the Nations (3:1-16)

If the future held forth the blessing of salvation and the gift of the Spirit, it also held forth Yahweh's judgment of the nations. The expression "in those days" and "at that time" coordinates the salvation of Judah and Jerusalem with the judgment of the Day of Yahweh (3:1; cf. 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14). The nations will be assembled at the great assizes to be prosecuted by Yahweh, who serves as both prosecutor and judge (3:2a). The title "Valley of Jehoshaphat" does not correspond with any known location in ancient Israel, but apparently it was chosen because of the meaning of the name Jehoshaphat (= Yahweh judges).[28]

The charges against the nations center around their treatment of the people of Judah (3:2b-3). They had sent the people of Jerusalem and Judah into exile, selling their children into slavery for the paltry benefits of sex and liquor. The more obvious offenders were surely the Assyrians and Babylonians; however, the Phoenicians and Philistines are indicted as well, since they, too, looted the land of Judah, taking booty and selling Israelite slaves to the Greeks (3:4-6). We know from Amos that slave-trading was a known vocation among both the Philistines and the Phoenicians in the 8th century BC (Am. 1:6, 9). In Amos, it is the Edomites who buy the Israelite slaves, while in Joel it is the Greeks. That the Philistines and Phoenicians were both coastal peoples probably accounts for their commerce in human merchandise with Aegean slave-traders. Nevertheless, the Israelite slaves,

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especially because the same language is picked up by Jesus (Mk. 13:24-25//Mt. 24:29//Lk. 21:25-26) and John (Rv. 6:12). Others see such language as largely symbolic of the fall of political powers, a type of symbolism that is characteristic of apocalyptic literature, cf. Testament of Moses 10:5; 1 Enoch 80:4-6; Sibylline Oracles 3.801-3; 2 Esdras 5:4-5. In either case, whether literal or symbolic, the disruption of the heavenlies is an expected response to a theophany of God.

[27] For the possibility that Joel 3:32b is a quotation of Obadiah 17, see the comments in the introduction to Obadiah.

[28] It is a curiosity that the three major religious groups in Palestine--Jews, Christians and Muslims—all come to the conclusion that a portion of the KidronValley on the east of Jerusalem will be the scene of the last judgment. Many tombs dot the hillside (Muslims on the western slope and Jews on the eastern slope). Jewish tradition holds that the part of the valley between the temple mount and the Mt. of Olives is the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Hence, the Lion Gate (St. Stephen's Gate) in Jerusalem was formerly known as the Gate of the Valley of Jehoshaphat, cf. W. LaSor, *ISBE* (1982) II.979-980.

who once were sold to the Greeks, would be revived, and the children of the Philistines and Phoenicians one day would be sold as slaves to the Israelites (7-8), who in turn would sell them to the Bedouins of southern Arabia![29] Thus, the penalty is the *lex talionis*-repayment in kind. In later history, the citizens of Sidon in Phoenicia indeed were sold into slavery by Antiochus III (345 BC), while the citizens of Tyre (Phoenicia) and Gaza (Philistia) were enslaved by Alexander (332 BC). Jews may very well have been among the buyers![30]

So, judgment was coming! There would be no escape! The nations may as well prepare for war (3:9-11), for in their antagonism against God's people they had become antagonists of God! Their opponent would be none other than Yahweh. This call to arms is likely the inspiration for John's description of the demon-couriers who muster the armies of the nations for the last great battle at Armageddon (Rv. 16:13-16). Joel obviously offers a temporary parody on the vision of peace anticipated by Isaiah and Micah (Is. 2:4; Mic. 4:3). Before the nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, they will make weapons with which to fight against Yahweh. They will advance to the Valley of Yahweh's Judgment (Valley of Jehoshaphat), there to confront the sovereign Judge of all nations (3:12).

To Yahweh, the assembly of defiant nations is like a vineyard ready for harvest. The grapes were ripe for the divine sickle, and the nations would be crushed in Yahweh's anger (3:13). In the New Testament, John draws deeply from this same imagery when he envisions the reaping of the earth (Rv. 14:14-20; 19:11-15; cf. Is. 63:1-6). It is the Day of Yahweh; the destiny of multitudes will be decided (3:14)! Joel repeats the imagery of the disintegration of the universe at the theophany of God (3:15-16a). Yet, for the people of God, there will be safety and refuge (3:16b). They will not come under judgment!

The Blessing of Salvation for God's People (3:17-21)

The images of blessing are juxtaposed with the images of abandonment. While the people of Judah and Zion will be blessed with peace, security and incredible abundance (3:17-18),[31] Egypt and Edom, because of their treatment of the citizens of Judah, will be deserted (3:19). Forever, the people of Judah and Jerusalem will live in the light of Yahweh's forgiveness (3:20-21)! The theme of God's dwelling place in Zion (3:17) is reaffirmed in the final line, "Yahweh dwells in Zion" (3:21b). It is the refrain of the people of God ever after, for "now the

[29] The Sabeans (Sheba) were ancient inhabitants of the southwestern part of the Arabian peninsula.

[30] Allen, p. 114.

[31] The "wadi of acacias" is an unknown location, but presumably it was a hot, dry gorge like the many others than run down toward the Dead Sea.

dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rv. 21:3).

These same images of blessing and abandonment are part of John's description of the holy city in the New Testament.

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murders, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood (Rv. 22:14-15).

Jonah

Background

Outside the book that bears his name, the only mention of Jonah ben Amittai (or John in more modern form) is 2 Kings 14:25, which puts the prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II (c. 793-753 BC),[32] the tenth king of the northern nation Israel. Jeroboam II's reign in Israel was a period of resurgence and prosperity, and apparently the ministry of Jonah figured in this cultural revival. The Kings record says that Jeroboam II's northward expansion into the area of Hamath and Syria and his southward encroachment into Judah was "in accordance with the word of Yahweh, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah ben Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher." Jeroboam II's reign is the background behind the other northern prophets, Amos and Hosea. A wide range of archaeological discovery demonstrates the prosperity of the period.[33] During Jeroboam II's reign, the threat of Assyria may have seemed remote, but the voices of Amos and Hosea declared that a dark cloud was appearing on the northern horizon, and it would bring disaster to the people of Israel (Am. 3:8-15; 6:8-14; Ho. 5:8-15; 8:1-14). Like Joel in the south, Amos preached in the north that the Day of Yahweh would soon come (Am. 5:18-20; cf. Joel 2:1-2; 3:14).

Jonah came from the village of Gath Hepher (= winepress of the well), a Galilean border town in the territory of Zebulun (Jos. 19:13) about three miles northeast of Nazareth.[34] Unlike Amos and Hosea, however, the message of the

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[32] While dating the kings of Israel and Judah are always a knotty problem, here we will follow the chronology of Thiele, cf. E. Thiele, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 39-45, 76-77.

[33] Extensive collections of ivory, for instance, from Megiddo and Samaria demonstrate the prosperity of the north at this time, cf. H. Shanks, "Ancient Ivory: The Story of Wealth, Decadence and Beauty," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1985) pp. 41-53

[34] Of course, this means that the Pharisees were wrong when they said no prophet ever came from Galilee (Jn. 7:52). Concerning this passage, however, some early manuscripts read "the prophet" rather than "a prophet" (p66 and p75), thus referring to the messianic prophet like Moses.

Book of Jonah does not address the sins of the northern nation. Rather, it describes a missionary trip to Nineveh, one of the principle cities of the Assyrian Empire that would eventually destroy Samaria and Israel.[35] Furthermore, unlike any of the other prophets, the book was not written as a collection of prophetic oracles, but rather, as the narrative story of the prophet who was called to preach in a pagan city.

The Critical Questions

Any modern student of the Book of Jonah must address two critical issues with regard to this book-whether or not the Jonah in the book was a real person and whether or not the story of the big fish is credible. The historical issues arose from modern critical scholars who pointed out several supposed inaccuracies in the book. Some of these charges, such as, the improbability of a man being swallowed by a fish,[36] were derived largely from a theological rejection of miracles. Another is that the dramatic conversion of the Ninevites to Hebrew monotheism has no corroboration in extensively excavated Assyrian records. Still another is the size of Nineveh as described in the book. The city's 120,000 citizens and the three days journey to traverse it seem extraordinarily large (Jon. 4:11; 3:3).[37]

Consequently, an allegorical or parabolic approach was developed. Here, the story was believed to have been composed after the exile as a short story. It was intended to drive home the theological point that God was not confined to the chosen community of Jews, and that his mercy embraced even the nations who were the enemies of the Jews. As such, then, any sort of narrow-minded nationalism was misplaced.[38] Jonah's name, which means "dove," was sometimes believed to symbolize the nation of Israel (cf. Ho. 11:11; Ps. 74:19), and Jonah's

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[35] Asshur, while remaining the formal cult center of the state, lost some of its status when significant administrative functions were moved to Nineveh by Tukulti-Ninurta II in the early 9th century BC. By the early 7th century BC, under Sennacherib, Nineveh became the primary center of population, and the administrative head of the whole empire, cf. J. Curtis and J. Reade,eds., *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1995), pp. 23, 28.

[36] The word improbable is better than impossible inasmuch as there have been a few remarkable occasions when humans have been swallowed by large fish, cf. R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Gran Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 907-908. To be sure, whales proper have such a narrow gullet that they can swallow only comparatively small fish; however, it must be pointed out that the Hebrew text is not nearly so specific as "whale," but rather, speaks of a "large fish" (Jon. 1:17).

[37] Here, again, the biblical record is not so extraordinary as first supposed. Archaeological excavations show that the city was quite large, with walls enclosing 720 hectares (almost 1800 acres or just under three square miles), cf. Curtis and Reade, p. 28. Of course, the entire administrative district of Nineveh was much larger than the walled metropolis. Donald Wiseman, noted British Assyriologist, says that estimates of a population as large as 175,000 are credible, especially since nearby Nimrud (Calah), a city less than half the size of Nineveh, had a recorded population of 69,574 in 865 BC. With respect to the time it took to traverse the city, there are other possible interpretations of that description that make it credible (see footnote #44), cf. D. Wiseman, "Nineveh," *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed, ed. J. Douglas (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1982), p. 837.

[38] B. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

flight to Tarshish symbolized Israel's default in her mission as God's representative to the nations. In the return from exile, Israel (the dove) now had a new opportunity to become a missionary people.

While the main point of the allegorical/parabolic interpretation is surely true, that is, that God's concern for humans had much wider parameters than just the Jewish nation, there are equally grave difficulties for this approach. It would seem incredible, for instance, that a Jewish writer from Judah would choose such an obscure prophet as Jonah from northern Israel as the *nom de plume* for his fiction. The later Judean retort, "Look into it, and you will find that no prophet comes out of Galilee!", seems more typical (Jn. 7:52). Especially since the northern tribes did not return to the land of Israel after the exile, the allegorical suggestion of a second chance for them to be missionaries symbolized by a northern prophet seems particularly dubious.

It seems better, then, to allow the story of Jonah to stand within the historical framework of the 8th century BC. Certainly Jesus seems to have considered Jonah and his "fish story" to have been a real occurrence (Mt. 12:39-41; Lk. 11:29-30, 32). The historical objections are not insuperable, and in any case, the rejection of the traditional view because one also rejects *a priori* that God performs the miraculous says more about the interpreter than it does about the story of Jonah.

Jonah's Call (1:1-3)

The story of Jonah unfolds in five dramatic scenes. The first is Jonah's commission from Yahweh to go to Nineveh and preach (1:1-3). Like other prophets, the commission from Yahweh is stated simply, "The word of Yahweh came to Jonah..." (1:1). The sins of Nineveh were known to God, and the antidote to sin was a preaching prophet (1:2).

Jonah, however, decided to run from his calling. Actually, the text says that he ran "from the face of Yahweh" (1:3). The reason for his flight is not stated until later (cf. 4:2), but most interpreters reasonably suggest that he knew such a commission implied that God, whose nature is always to show mercy, might allow the city to survive if it repented. This could only mean disaster for Israel, since the Assyrians were already threatening in the west. As the book will later demonstrate, Jonah not only had a problem with his calling, he had a problem with God's ways. He wanted no part of this divine penchant for mercy to such hated people as the Assyrians!

So, Jonah booked passage from Joppa, the primary seaport along the central coast of Palestine, and he headed for Tarshish, a destination westward in the

Mediterranean.[39] It goes without saying that this was in precisely the opposite direction as Nineveh.

From this point onward, there is a subtle but definite play on the downward movement of the prophet based on uses or implied uses of the Hebrew verb *yarad* (= to do down).[40]

- Jonah *went down* to Joppa (1:3)
- He *went down* below the deck during the storm (1:5)
- He went down into the water (implied)
- He went down into the fish (implied)
- He *went down* to the bottom of the sea (2:6)

To run from the face of the Lord is always a downward spiral!

The Stubborn Prophet (1:4-16)

It may be hard to appreciate the shocking description of a true prophet running from Yahweh. Usually in Israelite history, when a prophet was told, "Arise and go to such-and-such a place," he obeyed immediately and without question (cf. 1 Kg. 17:9-10). Not so with Jonah! Nevertheless, though Jonah turned from the face of Yahweh, he never escaped the long arm of Yahweh. God sent such a violent storm that the ship was in danger of disintegrating (1:4). Though the sailors lightened the weight by throwing overboard some of the cargo, nothing seemed to help (1:4).

The sailors were pagans who did not serve Jonah's God (1:5). To make matters worse, Jonah quite frankly confessed to them that he was aboard only because he was running away from God's commission (cf. 1:10b), an action that must have seemed strange, even to pagans. While they struggled to keep the ship afloat, Jonah slept below deck. When the captain confronted him, his words were not, "Why aren't you helping," but "Why aren't you praying" (1:6). Why, indeed? The sailors decided to cast lots to find out if there was some culprit aboard whom one of the gods was trying to punish. The lot fell on Jonah, who confessed his nationality and his faith (1:7-9). When the sailors queried him, he told them the only solution was to throw him overboard (1:10-12). He would rather drown in the

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[39] The name Tarshish is associated with the Mediterranean but also with Arabia. Here, the destination was in the Mediterranean, since the port for Tarshish in Arabia was Ezion-geber (2 Ch. 20:36). Several possible Mediterranean sites have been offered, ranging from Spain to Italy to North Africa to the south coast of modern Turkey, cf. *ISBE* (1988) IV.734. The most popular of them is Spain.

[40] The Hebrew language is rich in verbs meaning "to go," but the verb used here means "to go down."

sea than go to Nineveh and preach!

Still, the sailors tried to save Jonah's life. They rowed for land, but the storm overpowered them until, finally, they desperately began to pray to Jonah's God, Yahweh (1:13-14)! This is the consummate irony. Jonah, a true prophet, runs from Yahweh, while pagan sailors desperately pray for Yahweh to hear them! Finally, with no other solution open, they pitched Jonah overboard. The sea then became calm, and the sailors, in yet another irony, offered sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows to him (1:15-16).

Then comes the final irony. Jonah, who would rather drown than do God's bidding, was prevented from drowning. Yahweh prepared a great fish to swallow him for three whole days (1:17)!

The Hebrew phrase *dag gadol* (= great fish) is far less specific than the traditional English New Testament versions that used the word "whale" (Mt. 12:40, KJV, ASV). Even the Greek term *ketos* (= sea monster) is not so specific. Thus, the text is silent concerning exactly what kind of fish is intended. Of course, plankton-eating whales, with their small gullets, are incapable of swallowing a human apart from miraculous intervention. The great toothed whales, on the other hand, eat giant squid and seals, so they would be quite capable of swallowing a man. No matter the kind of fish, the element of the miraculous is present throughout, from God's provision of the great animal to his sustenance of Jonah while he was in the fish's belly.

Jonah's Prayer (2:1-10)

Unlike the narrative sections, which all appear in the third person, chapter 2 of the book is Jonah's first person prayer of distress composed in poetry. From inside the fish he prayed (2:1), and his opening words, "In my distress I called to the LORD" (2:2a), recall similar expressions in the psalms (cf. Ps. 18:6; 31:9; 77:2; 120:1). Understandably, he perceived that he was now experiencing a living death as described by the depth of *sheol* (2:2b).[41] The sea waves of Yahweh had overwhelmed him, an expression that once more reflects the Psalms (2:3; cf. Ps. 42:7). His banishment to the depths caused him to seek the face of Yahweh from which he fled (2:4). With seaweed wrapped around his head as the great animal descended to the bottom of the sea, Jonah strangled and despaired and prayed in his mind's eye toward the temple in Jerusalem (2:5-7).

In many ways, the story of Jonah is the Old Testament version of the

[41] The Hebrew *sheol* (= underworld, abode of the dead), often translated as "hell" in the older English versions, was the shadowy existence of those who passed from death to life, cf. E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 302ff.

Prodigal Son. Jonah, the wayward prophet, runs from Yahweh, his Father. Only in his last extremity does he have a change of heart. Like the New Testament version, there is the strange twist in the story that, when most Jews should have expected Jonah to get his just desserts, Jonah prays and God listens! In this sense, the hero of the story is not Jonah, but Jonah's God! It is never too late, for the grace of God reaches into the depths of *sheol* for this wayward prophet, saving him by a miracle and transforming his stubborn heart.

The conclusion of Jonah's prayer, similar once again to a Psalm (Ps. 31:6), decries the futility of idol worship. So long as one clings to those things that have no power, he forfeits God's grace, just as Jonah had turned from the face of Yahweh (2:8). Now, however, Jonah has turned back to the Lord with thanksgiving and the promise of a sacrificial vow (2:9). The prayer ends with the triumphant proclamation, "Great salvation comes from the LORD" (2:9b).[42]

With Jonah now in the right frame of mind to respond to Yahweh's call, God caused the great fish to spew Jonah up on dry ground (2:10).

Jonah's Second Commission (3:1-10)

God's commission to Jonah had not changed. As in the opening of the book, the charge of Yahweh to his recalcitrant but chastened prophet was to "go to the great city of Nineveh," where he would proclaim the oracle of the LORD (3:1-2).[43] While the message was the same, Jonah was not entirely the same! His misplaced patriotism and attempt to escape beyond the long arm of God had failed. Furthermore, he had been surrounded by pagans who were more willing to recognize the sovereignty of Yahweh than he had been. This time Jonah obeyed (3:3). Like Jeremiah, who said that when he attempted to hold back the oracle of Yahweh the prophetic word was like a burning fire in his bones (Je. 20:9), Jonah could not refuse his commission this time.

Where Jonah was beached after his expulsion from the big fish we are not told, but Nineveh was a great distance inland from any part of the Mediterranean coastline necessitating a considerable journey by land. When he arrived, Jonah began to fulfill his mission. As large as was Nineveh, it took three days to go throughout the city (3:3).[44] Wherever he went, Jonah announced that the city would

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[42] The Hebrew Piel verb *yeshu'athah* is intensive, hence, "Great salvation comes from Yahweh."

[43] The LXX, in fact, has the added phrase that he should preach "according to the former preaching that I spoke to you."

[44] Critical scholars have often pointed out that the "three days journey" suggests the language of myth, not history. However, it may be that what is in view is not merely the walled city proper, but the much larger administrative district, which included Khorsabad and Nimrud. If so, Jonah's preaching tour (which must surely have taken considerably longer than simply a straight walk-through) may have begun in the southern suburbs and ended in the north, a distance of between 30 and 60 miles, cf. D. Wiseman, *NBD* (1962) 889. Genesis 10:11-12, for instance,

be destroyed in a short time (3:4).[45] The diplomatic language of the ancient Near East was Aramaic, understood by both Assyrians and Hebrews, so Aramaic may have been the language of his proclamation.

Why Jonah's message was so compelling, we are not told.[46] In fact, there is no extra-biblical corroboration of Nineveh's mass repentance. Given what happens later, it appears to have been short-lived. Nevertheless, it was real enough at the first, expressed in the traditional forms of ancient Near Eastern fasting and dressing in coarse cloth (3:5). Nineveh's king (whether city governor or emperor, we are not told) joined the mass repentance, issuing a proclamation to enforce the fast and calling for national prayer (3:6-9).[47] It is worth special notation that the king realized one of the offenses for which the Ninevites might be especially liable was violence, and the excavated Assyrian bas-reliefs, with their depictions of impaled corpses and decapitated heads, demonstrate the ferocity of the Assyrians toward their enemies.

Unlike Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh was spared because her citizens repented before God (3:10). Prophecies of judgment are contingent, as both Jeremiah and Joel indicate (Je. 18:7-10; Jl. 2:13-14), and in view of Nineveh's full-hearted response, God compassionately relented from sending disaster. So Nineveh, like Jonah, was spared destruction. Jonah had faced the depths of *sheol*, but in his distress he cried out to Yahweh (2:1) and was restored to his family (cf. 3 Maccabees 6:8). Nineveh faced the prospect of total collapse, but when its citizens cried out to God, he extended to them grace.

Jonah's Final Lesson (4:1-11)

The reader might have expected the story to end with Nineveh's repentance and escape, but in fact, God was not yet finished with Jonah's education. If the prayers of the pagan sailors and Jonah's rescue from the great fish were educational, Jonah was now to enter his graduate course of study! The problem all along, of course, had been Jonah's stubborn refusal to accept the implications of God's grace. If God intended to be gracious to the Ninevites, Jonah had wanted no

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names Nineveh and other cities collectively as "the great city."

[45] The number "forty"appears frequently in the Old Testament, and many scholars believe that it should be taken as an approximate rather than a specific number. Furthermore, the LXX (followed by the Old Latin) has "three days" rather than "forty days," most scholars agreeing that the number three was probably assimilated to the three days journey.

[46] In the New Testament, Jesus said that Jonah was "a sign" to the Ninevites (Lk. 11:30), but the nature of the sign value is not discussed.

[47] While the king is not named, if the reference is to an Assyrian emperor it could have been any of the kings during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kg. 14:25, c. 793-753 BC), which included Adad-nirari III (810-783 BC), Shalmaneser IV (782-773 BC), Ashur-dan III (772-755 BC) and Ashur-nirari V (754-745 BC).

part of it. If the Ninevites were in, Jonah wanted out! He was willing to flee or even drown rather than allow God to be merciful to those whom he loved to hate. Of course, in his own hypocritical ethnocentrism, Jonah was quite willing to accept grace for himself, exemplified by his prayer from the belly of the sea monster. In Nineveh, things turned out just as he had feared. God's mercy was extended to the Ninevites, and this show of grace angered Jonah. He even prayed to die rather than live to see God's grace shown to those he hated (4:1-3). Like Joel, Jonah was familiar with the Sinai revelation that Yahweh was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love (cf. Jl. 2:13; Ex. 34:6-7). In fact, this way of describing God was the traditional "creed" of the Israelites (cf. Nu. 14:18; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8-9; Na. 1:3; Ne. 9:17). Jonah, however, wanted none of it. It was bad enough that he could not tolerate the Ninevites; now he had trouble tolerating God! Jonah, the prophet who experienced divine mercy that he never deserved, had the gall to complain because God's judgment did not fall on someone else.

God was still not through with Jonah, however, and the question, "What right have you to be angry?", prepares the reader for the most important lesson of the book. To the east of the city, where Jonah sat in the hot sun trying to create for himself a bit of shade while he waited to see if anything would happen to Nineveh, God prepared a vine to give the prophet relief from the blistering heat (4:5-6). Once again, the Hebrew verb *manah* (= to supply) points toward God's sovereign work. He had supplied a great fish, and now he supplied a vine. Jonah greatly appreciated the vine! However, the God who supplied the vine now supplied a worm to chew the vine so that it withered (4:7), and furthermore, God supplied a scorching east wind to blow hot air at Jonah while the sun blazed on his head, threatening him with sunstroke (4:8a).[48]

Now, Jonah wanted to die even more (4:8b)! This is now the third time he expressed the desire to die. Once, he was willing to die in the sea (1:12). Of course, he did not really want to die, since when he was in the belly of the fish he cried out to the Lord for help (2:1-2). Later, he said it would be better to die than to endure God's grace to the city of Nineveh (4:3). Now, he wanted to die because his personal comfort had been disturbed (4:8).

Gently, God interrogated his stubborn prophet, "What right have you to be

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[48] In each of these passages, the piel intensive verb *manah* (= to supply) is employed:

God "supplied" the great fish (2:1).

God "supplied" the vine (4:6).

God "supplied" the worm (4:7).

God "supplied" the wind (4:8).

angry about the vine?" (4:9a). The question, of course, is the same as the earlier question, "What right have you to be angry [about the salvation of Nineveh]?" (4:4). But Jonah was so chagrined that he retorted, "I have every right, and I'm angry enough to die!" (4:9b).

So, Yahweh patiently pointed out that Jonah's concern about the vine, which was an act of divine grace, since Jonah did not cultivate it, should help him appreciate divine grace on a much broader level. God cares for what he creates, and even though the Ninevites were morally little better than children, hardly knowing their right from their left, God was concerned about them (4:10)! Their huge population (see footnote #37), not to mention their animals, was shown mercy because it is God's character is to show mercy! The ancient eucharistic words from the Book of Common Prayer bear repeating: *But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy...*

> *A Jonah lurks in every Christian heart, whimpering his insidious message of smug prejudice, empty traditionalism, and exclusive solidarity. He that has ears to hear, let him hear and allow the saving love of God which has been outpoured in his own heart to remold his thinking and social orientation.*
>
> Leslie Allen, London Bible College

The Messianic Interpretation (Mt. 12:40)

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the great fish anticipate Jesus' descent to the place of the dead between his crucifixion and resurrection. Aside from the issue of calculating "three days and three nights", which is better left to the New Testament commentaries,[49] there remains the prophetic relationship between Jonah's experience and Jesus' death. Some commentators suggest that the whole point of the book of Jonah was not the issue of God's universal concern for the nations, of which Nineveh was a paradigm, but rather, the story of Jonah's descent into *sheol* and his being cast out alive as a prefigurement of Jesus' passion.[50] Such a construction is too sweeping and seems to make the final two chapters superfluous. It flies in the face of the dialogue between God and Jonah at the end of the book.

It seems better to see the relationship between Jonah and Jesus as one of

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[49] See the extensive discussion, for instance, in Harold Hoehner's *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 65-93.

[50] This seems to be the position, for instance, of E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 263-264.

prophetic recapitulation, where an ancient event is repeated in some sense in the life of Christ. This type of fulfillment is not as unusual as it might seem at first glance, for Matthew clearly employs such a sense in other fulfillment passages (e.g., 2:15; cf. Ho. 11:1). Clearly, Jonah's experience is not presented in the Book of Jonah as a messianic prophecy about the future. It is entirely a description about what happened to the prophet who tried to run from Yahweh. Nor are there any personality parallels between Jonah and Jesus. They could hardly have been more different! Jonah was disenchanted with God's grace, while Christ embodied it. Rather, Jonah's experience of descending to "death" and then being delivered from death by the sovereign hand of God was recapitulated in the life of Jesus, who descended to the place of the dead but was delivered from death on Easter morning. This typological connection is a familiar form used by the New Testament writers to illustrate that Jesus of Nazareth was the true Israel.[51]

Zephaniah

Background

The opening line of the Book of Zephaniah locates Zephaniah's ministry during the reign of Josiah of Judah (640-609 BC). Josiah's kingship was a spiritual renaissance. Following the disastrous reign of Manasseh (686-642 BC), whose flagrant courting of Canaanite and Mesopotamian religion earned him a scathing condemnation in the Kings' and Chronicles' records (2 Kg. 21:1-18; 2 Chr. 33:1-9), and the short-lived reign of his son, Amon, who was assassinated by his own officials (2 Kg. 21:19-23; 2 Chr. 33:21-25), Josiah was installed in office at the tender age of eight (2 Kg. 22:1; 2 Chr. 34:1). Little is known of the early years of Josiah's reign, though presumably his affairs of state were directed by trusted advisors, since the king was so young. By the time he was in his mid-teens, however, he had begun a serious turning toward the faith of Yahweh (2 Chr. 34:3a), and when he was twenty, he began sweeping religious reforms to purge the capital and the nation from the syncretistic ways of Manasseh, his predecessor (2 Chr. 34:3b-7). Besides his religious reforms, Josiah took advantage of Assyria's weakening grasp in the west. Manasseh, his predecessor, apparently served as an Assyrian vassal during his whole lifetime.[52] However, as Assyria became enmeshed

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[51] D. Lewis, *3 Crucial Questions About the Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 50-61.

[52] While this vassalship is not directly mentioned in the Old Testament, Manasseh's name appears in Esarhaddon's list of vassal kings who supplied building materials for constructing his palace in Nineveh, cf. J. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1958), I.201. Later, Manasseh was taken a prisoner to Assyria (2 Chr. 33:11).

with internal problems and outside threats much closer to home, Judah became independent by default.

In his mid-twenties Josiah began a restoration project for the temple on Zion (2 Chr. 34:8-13; 2 Kg. 22:3-7). It was during this restoration that the "Book of the Torah" was discovered and read to the king (2 Chr. 34:14-18; 2 Kg. 22:8-10). The exact extent of the Book of the Torah is not described, but many scholars believe it to have been the Book of Deuteronomy, given Josiah's horrified reaction to its reading (2 Chr. 34:19-21; 2 Kg. 22:11-13). Specifically, the words of Huldah, the prophetess, point to the "curses written in the book" (2 Chr. 34:24). While we may assume that the books of the Torah were in separate scrolls, no one of them outlines the sworn curses for covenant disobedience as extensively as Deuteronomy 27-28.[53]

The upshot of Josiah's discovery was that he initiated a renewal of the ancient covenant with the whole nation (2 Chr. 34:29-33; 2 Kg. 23:1-20, 24-25). It is unlikely that the movement toward reform was due to the discovery of the law code alone, however. We know of two other important voices during this period, Zephaniah and the young Jeremiah. It is not unlikely that the sworn curses of the Book of the Torah stood alongside the dire predictions of Zephaniah about the coming Day of Yahweh's judgment.[54] It is not too much a stretch to speculate that together Zechariah's oracles and the curses of Torah stimulated Josiah to lead Judah in deep national repentance and a return to the ancient covenant.

Zephaniah's lineage can be traced back four generations to Hezekiah (1:1), a genealogy that puts him within the royal family. As a resident in Jerusalem, he doubtless had observed the rash pagan tendencies of Manasseh. His description of the shocking idolatrous practices in Jerusalem and Judah suggests that his ministry dates to the earlier years of Josiah prior to the great reforms.

The structure of the book falls into three sections: the vision of the Day of Yahweh (1:2-2:3), the oracles against foreign nations (2:4-15) and the woes and blessings of Jerusalem (3).

The Terrible Day of Yahweh (1:2-2:3)

Like Amos (5:18), Isaiah (2:12; 13:9ff.) and Joel (2:1, 31), Zephaniah uses the expression "the day of Yahweh" to describe the coming doomsday. It would be as cataclysmic as the flood of Noah, wiping out the human population of the earth and destroying animal, fish and fowl (1:2-3). Zephaniah's primary concern,

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[53] There are, of course, other portions of the Torah that pronounce curses for disobedience (e.g., Lv. 26). Nevertheless, the total context of Josiah's reform fits best the form of the law in Deuteronomy.

[54] J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 319-320.

however, was not the world at large, but rather, Jerusalem and Judah (1:4a). Here, in the city and nation that was chosen to bear Yahweh's name, the citizens had turned from the pure faith of Yahweh to follow the attractions of the Ba'al fertility cult (1:4b),[55] bow down to the astral worship of the heavens popular among the Mesopotamians (1:5a),[56] and participate in the bloodthirsty offerings to Molech, the Ammonite national deity (1:5b).[57] Each of these deviations can be traced directly to Manasseh's reign, who erected shrines to Ba'al and Asherah, worshipped the constellations and zodiac, and sacrificed his own son in the fire to Molech (2 Kg. 21:3-6; 2 Chr. 33:3-7). The fact that the people of Judah pronounced oaths both in the name of Yahweh and also in the name of Molech points to a widespread syncretism. Some went even farther by abandoning any recognition of Yahweh altogether (1:6).

It was especially toward these Israelites-turned-pagan that Zephaniah's pronouncements of doom were aimed. Yahweh had prepared a sacrifice of his own, and the people of Judah were invited to be the victims (1:7)! Then follows a list of offenses by Jerusalem's citizens.

- By adopting the clothing fashions of the foreigners, the Judahites showed their fascination for pagan culture (1:8). Perhaps this included the abandonment of special clothing stipulated in the Torah (cf. Nu. 15:38-40; Dt. 22:11-12), and it also may have included the wearing of pagan cultic garments or garments with pagan cultic designs.[58]
- Pagan superstitions were also a sign that the people of Judah were adopting pagan ways (1:9a). "Stepping over the threshold" so as not to step on it is an obscure custom first associated with the Philistines (cf. 1 Sa. 5:5), and it may have been a superstition to avoid evil inflicted by demons. It was believed that household demons lay beneath the

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[55] The Ba'al cult, based on the myth of Ba'al who mated with Ashtaroth in an annual ritual, largely consisted of sacred prostitution. Sexual orgies at the high places (*bamoth*) were believed to stimulate Ba'al and his female consort to mate, thus producing fertility in the land and in humans, cf. P. Craigie and G. Wilson, *ISBE* (1988) IV.99-100.

[56] Mesopotamians believed there was a relationship between heavenly bodies and earthly events, especially since heavenly bodies were believed to be deities, cf. J. Wright, *ISBE* (1979) I.342-343. The worship of the heavenly bodies, especially Ishtar, the Queen of heaven, who was connected with the planet Venus, became especially popular in Judah from the time of Manasseh (cf. 2 Kg. 21:3, 5; Je. 8:2; 19:13; 44:16-19), cf. R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1988) IV.8.

[57] The worship of Molech (Milcom) included the offering of children in a fire ritual, probably by throwing them into a furnace (Je. 7:31), cf. R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1986) III.401.

[58] Whether Isaiah's earlier denunciation of elaborate clothing is related to pagan styles or simply opulence and pride is unclear (cf. Is. 3:16-23).

thresholds, and stepping on the threshold might anger them.[59]

- Similar to what happened in Israel to the north a century earlier (Am. 2:6-8), votive gifts to the gods and goddesses of the pagans were taken from the proceeds of violence and deceit (1:9b).

In response to such flagrant sins, Yahweh declared his intent to allow Jerusalem to be invaded from the north. All the districts named, the Fish Gate (probably in the northern wall), the Second Quarter (the *Mishneh*) and the Mortar (the *Maktesh*), were probably on the northern side of Jerusalem, the area most vulnerable to assault, since the other three sides were protected by steep embankments (1:10-11a).[60] Zephaniah does not name this northern enemy, so whether he envisioned a resurgence of Assyria or anticipated its demise and the subsequent rise of Babylon is unclear. Nevertheless, all the businesses would be wiped out (1:11b, 13), and Yahweh would punish the flippant citizens who had relegated him to a "do-nothing" deity (1:12; cf. Mic. 2:6-7; 3:11; Je. 5:12; 22:21; 23:17). He would search them out in every dark corner, for they were "like wine left on its dregs," a simile for spiritual complacency and apathy (cf. Je. 48:11).

So, the terrible Day of Yahweh was imminent (1:14)! Like Amos, Zephaniah describes it as a day of darkness-a veritable doomsday (1:15-18; cf. Am. 5:18-20). The invasion from the north would sweep over the whole land, destroying every fortified city! The oracle shifts to the first person in 1:17, where Yahweh now speaks directly of his coming judgment. The coming destruction is broadened out, typical of prophetic literature, so that what would happen to Jerusalem also would happen to the whole world (1:18). The fall of Jerusalem is only a microcosm of God's judgment that will extend to all the citizens of the earth.

The dire prediction of Yahweh's judgment is tempered with a call to repentance. There was still time, though not much. Like Joel, who challenged the people to call a solemn assembly for repentance (Jl. 2:16-17), Zephaniah preached that Judah must assemble before the stroke of judgment fell (2:1-2). Jerusalem's citizens, especially the ones who still maintained their covenant faith, must seek Yahweh! Like Amos and Micah, Zephaniah challenged his fellow-citizens to seek righteousness and humility (Am. 5:24; Mic. 6:8). The word *'ulay* (= perhaps) , while it does not suggest that the judgment of God will be cancelled, holds forth the hope that those who seek the Lord will be protected from his wrath. Similarly, in the exodus the Israelites were protected by Yahweh from the plagues (cf. Ex. 8:22-23; 9:4, 6, 26; 10:23).

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[59]R. Klein, *1 Samuel [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 50.

[60] W. LaSor, et al., *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 314.

Oracles Against Foreign Nations (2:4-15)

Oracles directed against specific foreign nations appear in several of the prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Obadiah and Nahum. Since the Day of Yahweh would be directed toward the entire human population of the earth (1:2-3, 18b), it was only fitting that, along with Judah herself, the neighboring nations of the ancient Near East would come under the scope of Zephaniah's prediction. In other prophets, the sins of these nations are spelled out. Amos, for instance, indicts Israel's neighbors for slave-trading and war crimes (Am. 1:2-2:3). Zephaniah, however, spells out the sins of only one nation, the Moabites. The wickedness of the others, it can be assumed, was apparent to the original readers.

The first indictment is against Philistia, where four of the original five cities of the pentapolis are marked for destruction (2:4).[61] The name Kerethites (2:5; cf. Eze. 25:16), which most probably means Cretans, alludes to the origin of the Philistines in the Aegean (cf. Dt. 2:23; Je. 47:4; Am. 9:7).[62] The Philistines would be destroyed in the coming judgment, and their land would be annexed by the people of Judah and turned into pasture (2:6-7). Here, though brief, there is the hope that after judgment there will be a restoration for Judah. In chapter 3, the restoration will be developed more fully.

The second indictment is against Moab and Ammon, Judah's neighbors in the transjordan. Like the Edomites, who later would exult at the downfall of Jerusalem (Ps. 137:7; Ob. 11-14), the Moabites and Ammonites had taunted and threatened the people of Judah throughout their history (2:8, 10; cf. Nu. 22-24; Jg. 3:12-14; 10:6-11:28;1 Sa. 12:9; 2 Sa. 10:1-6; 2 Kg. 13:20; 2 Chr. 24:26). Yahweh had heard this mockery, and he took oath[63] that both Moab and Ammon would be destroyed as thoroughly as Sodom and Gohmorrah once had been destroyed (2:9a; cf. Ge. 19). Their transjordan territories would become wasteland to be overrun by the people of Judah and other survivors after the disaster (2:9b). Their deities, Chemosh of Moab and Milcom (Molech) of Ammon, would be destroyed as well (2:11a). The faith of Yahweh would be embraced by nations from every shoreline

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[61] Gath, the city not mentioned, was seriously crippled in the 9th century by Hazael of Syria (2 Kg. 12:17), and Uzziah of Judah broke down the perimeter walls a century later (2 Chr. 26:6). Amos cites Gath as one example of cities that had been destroyed (Am. 6:2), and after the 8th century, Gath does not figure in any of the listings of Philistine cities (e.g. Je. 25:20; Zec. 9:4-7).

[62] The Hebrew name for Crete is Caphtor, and most scholars agree that the Philistines were among the Sea Peoples who in Egyptian records are described as invading Egypt in boats but were turned back by Merneptah and Rameses III. The Philistines then settled on the south coast of Palestine and occupied the five cities for which they are famous in the Bible, cf. J. Greenfield, *IDB* (1962) I.557 and III.791ff.

[63] The expression "as I live" is the familiar Hebrew oath formula.

(2:11b).[64] This promise of international worship, a theme that is common in the prophets' vision for the future, was understood by the apostles in the New Testament to refer to the gentile nations who accepted the gospel (e.g., Is. 45:23-24; Phil. 2:10-11).

The third indictment is a single line. It promises judgment on the Cushites (2:12), and Cush is a region generally identified with Nubia or Ethiopia. Possibly Cush is listed since the other nations mentioned are to the west (Philistines), north (Assyria) and east (Moab and Ammon) of Judah, and Cush would fill out the four directions.

The fourth indictment is against Assyria and Nineveh. While Jonah had preached repentance in Nineveh, and the city had turned to Yahweh with fasting and contrition, apparently that conversion was short-lived. Nineveh would become a wasteland, the habitation of wild animals (2:13-14). It's existence as a self-sufficient metropolis free from care or fear would end-and in history, this end would come very soon (2:15a). In 626 BC, a southern official named Nebopolassar wrenched Babylon away from Assyrian rule. By 620 BC, the Assyrian armies had been driven out of Babylonia. In 614 BC, Median marauders sacked the countryside and destroyed Asshur, and in 612 BC Babylonian engineers directed the waters of Sennacherib's canal system against the walls of Nineveh itself. A combined assault by Medians and Babylonians destroyed the city.[65] No doubt, passersby indeed shook their fists in malicious glee at the downfall of Nineveh (2:15b)!

The Woes and Blessings of Jerusalem (3:1-20)

The final section of Zephaniah has two parts. The first outlines the fate of Jerusalem in the coming Day of Yahweh. To be sure, the name Jerusalem is not given, but the description of prophets and priests and the language that "Yahweh [is] within her" leaves little room for doubt (3:4-5). Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, is indicted just as the surrounding nations. It was a city of *oppressors*, who disregarded the powerless, *rebels*, who refused to keep God's covenant, and *the polluted*, those whose lives were defiled by pagan orgies (3:1). Her citizens would not obey, they could not be corrected, they refused to trust in Yahweh, and they stubbornly remained aloof from God (3:2). Jeremiah, also, would describe the recalcitrance of the people of Judah who could not change their ways any more than an African his skin or a leopard his spots (Je. 13:23).

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[64] Some scholars, due to an ambiguity in the text, translate 2:11 so that it is the gods of the nations who worship Yahweh, somewhat along the lines of Dagon in 1 Sa. 5:3. Most English versions, however, render it so that it is the nations who worship Yahweh.

[65] Curtis and Reade, p. 31.

Judah's leaders were the most at fault. *Officials* and *rulers* were only interested in their personal profit margin, like beasts of prey devouring the meat from the bones of the citizens (3:3). A generation earlier, Micah had chastised the hierarchy in Jerusalem for taking bribes (Mic. 7:3), and it was no better now. *Prophets* were arrogant and treacherous, preaching only what those in positions of power wanted to hear (3:4a). Jeremiah, who may have been Zephaniah's contemporary in his early ministry, repeatedly excoriates the false prophets in Judah (Je. 2:26; 5:13; 6:13; 8:10; 14:14; 23:9-40; 26:8-9; 27:9-10, 14-15; 32:32). The *priests* were of the same ilk (3:4b). In the former generation, Isaiah had denounced the priests who, along with the prophets, were often drunk, vomiting on the tables and staggering from place to place (Is. 28:7-8). Jeremiah observes with horror that priests were like tyrants, "ruling by their own authority" (Je. 5:30-31).

In spite of these horrendous abuses of power, Yahweh was still in the midst of Jerusalem in the temple on Mt. Zion (3:5a). Every morning he was dispensing justice to the weak and powerless, in spite of the shamelessness of those in official positions (3:5b). He had brought down powerful nations already (3:6) in the hopes that Jerusalem would take warning, but to no avail (3:7). Nothing remained but to wait for the doomsday of the world (3:8).

The second part of Zephaniah's final oracle looks beyond judgment to Judah's restoration. If woe was in the near future, blessing awaited in the distant future. Judah's citizens would be purified so that they might stand shoulder to shoulder and call on Yahweh's name (3:9). Yahweh's scattered people, those who lived outside the circle of Jewish nationalism, would serve Yahweh also (3:10).[66] The coming restoration, as in Isaiah, would be for a remnant (3:13a; cf. Is. 10:20-22; 11:11, 16; 28:5; 37:31-32). For these survivors, Jerusalem would be purged of the arrogant (3:11), leaving the meek and humble who were faithful to Yahweh (3:12). Indeed, as Jesus would say several hundred years later, it would be the meek who would inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5)! This purified and purged remnant would abide in faithfulness to the covenant, living in peace and without fear (3:13)!

Then follows an anthem of rejoicing for the "daughter of Zion" (3:14-17).[67]

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[66] The Hebrew text is unclear whether "my scattered people" refers to the Jewish diaspora or to non-Jews in foreign lands. Interpreters are divided, but John's interpretation of Caiaphas' prophecy at the trial of Jesus may well allude to this passage in the latter sense (cf. Jn. 11:49-52). The concept of the diaspora was used by Peter to symbolize the gentiles in the Greco-Roman provinces who had come to Christ (1 Pe. 1:1).

[67] The expression "daughter of Zion" appears in various places, sometimes in the singular (e.g., 2 Kg. 19:21), sometimes in the plural (e.g., Ps. 48:11). Because the Hebrew word *bat* also refers to some kind of settlement, the plural form *banot* (= daughters) may refer to villages surrounding a major city, cf. I. Hopkins, "the 'Daughters of Judah' Are Really Rural Satellites of an Urban Center," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1980), pp. 44-45. When used in the singular, as here, the "daughter of Zion" and its parallel, "the daughter of Jerusalem", probably refer to the settlement of the City of David that lies just below the summit of Mt. Zion. The same parallelism is found in Isaiah 37:22.

The people of Israel are called to celebrate the gift of forgiveness and the promise of freedom from further punishment or harm. Yahweh is now within the city, mighty to bring salvation (cf. Eze. 48:35)! There will be no despair, symbolized by limp hands (cf. Is. 13:7; Je. 6:24; Eze. 7:17), but rather, the delight of basking in Yahweh's favor. Like a mother with an infant, Yahweh will sing over Jerusalem and quiet her with his maternal love![68] The judgment of the people by exile meant that the seasons of the pilgrim feasts, Passover, Weeks and Booths, were especially depressing, since the exiles could no longer make the pilgrimage to Zion to keep them. Such seasons were a burden to those estranged from the homeland (3:18). In the restoration, however, this burden would be lifted, for God would gather his scattered people. He would rescue the disabled, judge their oppressors, and exchange his people's shame for honor in all the lands where they were oppressed and among all the peoples of the earth (3:19-20).

Nahum

Background

In the mid-7th century BC, it would have been hard for anyone in the ancient Near East to imagine a world where Assyria was not a menacing presence. Since the time of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC), who revived the Assyrian imperialistic vision and conducted campaigns into Babylonia, Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Anatolia, the nations and city-states of the ancient Near East had never been exempt from the Assyrian presence. Most of them had served off and on as Assyrian vassals in suzerainty treaties ever since. A century after Shalmaneser III's initial attempts at conquest, Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BC), Shalmaneser V (726-722 BC) and Sargon II (721-705 BC) extended Assyrian rule from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and all the way to Cyprus. Local rulers were allowed to survive if they submitted in sufficient time, but they still were required to pay heavy tribute to their Assyrian overlord. A network of roads and posting stations ensured an effective communication system across the empire to maintain Assyrian policies and allegiances.

In this expansion, the northern nation of Israel was crushed in 721 BC, its citizens exiled and colonists brought in to replace them (2 Kg. 17). Judah, the southern nation, still eked out a political existence, but never outside the shadow of the Assyrian empire-builder. Sennacherib (704-681 BC) invaded Judah and

[68] The Hebrew of 3:17 is very difficult, and translators have offered several alternatives, none of them entirely satisfactory, cf. R. Smith, *Micah-Malachi [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), p. 143. Here, I have followed the sense of "silence" for the word *hari'sh* (= plowing, scorching, silence).

Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah, destroying forty-six of his walled cities.[69] Hezekiah himself escaped only by a miracle from God (cf. Is. 36-37; 2 Chr. 32; 2 Kg. 18-19).

The reign of Ashurbanipal (668-631 BC) is reckoned as the high water mark of the Assyrian Empire. He built a magnificent palace in Nineveh and filled it with impressive bas-reliefs of Assyrian conquests. The golden age notwithstanding, the demise and fall of Assyria would take little more than a score of years after his death. The rulers following Ashurbanipal were weak, and a series of crippling defeats brought the empire from glory to extinction. The Babylonians drove the Assyrians out of Babylonia by 620 BC. Nabopolassar of Babylon followed up this advantage by destroying Ashur in 614 BC and Nineveh in 612 BC. An Assyrian refugee government in northwest Mesopotamia lasted barely another couple years until Ashur-uballit II (*c.* 611-609 BC) was killed. When Assyria's Egyptian allies marched north to her aid, Josiah interposed the Judean army at Megiddo, confronting Pharaoh-Neco II in 609 BC. Josiah was killed in this conflict (2 Kg. 23:29-30; 2 Chr. 35:20-24), but he stalled the Egyptians long enough to leave the Assyrians unaided. Finally, in 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon turned back the last vestige of Assyrian support when he defeated Neco in the battle of Carchemish.

This history of Assyrian decline lies behind the little work of Nahum. Other than his name, which means "comfort", and his city Elkosh, an unknown location,[70] the reader has no information about this prophet apart from the oracle itself. Historically, however, the prophecy must be placed after 653 BC, when Thebes, Egypt was destroyed by the Assyrians under Ashurbanipal (3:8-10). The fact that the oracle predicts the destruction of Nineveh means that the work must be dated prior to 612 BC. During one interval between 653 BC and 612 BC, however, Judah was free from Assyrian oppression, when Josiah, by default, was able to break his Assyrian vassalship (after *c.* 621 BC). Consequently, most scholars date the book either earlier

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[69] The prism of Sennacherib describes the siege of Jerusalem as follows: *As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered [them] by means of well-stamped [earth]-ramps, and battering rams brought [thus] near [to the walls] [combined with] the attack by foot soldiers, [using] mines, breeches as well as sapper work. ...Himself (i.e., Hezekiah) I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest those who were leaving his city's gate. ...Thus, I reduced his country, but I still increased the tribute and the katru-presents [due] to me [as his] overlord, which I imposed [later] upon him beyond the former tribute, to be delivered annually. Hezekiah, himself, whom the terror-inspiring splendor of my lordship had overwhelmed and whose irregular and elite troops which he had brought into Jerusalem, his royal residence, in order to strengthen [it], had deserted him...did send me, later, to Nineveh...all kinds of valuable treasures. In order to deliver the tribute and to do obeisance as a slave he sent his [personal] messenger.,* cf. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*. p. 200.

[70] A wide range of suggestions have been offered, based upon linguistic similarities of known towns from Iraq to Galilee to southern Judah, cf. G. Smith, *ISBE* (1986) III.477. The mention of Judah (1:15) surely carries the most weight.

or later than this interval, with the most widely accepted date being later, between the fall of Ashur in 614 BC and Nineveh's destruction in 612 BC.

The structure of the book falls into three sections roughly corresponding to the chapter divisions. The first, an opening psalm, extols the warlike Yahweh who comes to judge his enemies (1:2-2:2). Since some of the verses seem to follow the form of an acrostic for the first several letters in the Hebrew alphabet, the attempt has been made to extend the form to complete the alphabet, but with no success.[71] The second part of the book describes the siege and sack of Nineveh (2:3-13), while the third part pronounces woe on Nineveh and compares its fall to the earlier fall of Thebes (3:1-19).

A Theophany of Yahweh, the Man of War (1:2-2:2)

Like Habakkuk (3:3ff.), Nahum depicts God as descending upon the world in the terrible and awe-inspiring form of theophany. Theophany, while not a biblical word, derives from the biblical phenomenon that God visibly appears or allows himself to be revealed to the human mind. It is a theological bridge between the stern warning that God cannot be seen (Ex. 33:20), yet at times he reveals himself in anthropomorphism, as the Angel of the LORD or by his manifested glory in smoke and fire. Here, Yahweh appears as a warrior who executes judgment on his enemies (1:2; cf. Ex. 15:3). Also like Habakkuk (cf. Ha. 3:3ff.), the precedent for this theophany is the fiery appearance of Yahweh at Mt. Sinai. Like Joel and Jonah, Nahum's description recalls the covenantal Yahweh of the Sinai theophany, the God who is "slow to anger...but not leaving the guilty unpunished" (1:3a; Jl. 2:13; Jon. 4:2; cf. Ex. 34:6-7). The language of theophany shows a world in recoil before the anger of God. God comes like a desert sirocco (1:3b), drying up the water courses, withering the plateaus and sweeping away the mountains (1:4-5). Yet in spite of his judgmental anger (1:6), Yahweh's basic relationship toward those who trust him is to provide refuge (1:7). Judgment is reserved for unbelievers, like the Ninevites; it is not for the faithful (1:8).

Similar to the psalmist (cf. Ps. 2:1-3), God views Nineveh's imperialism as a plot against himself, a plot that will surely fail (1:9, 11). But Yahweh will brook no rivals! "No adversaries dare oppose him twice" (1:9b, NEB). Rather, his enemies will be as hopeless as one entangled in a thorn bush, as useless to defend themselves as a drunkard, and as helpless as stubble before fire (1:10). At present, the Assyrians seem invulnerable in their violent aggression, but God will cut them down and deliver Judah from their oppression (1:12-13). So thoroughly would God destroy Assyria

[71] Beginning in 1:2 through 1:9, the acrostic works for the letters *aleph* through *nun* so long as one puts 1:2b after 1:9, but no workable solution has been discovered to extend the acrostic beyond 1:9, cf. Eissfeldt, p. 414.

that after the empire's fall, no Assyrian successor would ever arise again (1:14). Nineveh, its deities, and its shrines would be dead and buried! The Assyrian capital may as well brace itself inasmuch as Yahweh, the divine attacker, was moving against it (2:1).

In the midst of this description of Yahweh's shuddering attack upon Nineveh, there also appear two passages promising restoration for Judah.[72] The first envisions a herald bearing good news on the mountains of Judah, a gospel that enables the people to renew their annual festivals while it promises freedom from invasion (1:15). The striking imagery of "the feet of one who brings good news [and] who proclaims peace" and its similarity to Isaiah 52:7 have long been observed.

This similarity between the two passages raises the question of a literary relationship. If one passage alludes to or loosely quotes the other, then the dating of Nahum and the dating of the Isaiah passage must be coordinated. Many scholars date Isaiah 40-66 as post-exilic, and credit this part of the book not to Isaiah of Jerusalem but to a later unknown prophet. If so, then the corollary is that the passage in Nahum is primary, while the passage in Isaiah 52 depends upon it. However, if Isaiah 40-66 are credited to Isaiah in the mid-8th century, the reverse is true, and Nahum alludes to Isaiah.

Beyond the dating issue is a theological one. To whom does Nahum refer by speaking of the bearer of the gospel. For early Christians, the Septuagint translation of the verb in 1:15 as *euangelizo* (= to announce the gospel) must have been striking.[73] Christians, since the time of St. Paul, have considered the Isaiah passage to have a messianic connotation (cf. Ro. 10:14-15). To be sure, the primary aim of the reference in Isaiah was to the good news of the redemption of Jerusalem from Babylonian oppression by the edict of Cyrus (cf. Is. 45:1). However, this near fulfillment did not exhaust the prophecy, and the departure of the Jewish exiles from pagan Babylon came to symbolize the departure of Christians from the world of sin. Might this same sort of *sensus plenior* be applied to the reference in Nahum? There seems to be good reason for thinking that it does. The restoration of Judah envisioned here, like the many passages describing the restoration of Israel in various of the prophets, probably carries a messianic overtone that reaches far ahead of the ancient politics of the Mesopotamian empire-builders.

Finally, the promise in 2:2 envisions a restoration of "Jacob like...Israel" (2:2). This enigmatic comparison has been interpreted in more than one way. Some take

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[72] Some scholars believe that verse 2:1 and 2:2 were transposed. If they are reversed, then the two passages concerning restoration appear together (so NEB).

[73] Tertullian, for instance, cites this verse in a collage of Old Testament passages pointing to Christ, cf. *Against Marcion*, IV.xiii.

"Jacob" to refer to the northern nation, now exiled, and "Israel" to refer to Judah, thus predicting an ultimate restoration and unity between the two halves of the divided kingdom, somewhat along the lines of the union envisioned by Ezekiel (cf. Eze. 37:15-28). Others suggest that "Jacob", the birth name, refers to the people who under judgment were deprived of their religious privilege, while "Israel", the name of blessing, refers to the people restored after judgment. Either is possible, though most interpreters follow the first option.

The Fall of Nineveh (2:3-13)

Nahum's vivid description of the storming and capture of Nineveh contains some of the most powerful poetic lines in the Hebrew Bible. The Assyrian chariot corps race through Nineveh's streets as the first phalanx of defense (2:3-4). Yet in spite of the Assyrian crack troops, dashing to the wall to shore up the defenses, their frantic efforts will fall short (2:5). The successful strategy of the attackers may have been to dam the Tigris and its connecting canals in order to send a veritable flood hurtling toward the city, breaking down the river gates and collapsing the palace walls (2:6, 8).[74] Nineveh was left like a pool of receding floodwater, while the Babylonian and Median enemies looted its treasures (2:9-10). Like a slave girl carried into exile (2:7), the great Assyrian capital was abandoned (2:8b). For the next three centuries, the mound of Nineveh would remain uninhabited.[75]

Then follows a taunt song over Nineveh's fall (2:11-13). Once the home of royal game preserves, where lions were kept for the royal hunts, Nineveh and her royal sport was now gone. Assyria herself, once a preying lion to all the other nations of the ancient Near East, had now become the victim of the hunt.[76] The attacker was not merely the Babylonians and Medes, but rather, Yahweh Tsabaoth! It was he who would burn the chariots of the Assyrian war machine; it was he who would destroy the destroyer.

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[74] So, C. Amerding, "Nahum," *EBC* (1985) VII.476. Assyrian scholars suggest that Babylonian engineers may have directed the waters of Sennacherib's canal system against Nineveh's walls, cf. J. Curtis and J. Reade, eds., *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1995), p. 31. The *Babylonian Chronicle*, no. 21,901, recounts the fall of Nineveh in cuneiform: *...they marched (upstream) on the embankment of the Tigris and ...[pitched camp] against Nineveh...From the month Simanu till the month Abu, three ba[ttles were fought, then] they made a great attack against the city. In the month of Abu, [the ...th day, the city was seized and a great defeat] he inflicted [upon the] entire [population]. On that day, Sinsharishkun, king of Assy[ria fled to]..., many prisoners of the city, beyond counting, they carried away. The city [they turned] into ruin-hills and hea[ps (of debris)*, cf. Pritchard, pp. 202-203.

[75] C. Fritsch, *ISBE* (1986) III.540.

[76] The wall-reliefs from excavated Assyrian ruins show many scenes of the royal lion hunts, which carried special significance. Lions symbolized the wild forces of nature, which it was the Assyrian king's duty to control, and a national policy reserved the killing lions for royalty alone, cf. J. Curtis and J. Reade, eds., *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1995), pp. 51, 82-83, 86-88.

Nineveh, the City of Blood (3:1-19)

The final section of Nahum's oracle falls into three distinct parts. The first one recapitulates the terrors of Assyrian imperialism. The wealth of Nineveh had been built on the blood of its victims, international intrigue, looting and the terrible effectiveness of their war chariots (3:1-3). Like the metaphor of the great whore in John's Apocalypse (cf. Rv. 17-18), Nahum depicts Nineveh as an international whore (3:4). Once more, Yahweh declares, "I am against you, Nineveh!" (3:5a; cf. 2:13). The exposure of whores in ancient Israel was an event of public disgrace (3:5b-6), and the prophets repeatedly use this metaphor to depict divine judgment on nations (cf. Je. 13:26-27; 23:5-35; Eze. 16:35-41; Ho. 2:2-3). Nineveh, the international whore, will be reduced to ruins (3:7).

The second part of this final section compares the fall of Nineveh to the fall of Thebes. Only half a century earlier, Ashurbanipal, who produced the finest and most imaginative examples of Assyrian art in building his palace at Nineveh, had campaigned in Egypt. In 667 BC, he sailed up the Nile to Thebes, and under the Assyrian threat, the city surrendered. The Egyptians were not content to remain under Assyrian vassalship, however, and rebelled, so in 663 BC, Ashurbanipal again visited this Egyptian capital on the Nile and destroyed it.[77] Thus, in direct address, Nahum asks Ninveveh, "Are you better than No Amon (Thebes)?"[78] Neither the Nile River nor the Egyptian allies in North Africa were able to prevent the onslaught of the Assyrians (3:8-10). As Assyria did to Thebes, so the Babylonians would do to Nineveh (3:11)! The Assyrian outposts would fall like figs from a tree (3:12-13). Though the Ninevites might conserve water against siege and shore up their walls (3:14), they would die by fire and sword like vegetation stripped bare before a locust plague (3:15a). Continuing the analogy of the locusts, Nahum says that Assyria herself had multiplied like a locust swarm (3:15b-16a, but her elite guard and military recruiting officers[79] were more like cold-blooded locusts on a cold day-clinging to the walls and waiting for the sun. When they were warm enough, they would simply fly away, leaving Nineveh unprotected (3:16b-17).

The third and final part of this closing section is a taunt addressed to the "king of Assyria." His officers (shepherds) are asleep (dead), along with the nobles (3:18a). The citizens of Nineveh are driven out like sheep (3:18b). The death wound could be

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[77] E. Blaiklock, "Nahum," *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Bruce et al. (London: Marshall Pickering, 1986), p. 938.

[78] The Hebrew text reads *no amon*, a transliteration of the Egyptian *niwt 'Imn* (= the City of Amon), cf. T. Lambdin, *IDB* (1962) IV.615. This name refers to the fact that Thebes was the cult center for the worship of the Egyptian god Amon, the symbol of chaos and the author of creation who in Egyptian texts was described as having created himself, cf. J. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), pp. 36, 58n, 69-70.

[79] Smith, p. 89.

healed, and everyone in the whole ancient Near East who heard of the fall of Nineveh would clap their hands in scorn (3:19)!

Habakkuk

The prophetic oracles of Habakkuk are unique among the minor prophets. Rather than elaborate pronouncements of judgment upon Judah or the nations, which is more typical of the other prophets, Habakkuk's oracles focus on questions of theodicy. Is God just in his treatment of Judah and the nations? In this sense, then, Habakkuk has affinities with the Book of Job, which explores the injustice of innocent suffering. Theodicy, by definition, addresses a problem of the logical consistency of a theological position. In this case, the problem arose from the basic belief that all history was under the control of a sovereign God, a view that seemed to be in significant conflict with the tragic realities of ever-present and increasing wickedness in the world. In simple language, the problem is as follows:

If God really is in control, why is there so much evil in the world?

If God really is righteous, why does he allow wicked empires to swallow up nations less wicked than themselves?

On the surface, at least, the historical evidence surrounding Habakkuk seemed to be a flat contradiction to his fundamental belief about God's sovereignty and justice.

To be sure, the threat from the north certainly underlay Habakkuk's questions. Other prophets already had predicted the devastating invasions from Mesopotamia, and this threat was the heart of the problem. However wicked the people of Judah might be, surely they were less depraved than the Assyrians or Babylonians! Yet it was the Babylonians who were going to destroy Judah and Mt. Zion! How could this be? How could Yahweh allow such a thing?

Background

The historical background for the book has been thoroughly debated. The clearest historical marker is the reference in 1:6 to the Babylonians.[80] Taking this

[80] Some scholars have questioned even this reference, suggesting that the term *Kasdim* (= Chaldeans, Babylonians) in 1:6 be emended to read *Kittim* (= Cypriots, a general designation for Greeks). Such an emendation, if accepted, might make the work as late as the time of Alexander the Great (4th century BC), but the suggestion should be

reference to be determinative, it still remains to decide if Habakkuk's statement is intended to be a prophecy of the future or an observation about the present. Either is possible, for the closing years of the Assyrian Empire were marked by serial defeats of their armies at Babylon (626-620 BC), Ashur (614 BC), Nineveh (612 BC) and Harran (609 BC). After the brief reign of Ashur-uballit II (c. 611-609 BC), the Assyrian Empire disappears from the pages of history.[81] Hence, many if not most interpreters have concluded that Habakkuk's work fits best in the period at about the time of or slightly earlier than the Battle of Carchemish, where Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon defeated the Egyptians, the last remnant of Assyrian support (605 BC). With this Babylonian victory, it was only a matter of time before Nebuchadnezzar would swing southward toward Judah. In fact, Jehoiakim, who had been installed by Pharaoh Neco as the puppet king of Judah, would shortly become the vassal of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kg. 23:34-24:1; 2 Chr. 36:4-6). If this is the political milieu of Habakkuk's ministry, as seems likely, then he would have been a contemporary of Jeremiah (cf. Je. 36).

A second preliminary question concerns "the wicked" of 1:4, who threaten the righteous and pervert justice. Though Habakkuk does not name them, the best identification is probably that they are the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, who were oppressing their own people. While various scholars have suggested some external force, such as the Assyrians, Habakkuk's language about the paralysis of the *Torah* (= law) and the absence of *mishpat* (= justice) seems better suited to an internal rather than an external oppression (1:3-4). Other prophets from about the same period point to the distressing exploitation of Judah's citizens by the powerful elite (cf. Zep. 3:3-4; Je. 5:5, 26-31; 7:9-11).

As to the prophet himself, virtually nothing is known other than his name mentioned in 1:1. The Septuagint offers the intriguing story that Habakkuk, while carrying a stew to the field workers in Judah, was seized by the hair of his head by the angel of the Lord and flown to Babylon, where he took the stew to Daniel when he was in the lion's den (Bel and the Dragon, 33-39). Though canonical for Roman Catholics, this story has never impressed most Christians as being anything other than a pious folk legend.

Structurally, the book falls into two major sections. The first is a dialogue between the prophet and God. Habakkuk offers his initial complaint (1:2-4) followed by Yahweh's reply (1:5-11). Unsatisfied by God's answer, Habakkuk presses his argument with a second complaint (1:12-2:1), and this complaint is

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rejected without any corroborating textual evidence.

[81] J. Curtis and J. Reade, eds., *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1995), pp. 30-31.

again followed by a divine answer (2:2-5). Then follows a taunt song against Babylon in which five woes are pronounced against the aggressive empire-builder (2:6-20). The book closes with Habakkuk's visionary prayer of God's theophanies and righteous judgments in history and the confidence of the godly in view of God's promises (3:1-19).

The Dialogue

Habakkuk's First Complaint (1:2-4)

The initial question pertains to what seems to be God's aloofness to human violence and injustice (1:2-3a). If Yahweh is sovereign, why does he allow anarchy to rule in the world? Josiah's recovery of the Book of Torah, aided in all likelihood by Zephaniah's scorching prophecies, had produced a heartfelt revival in Judah (2 Kg. 22-23; 2 Chr. 34-35). Alas, it was a short-lived spiritual reprieve! Josiah's successors, Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, quickly descended back into the pit of covenant violation and oppression (2 Kg. 23:31-37; 2 Chr. 36:2-8). Now, there was every sort of perversion and exploitation until the very Torah itself seemed numb (1:3b-4). So, Habakkuk's implicit question to God was, "Why don't you do something?" God seemed not to be listening (1:2a). He seemed silent and inactive.

Yahweh's First Answer (1:5-11)

God's answer was that, indeed, he was about to do something-something so shocking and terrible that Habakkuk would hardly be able to believe it (2:5). God was not aloof! He was already putting his plan into action, though it was hardly what Habakkuk might have expected. God was about to raise up the Babylonians, who would sweep across the ancient Near East in a veritable frenzy of war and annexations (1:6). This answer, as von Rad described it, is "that worse is still to come, that the enigmas of the divine guidance of history are to grow even darker..."[82] If the Assyrians had been fearful, the Babylonians would be even more so. They were as fully bent on conquest as their predecessors, riding down all opposing armies and breaking down the walls of all opposing fortified cities (1:7-11). The Babylonians accepted no codes of military conduct (1:7) nor gave allegiance to any deity but their own despotic power to subdue others (1:11). Like the Assyrians before them, they fully intended to deport their prisoners of war (1:9).[83]

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[82] G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), II.190.

[83] A. Nute, "Habakkuk," *International Bible Commentary* (Suffolk, England: Marshall Pickering, 1979), p. 946.

Habakkuk's Second Complaint (1:12-2:1)

Yahweh's answer was hardly what Habakkuk wanted. If anything it made his original complaint more acute. In his prayer, he reminded Yahweh of his eternal qualities. If Yahweh was eternally sovereign, he could hardly be faithful to himself and his covenant by allowing the people of Israel to be exterminated (1:12a; cf. Lv. 26:44; Dt. 4:27-31; Mal. 3:6). The coming invasion of the Babylonians must surely be a temporal judgment within history (1:12b). Even so, the punishment seemed incompatible with Yahweh's attributes of justice and holiness. How could Yahweh, given his lofty moral character, tolerate the Babylonian invasion of Judah, when the Babylonians were even worse than the Judahites (1:13)? It was true that the people of Judah deserved discipline, but from aggressive barbarians like the Babylonians? Yahweh's answer seemed incredible.

Then follows an extended metaphor for the Babylonian conquests. The nations of the ancient Near East were like fish in the sea. The metaphor takes as its primary comparison the fact that fish seem to exist in independent schools, very much like the various nations and city-states of Mesopotamia and Canaan (1:14). Babylon is like a fisherman, who drops his dragnet in the water and indiscriminately pulls in his quarry (1:15). The dragnet fisherman makes no distinction between "good" fish and "bad" fish; he catches them all and uses them to feed his own political ambitions. But wasn't this inherently unjust, Habakkuk queries? Marduk, the Babylonian god of war and chief among the approximately 3000 Babylonian deities, was the "net" in the metaphor, to whom the Babylonians sacrificed and burned incense, while reveling in the luxury that foreign conquests inevitably brought (1:16). But could Yahweh allow a pagan nation in service to a pagan deity to continue pulling the "fish" out of the ancient Near Eastern world without restriction (2:17)? This was the question!

Habakkuk resigned himself to wait and see (2:1). Like a sentry on duty, he determined to wait for God to answer his complaint. His waiting for God was also an implicit waiting for the Babylonian doom that threatened.

Yahweh's Second Answer (2:2-5)

Yahweh's answer to Habakkuk's second complaint was prefaced by the solemn instruction to record the divine answer on tablets, quite possibly an early form of public display (2:2; cf. Is. 8:1; 30:8).[84] The similarity between this passage and the giving of the ten commandments on stone tablets is striking (Ex. 34:1), suggesting that Yahweh's answer was to have the same enduring quality. Also, like the command to Moses to record the laws of Torah on stone memorials (Dt.

[84] Smith, p. 106, suggests wooden tablets, though a more common medium in the ancient Near East was stone.

27:6-8), Habakkuk was to legibly inscribe the message so it would be clearly readable and ready for dispersion.[85] This revealed message pointed toward the long range future. The answer to Habakkuk's complaint and the resolution to the problem of evil would not appear soon, but rather, at "the end," an unknown future time in God's sovereign appointments. Nevertheless, though the resolution to the problem of evil would not appear immediately, it would surely come (2:3). In the meantime, Habakkuk (and indeed, all God's people) must be content to wait. Habakkuk's earlier determination to stand watch on the city's tower to await Yahweh's answer now becomes a symbol for the waiting of the righteous through the ages for God's final justice. This message to wait would be recapitulated in the teachings of Jesus (Lk. 18:7-8) and the writings of the apostles (2 Th. 1:5-10; Rv. 6:9-11).

Now for the message itself! Yahweh's answer is in two parts, one part directed toward Babylon, who becomes a symbol for all the aggrandizing power-seekers of the world, and the other directed toward the people of God who await divine justice. Perhaps this two-pronged message is why Habakkuk was to record it on more than one tablet. The message to Babylon is a description of the empire-builder's unrelenting pride and ruthless use of power.[86] Babylon is drunken, arrogant, restless, greedy and bent on conquest (2:4a, 5). No wonder Babylon becomes an enduring symbol of all that is opposed to God and his eternal purposes! Yet, for reasons known only to God, Babylon will be allowed to invade and conquer.

Habakkuk, then, lives in between the times-between the promise of justice and the fulfillment to come. How is he to live, and indeed, how are any of the righteous to live in the presence of such unrestrained evil? Yahweh's answer is that the righteous person must live by faith, that is, he must wait in faith for God's own time and way (2:4b). The word *emunah* (= faith), which is related to the word "amen," refers to the inner attitude that motivates faithfulness and continual conscientiousness.[87] The righteous person must not lapse into the self-aggrandizing ways of the pagans, but he must remain steadfast in his trust toward God. In the New Testament, of course, Paul quotes this same passage to illustrate the fact that it is precisely by this life of faith that a person stands justified before God (cf. Ro.

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[85] Scholars have puzzled about the meaning of the phrase "the one reading may run with it." Perhaps an actual herald is envisioned, though other suggestions include the interpretations that the verb "run" is a metaphor for living in obedience to God's will or that the script would be large enough and clear enough so that a person on the run might be able to read it or that those who knew how to read might explain it to the illiterate, Smith, pp. 106-107.

[86] The LXX differs from the MT in the opening of 2:4a, offering the translation, "If he should draw back, my soul has no pleasure in him." This version, of course, is the one quoted by the writer of Hebrews in 10:37-38.

[87] A. Jepsen, *TDOT* (1974) I.316-319.

1:17; Ga. 3:11). The fact that the message of faith is sandwiched as a parenthesis in the midst of the description of Babylon's conquests serves as a structural pointer to the reality that the righteous, also, live in the parenthesis between promise and fulfillment. In the end, however, Habakkuk could rely absolutely on God's moral character. Sin would not go unpunished, and the righteous faithful would not go unrewarded. In the meantime, the just must live by faith!

Taunt Song Against Babylon (2:6-20)

The taunt song, a Hebrew poetic form, appears as a direct address against an enemy. It ridicules his pretensions and scoffs at his destruction. Taunt songs are found in various prophetic oracles (e.g., Ps. 52; Is. 14:3ff.; Mic. 2:4; Eze. 28:2ff.; 32:2ff.). The present taunt song comes in the form of five woes, all of them directed toward Babylon. The "he" in these woes derives from the metaphor of the wicked fisherman (cf. 1:15), in which Babylon is depicted as indiscriminately pulling up the "fish" of the ancient Near East into his evil net.

The first woe (2:6-8) announces doom on Babylon who has amassed the booty of conquest. Those whose lands have been stripped by the invader are depicted as creditors,[88] and the day for settling accounts will surely come! They will plunder Babylon just as Babylon has plundered them.

The second woe (2:9-11) emphasizes Babylon's exploitation of the nations. Like a vulture, Babylon has scavenged the ancient Near East, building its nest high to avoid the backlash of revenge. In the end, the very stones and beams of the house built by extortion will cry aloud for vengeance, and Babylon will forfeit its life.

The third woe (2:12-14) describes the Babylonian efforts to build a capital through the bloodshed of conquest. Mighty Babylon, a wonder of the ancient world, would not endure. All the labor for building Babylon will disappear like flax in the fire. There is a larger purpose at work in history with which Babylon must reckon-the eternal purpose of Yahweh Tsabaoth (= Lord of armies). His divine purpose is that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (cf. Is. 11:9).[89] It is for this triumphant goal that the righteous person waits and lives by faith!

The fourth woe (2:15-17) employs the metaphor of drunken debauchery. Just as inebriated celebrants descend into voyeurism and shame, a possible allusion to

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[88] The Hebrew participle *nosh'kim* (= one who borrows at interest) is probably a word play on the homonym *nashak* (= to bite).

[89] Habakkuk's wording in the Hebrew text is not identical to Isaiah's, but the content is so similar that he is likely alluding to the famous oracle of his predecessor.

the orgies of the Ba'al fertility cult, so Babylon will be drunken and exposed by the justice of God. The cup of divine wrath, an apocalyptic symbol of judgment (cf. Is. 51:17-23; Je. 25:15-29; 49:12; 51:7; La. 4:21; Eze. 23:31-34; Rv. 14:10; 16:19; 18:6), will come around the table to Babylon. The violence Babylon dispensed to others will recoil upon her own head.

The fifth and final woe (2:18-20) scorns the Babylonian religion and its idolatry. The hewn and poured images[90] of Shamash, Marduk, Ishtar, Ea, Ninurta-Nimrod and hundreds of others were lifeless. They offered no truth, no word, no guidance and no breath. How different is Yahweh, the living God! He is in his holy temple to be revered by all the world! While the idolater must demand of his gods, "Wake up," the true worshipper bows in awe before the majesty of the Lord.

Habakkuk's Visionary Prayer (3:1-19)

Like several of the psalms (Ps. 17, 86, 90, 102, 142), the closing section of Habakkuk is structured as a prayer (3:1). The term *shigionoth*, the singular form of which also appears in Psalm 7:1, is obscure. It may be related to the verb *shagah* (= to err, wander), but if so, such a nuance seems hard to fit into the context of the present passage.[91] Little more can be said than that it probably denotes an obscure musical or literary term. That this section has a title similar to a psalm may suggest that this chapter circulated as an independent literary unit, though such a conclusion is not a necessary one. The prayer is punctuated by three *selahs* (3:3, 9, 13). Once again, the meaning of this obscure term that appears so frequently in the Book of Psalms can only be speculated about. The most frequent suggestion, based on the Septuagint, is that it calls for an interlude. Others have suggested a shift in musical accompaniment. The subscript at the conclusion offers the poem to the director of music, indicating that its recitation should be accompanied by stringed instruments, and thus implies that the piece was composed for the liturgy of the temple (3:19b).

The prayer itself begins with a short intercession followed by a description of a theophany of Yahweh. Habakkuk, after hearing God's responses to his two complaints and the charge that he must wait for God's timing to see final justice in the earth (cf. 2:2-3), prays for the coming of this mighty intervention of God (3:2). Habakkuk wants more than just to hear about God's might acts; he wants to see them, too, especially the extension of divine mercy in the midst of wrath. God's mighty acts of salvation, such as the exodus from Egypt, were now a memory belonging to the past. God's word to Habakkuk had been that he intended to bring

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[90] The Hebrew text uses both the words *pesel* (= carved image) and *massekah* (= cast image).

[91] Some scholars, for instance, suggest that this nuance, if it has any relevance at all, only means that the construction is irregular, cf. A. Anderson, *Psalms 1-72 [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 46.

judgment on both Judah and Babylon (cf. 1:6; 2:6ff.). Would there be mercy, too, for those who determined to live by their faith? This is the implicit question.

Habakkuk's prayer was answered by a vision of God's redemptive deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, a vision that at the same time anticipated his deliverance in the future, when wrath would fall upon the nations. The opening lines before the first *selah* are clearly connected to the poetic description of God's redemptive theophany in Deuteronomy 33, where Paran (the wasteland between Kadesh-barnea and Mt. Sinai[92]) and Seir (the hill country of Edom) are both associated with Mt. Sinai (3:3a). Thus, Habakkuk clearly recalls the giving of the Torah, the events surrounding the exodus and the desert where the people of Israel were formed into a nation. The pyrotechnics of theophany at Sinai (Ex. 19:16-19), repeated in the psalms (Ps. 18:7-15//2 Sa. 22:8-16), are now repeated to Habakkuk (3:3b-6). God's appearance had the surreal quality of a mighty thunderstorm. No wonder the dwellers in the desert were terrified at his manifestation (3:7)!

But why did God come? That is the question (3:8)! Was there not something more profound than merely a divine display of raw power? The answer is a resounding yes! God's appearance was as a warrior (3:9-11). His war was the manifestation of his judgment on the nations (3:12) and his deliverance of his people from their bondage (3:13-15)! Pharaoh, the god-symbol of Egypt, was crushed, along with his cohorts. These memories, in turn, become symbols for the future as well as the past. The God who once revealed himself as a man of war against Egypt (cf. Ex. 15:3) would yet split open the heavens to save his anointed. This hint at the future is suggested when the poet shifts, just for a moment, from the third person "them" into the first person "me" (3:14a).[93] The vision of the nations arrayed against Yahweh and "his anointed" is the same as the raging of the nations in Psalm 2 against Yahweh and his anointed. Here, as there, total triumph belongs to Yahweh.

This vision also becomes part of the answer to Habakkuk's complaint. Will God respond to evil in the world? Yes, he will (1:5ff.; 2:6ff.)! He will judge the nations! When he judges them, will he allow his own righteous people to die (2:12)? No, he won't! In the midst of his wrath he will remember them in mercy (3:2b), just as he did in ancient times (3:13)!

Habakkuk was overwhelmed by the power and immensity of this vision (3:16a)! The very universe stood still at such a revelation of God (3:11), and Habakkuk was reduced to a shuddering heap. What once happened to Pharaoh would happen to Babylon. What would happen to Babylon would happen to all the power-brokers of the world (cf. Is. 2:12ff.). In response, Habakkuk humbly resigned himself

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[92] T. Brisco, *ISBE* (1986) III.662.

[93] The NIV renders this as "us," but it is singular in the Hebrew text.

to wait for the day of God's judgment on Babylon (3:16b). In between the times-between the promise and its fulfillment-Habakkuk would rejoice in this future. Whatever hardships attended the present, whether drought or calamity, he would be joyful in the promise that God was his Savior (3:17-18). Through God's strength, he would rise above the injustices of the present while living by faith (3:19a). He would climb to the heights of faith with the feet of a deer (cf. Ps. 18:32-33//2 Sa. 22:33-34)!

Obadiah

Background

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible. It's primary theme is the announcement of Edom's coming judgment. The tension between the Israelites and the Edomites had a long history, beginning with the birth of Isaac's and Rebekah's twins (Ge. 25:23ff.; 27:39-40). Esau, the oldest, was the ancestor of the Edomites, while Jacob, his fraternal twin, was the ancestor of the Israelites.[94] The ancient oracles in Genesis that "the elder will serve the younger" is reflected in the Psalter in the metaphor of Yahweh, Israel's warrior God, "tossing his sandal" upon Edom, a symbol of his claim to sovereign authority (Ps. 60:8; 108:9; cf. Ru. 4:7-8).[95]

In the exodus, when the Israelites left Kadesh Barnea and began their final approach to Canaan, they requested safe passage through Edom along the "King's Highway". The Edomites bluntly refused (Nu. 20:14-21). Much later, during the Monarchy, the tensions continued as Saul skirmished with the Edomites (1 Sa. 14:47). Though Saul employed a mercenary Edomite as his head shepherd, this same shepherd took relish in butchering eighty-five unarmed priests and a Judean town full of women and children (1 Sa. 22:9-19), and it is hard not to believe that this act of violence was fueled by the ancient antipathy. David, also, fought the Edomites, forcing them to serve as vassals to Israel (2 Sa. 8:11-14). The Edomites broke this vassalship during Solomon's reign (1 Kg. 11:14-22), but Judah won it back under Jehoshaphat and ruled Edom through a vassal deputy (1 Kg. 22:47; 2 Chr. 20:2, 22-29). When Jehoshaphat died, the Edomites broke free again, reestablishing their native kingship (2 Kg. 8:20-22; 2 Chr. 21:8-10a). This time they managed to throw off the vassal yoke permanently.

Hostilities between Judah and Edom arose in matters other than full-scale political intrigue, also. During the reign of Ahaz, the Edomites raided southern Judah,

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[94] It seems safe to conclude that the boys were fraternal twins, not identical, due to the psychological and physical differences between them (cf. Ge. 25:27; 27:11).

[95] F. Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, trans. F. Bolton (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), II.199; A. Anderson, *Psalms (1-17) [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), I.445.

taking prisoners back to Edom (2 Chr. 28:16-17).[96] They were indicted by Amos in the eighth century for slave-trading (Am. 1:9) and their unrelenting antagonism toward the Israelites (Am. 1:11; cf. Jl. 3:19). Several prophets beside Obadiah gave oracles announcing Edom's coming destruction (Is. 34:5-15; Je. 9:25-26; 25:15, 21; 27:2-7; 49:7-22; La. 4:20-22). The antagonism between Edom and Israel was so severe that when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BC, the Edomites shouted in glee, "Tear it down! Tear it down to its foundations!" (Ps. 137:7; cf. Eze. 25:12-14; 35:15; 36:5).

As to the prophet Obadiah himself, nothing is known other than his name, which means "Servant of Yahweh."[97] It usually is assumed that he came from Judah. The date of his prophecy is also debatable, and it must be coordinated with the work of two other prophets, Jeremiah and Joel, both of which contain thematic parallels with Obadiah.

LITERARY PARALLELS

Obadiah	**Jeremiah 49**	**Obadiah**	**Joel**
v. 1	v. 14	v. 10	3:19
v. 2	v. 15	v. 11	3:3
v. 3a	v. 16a	v. 15	3:4, 7
v. 4	v. 16b	v. 15	1:15; 2:1; 3:14
v. 5	v. 9	v. 17	2:32
v. 6	v. 10a	v. 17	3:17
v. 8	v. 7	v. 18	3:8f.
v. 9a	v. 22b		
v. 16	v. 12		

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The parallels between Obadiah and Jeremiah 49 are so striking that some sort of literary dependency must be assumed. Jeremiah's ministry can be dated to the later years of Judah's national existence before exile (cf. Je. 1:1-3), but it is unclear how the dating of Jeremiah relates to the dating of Obadiah. Three possibilities are open: either Jeremiah used Obadiah, Obadiah used Jeremiah, or both prophets depended on some earlier source unknown to us. All three positions have

[96] Archaeological evidence demonstrates the Edomite encroachment into southern Judah, cf. I. Beit-Arieh, "Edomites Advance into Judah," *BAR* (Nov./Dec. 1996), pp. 34-36. A Hebrew ostracon recovered from Arad bears an inscription warning the Israelite commander to prepare for an Edomite invasion.

[97] The name itself is common, and there are about a dozen biblical persons bearing it.

proponents.[98] If the passage in verses 11-14 depicts the Edomite scorn and opportunism at the fall of Jerusalem along the lines of Psalm 137:7, which seems likely, than Obadiah must be placed after 586 BC.

The relationship between Obadiah and Joel is less direct. Some have maintained that there is a direct dependence between Joel 2:32b and Obadiah 17, and that the Joel passage must depend upon the Obadiah passage because of the phrase "as Yahweh has said."[99] However, the idea of deliverance on Mt. Zion and in Jerusalem is so prolific, especially in Isaiah (cf. Is. 1:26-27; 2:3; 4:3f.; 12:6; 14:32; 24:23; 28:16; 30:19; 33:20, 24; 35:10; 37:32), that Joel's dependence on Obadiah, though possible, is by no means necessary.

Structurally, the Book of Obadiah falls into two main parts, the vision concerning Edom's judgment (1-14) and the vision of the Day of Yahweh (15-21).

The Doom of Edom (1-14)

Obadiah's oracle commences with a summons to the nations to declare war on Edom (1). In direct address, he speaks to Edom's cliff-dwellers.[100] The Hebrew *sela'* (= rock) is a play on the name of the Edomite fortress of Sela (cf. 2 Kg. 14:7). Though proud, the Edomites would be reduced to insignificance (2)-4). The coming disaster would not be like some petty theft; it would be total destruction (5-6)! Her allies would desert her (7), and her defenders would fail (8-9). Though famous for her treasuries of ancient Near Eastern wisdom, her wise men would be destroyed (cf. Je. 49:7).[101] Judgment was due because of the Edomites' malicious glee over the fall of Jerusalem, presumably at Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the city and temple in 586 BC (11-12; cf. Ps. 137:7; Eze. 25:12; 35:5; cf. 2 Kg. 25; 2 Chr. 36; Je. 52). While Jerusalem burned, the Edomites looted the city (13) and turned over the fleeing refugees to the enemy (14).

The Day of Yahweh (15-21)

Like Amos, Isaiah, Joel and Zephaniah, Obadiah uses the stock imagery of the "Day of Yahweh" to describe the coming judgment on Edom. Edom's judgment

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[98] E. J. Young, for instance, favors Obadiah as being older, cf. p. 260. If v. 11ff. describes the fall of Jerusalem, however, this could hardly be the case. R. K. Harrison favors the idea that both Jeremiah and Obadiah depend upon some earlier oracle, though he puts Obadiah later than Jeremiah, cf. pp. 902.

[99] If this conclusion is accepted, then, of course, it makes Joel later than Obadiah.

[100] Much of the Edomite territory was upland plateau rising to about 4000' in elevation in contrast to the Dead Sea depression of about –1300'. The terrain closest to Judah featured expanses of volcanic rock cut by dry gullies and valleys, cf. Beit-Arieh, p.30.

[101] Ancient Near Eastern wisdom was the practical art of being skilful and successful in life, and especially, framing wise observations about life in proverbs and oral counsel. At least one of Job's comforters came from Teman, an area in northern Edom (cf. Job 2:11; 4:1, etc.).

would be only a small part of the larger judgment of God upon all nations (15a). Though Yahweh was long-suffering and gracious, he could not allow indefinitely behavior that violated his will. Furthermore, Yahweh was not merely the God of the Hebrews; he was the God of the nations, and he held them all accountable. Thus, the violence they committed would be turned back to them (15b). This violence is symbolized by the cup of wine (cf. Ps. 75:7-8). The nations, including the Edomites, drank heavily from the cup of Judah's misfortune, that is, they took advantage of Jerusalem's vulnerability and looted the city, showing no pity. Now, the cup of opportunism would be turned into the cup of Yahweh's wrath, and it would come around the table to every nation (16; cf. Is. 51:17-23; Je. 25:15-29; La. 4:21; Eze. 23:31-34; Ha. 2:16; Zec. 12:2).

As all the prophets regularly affirm, judgment is not Yahweh's final word. Rather, in the midst of the judgment of the Day of Yahweh there is also salvation. Mt. Zion, the place where Yahweh promised to place his name forever, would be the source of this deliverance (17a; cf. Jl. 3:17). Judah would be restored (17b), and her land boundaries would be expanded on all sides to the south (Edom), the west (Philistia), the north (Ephraim and Samaria) and the east (Gilead). The surviving remnant of exiles would possess the holy land as far north as Zarephath, Phoenicia. Exiled Jews would return home to live in the Negev once more (19-20).[102] Edom, by contrast, would have no survivors (18), and the land will be governed by leaders from Judah (21a). Most important, the entire kingdom will be Yahweh's (21b).

[102] The reference to Sepharad is unclear. In Jewish tradition, the location is in Spain, though several suggested locations in the ancient Near East are also possible, including *Saparda* in Media and Sardis, Lydia (which also appears as *Sparda* in ancient Persian). Given the context of Mesopotamian imperialism, the location in Media is favored by most scholars, cf. *ISBE* (1988) IV.399.