

Study Questions

1. Why did God elevate Daniel and his friends among the Jewish captives?
2. How do the details of the interpretation of the metallic statue (chap. 2) and the four beasts explain the historical fulfillment of biblical prophecy?
3. What character qualities enabled Daniel (chaps. 1; 6) and his friends to stand for God against the pressure to compromise their convictions?
4. What was the significance of the handwriting on the wall?
5. To what does the prophecy of the 70 "sevens" refer?
6. Why should we have confidence in biblical prophecies?
7. What is the final promise and prophecy of Daniel 12?

ENDNOTES

1. J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1964), 269.
2. For a detailed discussion of the critical view, cf. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Daniel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1922) and contrary to Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 365–88.
3. K. A. Kitchen, "The Aramaic of Daniel," in D. J. Wiseman, ed., *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (London: Tyndale Press, 1965), 31–79.
4. E. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 380–82.
5. Gleason Archer, "The Hebrew of Daniel Compared with Qumran Sectarian Documents," J. H. Skilton, ed., *The Law and the Prophets* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), 470–81.
6. T. C. Mitchell and R. Joyce, "The Musical Instruments in Nebuchadnezzar's Orchestra," in Wiseman, *Notes on Some Problems*, 19–27.
7. W. H. Shea, "Daniel 3: Extra Biblical Texts and the Convocation on the Plain of Dura," *AI/SS* 20 (1982), 37–50.
8. P. A. Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556–539 BC* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 156–57.
9. John C. Whitcomb, *Darius the Mede* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963).
10. Stephen Miller, *Daniel* (NAC, 18) (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 305–6. Church fathers such as Chrysostom, Jerome, and Theodorat clearly identify this king as the future Antichrist. Cf. Gleason Archer, trans., *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).
11. J. J. Slotki, *Daniel-Ezra-Nehemiah* (London: Socino Press, 1978), 100–101.

Chapter 33

MINOR PROPHETS

The Minor Prophets cover the books of Hosea to Malachi and form the final section of the Old Testament canon. They follow the Major Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Their present arrangement follows the order of the Latin Vulgate, which in turn follows the order of the Septuagint (LXX) in placing Hosea first as an introduction to the general themes of warning, judgment, repentance, and restoration in the 12 prophets.

Jewish rabbinic tradition held that the men of the Great Synagogue edited the 12 individual books into a single volume in the Hebrew Bible.¹ Their placement of the Minor Prophets in relation to the Major Prophets indicates that these books were revered as inspired Scriptures of equal value to their larger counterparts. In other words, the messages of the Minor Prophets were of major significance for the people of Israel.

These books are 12 separate compositions in our English Bible, but they appear as a single "Book of the 12" in the Hebrew Bible. Along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, they form the Latter Prophets. The history of these 12 prophets covered a span of more than three centuries. The first historical reference to these books in the apocryphal Strach (c. 200 BC) treats them as a single work because these smaller books could all fit on a single scroll. The order of these books is the same in the Hebrew and English canons, and some Jewish traditions viewed these books as arranged chronologically.

Six of the books (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah) contain historical headings or superscriptions and are generally arranged chronologically, though many would put the ministry of Amos (760 BC) earlier than Hosea (755–715 BC). The other six (Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Malachi) have no headings and are more difficult to date so it is hard to make strong claims about their chronological order. Commentators do not agree on the dates of Jonah, Joel, and Obadiah. Thematic considerations also appear to have influenced the order and arrangement of these books.

In terms of larger themes, Hosea-Micah focused on the sin of covenant breaking; Nahum-Zephaniah emphasized the approaching judgment of the Day of the Lord; and Haggai-Malachi promised the reversal of judgment and the future glory of Israel. Key words and phrases also provided links between the end of one work and the beginning

of another. Joel 3:16 and Amos 1:2 refer to the Lord's roaring like a lion. Amos 9:12 prophesies the judgment of Edom, and the fall of Edom is the thematic focus of the book of Obadiah that follows. Altogether the Minor Prophets are a collection of the messages of 12 individual prophets to Israel and Judah that serve both as predictions of judgment and as promises of hope for the future.²

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The books of the Minor Prophets cover the period from the eighth to the fifth centuries BC. This time began with an era of great prosperity for both Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom) but ended in disaster for both kingdoms. The early success of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC) would end with the total collapse of the northern kingdom and the destruction of its capital Samaria by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Although Judah would survive a similar assault by the Assyrians in 701 BC, the southern kingdom would fall repeatedly to the Babylonians, and Jerusalem would be totally destroyed in 586 BC.

The earlier Minor Prophets, like their counterparts, the Major Prophets, predicted the fall of both Samaria and Jerusalem to the Assyrians and Babylonians. Then, in turn, they also predicted the fall of Assyria and Babylon and the future restoration of Judah. Thus, the history of the Minor Prophets extends all the way through the Babylonian captivity (605–535 BC) and includes three postexilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) who preached to the Jewish people who returned to rebuild Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon.

STRUCTURE AND STYLE

The messages of the Minor Prophets were delivered on separate occasions and later collected and arranged in book form. Robert Chisholm suggests six distinct patterns of prophetic speech that appear in the messages of the prophets.³

1. *Inclusio*: the conclusion corresponds to the introduction (see Mic 1:8–16).
2. *Chiasmus*: the center of the literary unit builds toward a climax (see Joel 2:19–27).
3. *Judgment speech*: an accusation is followed by a pronouncement of judgment (see Amos 1:3–5).
4. *Woe oracles*: judgments that presume guilt and begin with the word “woe” (Hb. *hov*).
5. *Exhortation*: a call to repentance reinforced by a promise of hope (see Joel 2:12–14).
6. *Salvation announcements*: promises of God's deliverance and blessing (see Amos 9:11–15).

The preexilic prophets delivered warnings of judgment in which they predicted that God would implement the curses of the covenant based on Israel's ratification of the covenant stipulations in Deuteronomy 27–30. This same theme can be seen in the

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postexilic prophets. Therefore, it should not surprise us that the final verse of the Old Testament warns: “Or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal 4:6 NIV).

FOCUS OF THE PROPHETS

Three of the Minor Prophets (27 chapters in the English Bible) are focused on the northern kingdom of Israel (capital, Samaria):

- Hosea: God's Unquenchable Love
- Amos: God's Ultimate Justice
- Jonah: God's Universal Concern

Six of the Minor Prophets (20 chapters in the English Bible) are focused on the southern kingdom (capital, Jerusalem):

- Joel: Day of the Lord
- Obadiah: Doom of Edom
- Micah: Divine Lawsuit
- Nahum: Destruction of Nineveh
- Habakkuk: Destruction of Babylon
- Zephaniah: Disaster Is Imminent

The last three Minor Prophets (20 chapters in the English Bible) are focused on the Jewish exiles who have returned from Babylon to rebuild the temple and reestablish Jerusalem. They form the final link to the Messianic prophecies, which are fulfilled in Jesus in the New Testament:

- Haggai: Rebuild the Temple
- Zechariah: Restore the King
- Malachi: Repent of Sin

The messages of the Minor Prophets still speak to us today. They remind us that God holds all people responsible for their behavior, especially those who claim to belong to Him. God's warnings to Israel and Judah were meant to turn them away from impending disaster and urge them to be faithful to the One who really loved them. Thus, the call of the prophets echoes down the canyon of time, calling us to repent, return, and experience God's grace and forgiveness resulting in revival, restoration, and hope for the future.

For Further Reading

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ENDNOTES

1. R. K. Harrison. *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 858.
2. Paul R. House. *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 348.
3. Robert Chisholm, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 260.

Chapter 34

HOSEA

God's Unquenchable Love

Hosea (“salvation”) prophesied from the reign of Jeroboam II (791–750 BC) to the reign of Hezekiah (715–687 BC), and his ministry likely covered a time span of 35–40 years. Most of Hosea’s recorded messages focus on the **coming judgment of Israel** and thus occurred before the fall of Samaria in 722 BC. It is unusual that the heading of a book for a prophet who ministered in the northern kingdom mentions four kings of Judah and then only one king of Israel. Hosea prophesied concerning Judah as well as Israel (cf. Hos 1:7, 11; 4:15; 5:5, 10–14; 6:4, 11; 8:14; 10:11; 11:12; 12:2), and the focus of the heading on Judah is likely due to the fact that the written form of Hosea’s prophecies were viewed as much as a warning of the future exile of Judah as a historical message about the fall of Israel. The omission of Israel’s rulers following Jeroboam II reflects their political and religious insignificance.



The temple platform at Dan used by Jeroboam I. The steps lead up to a large platform made of ashlar masonry.

BACKGROUND

Hosea's ministry began at a time of great economic prosperity for Israel that rapidly disintegrated into one of national catastrophe. Both Israel and Judah prospered under the lengthy and effective reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah, so the weakness of both Syria and Assyria enabled Jeroboam II to expand Israelite territories (2 Kgs 14:23-29). Israel's political size and economic stability, however, were not indicators of spiritual vitality. Israel turned away from the Lord, worshipped Baal, and engaged in the perverse rites and practices that accompanied such worship. Israel wrongly credited Baal rather than Yahweh, as the provider of the wealth and economic blessing they enjoyed. The veneration of the golden-calf gods in the sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel and various forms of **religious syncretism** also corrupted their worship of the Lord and blurred important distinctions between Yahweh and the pagan gods.

At the social level Israel's accumulation of wealth led to a wide disparity between the upper and lower classes, and a **climate of injustice** prevailed as the rich used their power and influence to take advantage of the poor. Selfishness, greed, and the pursuit of pleasure characterized Israelite society rather than love for the Lord and one's neighbor. Following the death of Jeroboam II, Israel had a rapid succession of weak and ungodly leaders over its final 50 years. The assassination of Jeroboam's son, Zechariah, six months into his reign, set in motion a bloody and violent struggle in which four of Israel's final five kings came to the throne by murdering their predecessor (cf. Hos 7:5-7; 8:4-6; 2 Kings 15). The stability that Israel enjoyed in the first half of the eighth century BC quickly turned to chaos.

Jeroboam's death also coincided with the rise of Tiglath-pileser III to the Assyrian throne in 745 BC. Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BC) restored the power of the central government in Assyria and looked westward to expand his territories and gain much-needed tribute for his kingdom. Israel was no match for the **Assyrian military machine**. Menahem of Israel (749-739 BC) paid tribute to Assyria during his reign (2 Kgs 15:19-20). Pekah (737-732 BC) later attempted to form an alliance with King Rezin of Syria against the Assyrians, but the resultant Syro-Ephraimite War ended with the destruction of Damascus and heavy losses for Israel. The annals of Tiglath-pileser III record that Israel's final king, Hoshea, was installed as an Assyrian puppet. Hoshea later rebelled against the Assyrians by refusing to pay tribute and appealing to Egypt for military assistance (2 Kgs 17:4), and the Assyrian king Sargon II took the city of Samaria in 722 BC after a three-year siege. Hosea's prophecies of judgment against Israel were fulfilled, and Israel became an Assyrian province.

Outline

- I. Personal and National Problem: Unfaithfulness (Hosea 1-3)
 - II. Prospect of Judgment and Salvation (Hosea 4-14)
 - A. Judgment for Israel's Rebellion (Hosea 4:1-6:3)
 - B. Judgment Results in Israel's Ruin (Hosea 6:4-11:11)
 - C. Judgment Turns to Restoration (Hosea 11:12-14:9)

MESSAGE

I. Personal and National Problem: Unfaithfulness (Hosea 1-3)

God commanded Hosea to marry a promiscuous and **unfaithful wife**, who subsequently gave birth to three children with symbolic names. Both the woman and the children were metaphors of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness toward the Lord. Israel had prostituted itself by turning away from the Lord and following other gods. Scholars have interpreted the marriage of Hosea and Gomer in several different ways. Jewish and Christian interpreters alike have struggled with the moral dilemma of how the Lord could direct Hosea as His prophet to marry a promiscuous woman. Some have viewed the marriage as an allegory or parable rather than an actual union. Others have argued that Gomer was a cult prostitute or that she was guilty of spiritual infidelity like many others in the land of Israel. Still others have suggested that she became promiscuous after they were actually married.

The most natural reading of the text is that Hosea and Gomer were actually husband and wife. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and the outrageous act of a prophet marrying an immoral woman graphically demonstrated how the Lord viewed Israel's covenant deflection. Without a **real marriage** and all of the moral messiness accompanying such an act, the message of Hosea loses much of its rhetorical impact. Nothing could also more effectively communicate Yahweh's unconditional love and covenant commitment to Israel than a husband showing love to a promiscuous wife.

Did Jesus Fulfill Hosea 11:1?

In Hosea 11:1, Yahweh recalled His past deliverance of Israel at the exodus, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (NIV). Matthew 2:15 asserts that the return of Jesus from Egypt after his fleeing there with his parents from Herod was the fulfillment of Hosea 11:1. How can a passage referencing Israel in the Old Testament be applied to Jesus in the New Testament? Matthew interpreted the Hosea passage **typologically**, drawing a parallel between the experience of Israel as God's son and Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. God would not allow His son to remain in servitude and obscurity in Egypt.

The Gospels present numerous parallels between the life of Jesus and the experiences of Israel. The hostility of Herod and his slaughter of the infants mirrored Israel's experiences in Egypt. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness like Israel but, unlike Israel, was faithful and obedient when tested. As Moses in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expounded the law to His disciples filled the story of Israel in the Old Testament. Through His obedience and ultimately His saving death, Jesus would restore Israel as God's people and instrument of blessing to the rest of the world.

Hebrew Highlight

Repent. Hebrew שׁוּב (*shub*) is used 1,075 times in the Old Testament. It means to “turn” (Josh 19:12), “turn back” (Exod 14:2) or “return” (Gen 3:19). It denotes “repent” (Ps 7:12), or “reconsider” (Job 6:29). Used with other verbs, *shub* emphasizes decisive and repeated action. It is the strongest Hebrew term to indicate that true repentance involves a change of direction that results in renewal and restoration (Hos 6:1).

Rather than a dream or vision, the Lord’s command for Hosea to marry Gomer most closely parallels other texts in which the Lord directs a prophet to communicate His message by performing a **symbolic act**. The Lord commanded Isaiah to preach naked and barefoot for three years (Isa 20:1–3). He instructed Jeremiah to wear an animal yoke as he preached (Jeremiah 27–28) and directed Ezekiel to shave his head and beard (Ezek 5:1–4) as visual demonstrations of their messages of judgment. The Lord commanded Jeremiah not to marry or have children in order to warn the people that the judgment of exile would deprive them of their family members (Jer 16:1–4). Ezekiel’s wife also died on the day the Babylonians took the city of Jerusalem, and the Lord commanded the prophet not to mourn so the people would understand they were about to experience a disaster that would leave them too numb to grieve (Ezek 24:15–26).

It is not clear to some if Gomer was **promiscuous** before her marriage to Hosea or only engaged in immoral behavior after the marriage had occurred. Many interpreters have argued that Hosea retrospectively came to realize that the Lord had commanded him to marry an immoral woman after she was unfaithful to him in their marriage. Such a reading is possible and might better reflect the history of the Lord’s relationship with Israel. Israel was devoted to the Lord at the beginning of the covenant relationship (Hos 2:15; cf. Jer 2:2) and only later became unfaithful. However, other texts indicate that the people of Israel had worshipped other gods in Egypt and were unfaithful to the Lord from the beginning of their relationship (cf. Exodus 32; Numbers 25; Josh 24:14; Ezek 20:20–21). If the command to marry Gomer was the symbolic act commencing Hosea’s ministry, it would seem more likely that she was promiscuous when the prophet took her as his wife. Gomer’s unfaithfulness to Hosea was a metaphor of Israel’s unfaithfulness to the Lord, and the issue of her purity at the time of her marriage has no real impact on the message behind the metaphor. It was also not necessary for every aspect of the marriage between Hosea and Gomer to correspond to the exact details of the history between the Lord and Israel in order to serve as an illustration to the nation.

The **children** born to Gomer also represented Israel’s unfaithfulness, and the names of these children had symbolic significance and warned of the judgment that was coming upon Israel. *Jezebel* (“God sows”) was the place where God visited judgment on the house of Ahab (2 Kings 9–10). A name like “Columbine” would carry a similar connotation in a modern American context. The name also signified that the dynasty or house of Jehu, which King Jeroboam II was leading, was about to come to

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a violent and bloody end. *Lo-Ruhannah* (“not pitied”) meant that the Lord would not show mercy as He punished Israel for its sins. *Lo-Ammi* (“not my people”) indicated that Yahweh would sever His relationship with Israel as punishment for their covenant unfaithfulness. However, the Lord also promised that after their time of judgment He would restore His people and would bring about a reversal of the negative circumstances reflected by the children’s names (1:10–2:1, 23).

Instead of a place of violence, Jezebel, which can also mean “God sows,” would become a place of **renewal** as God securely planted His people in their land. The Lord would show His love to unloved Israel, and they would once again become His people. The text specifically identifies only Jezebel as the son of Hosea, and scholars have debated if Hosea was the father of the other two children, particularly in light of their names Lo-Ammi and Lo-Ruhannah.

At the beginning of chap. 3, Yahweh instructed Hosea to take back his unfaithful wife. **Gomer** had committed adultery and had degraded herself to the point that she had become the property of another man. Hosea paid the price of both silver and grain that cancelled out any debt she may have owed and that freed her from her servitude. After a time of isolation, Gomer would live with Hosea and be exclusively devoted to her husband. Similarly, the Lord would discipline Israel with a time of deprivation so that she would become devoted to Him. The renewal of Israel would also mean the restoration of the Davidic dynasty through the raising up of a new David in the last days.

II. Prospects of Judgment and Salvation (Hosea 4–14)

The marriage of Hosea and Gomer was a powerful **object lesson** of Israel’s unfaithfulness toward the Lord and the Lord’s unflinching commitment to His people. Moving beyond the issue of Gomer’s infidelity, chaps. 4–14 present a detailed explanation of Israel’s covenant infidelity. Like a prosecuting attorney presenting the Lord’s case against Israel, Hosea charged Israel with covenant infidelity in three separate indictments:

“The Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land.” (4:1 NIV)

“They have broken the covenant—they were unfaithful to me there.” (6:7 NIV)

“The Lord has a charge to bring against Judah; he will punish Jacob according to his ways and repay him according to his deeds.” (12:2 NIV)

Other prophets also presented similar **covenant lawsuits** against Israel (cf. Isa 1:3–20; Mic 6:1–8). Hosea documented that Israel had committed spiritual adultery against the Lord in four specific ways: (1) worship of Baal and other false gods (4:10–14; 8:11; 11:2; 13:1–2), (2) religious syncretism and the worship of the calf god at their sanctuaries (4:17; 8:5–6; 10:5–6; 13:2), (3) violation of Yahweh’s commandments (4:1–2; 6:7; 7:1–2), and (4) political alliances with other nations (5:13–14; 7:8, 11; 8:9–10; 12:1).

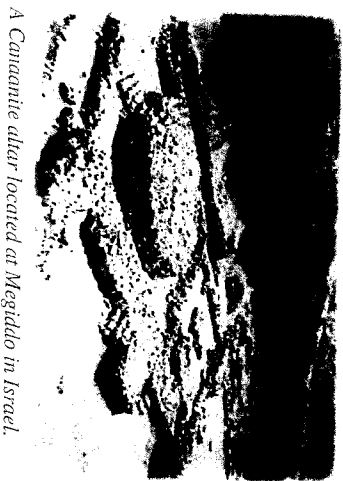
Chapters 4–14 consist of **three cycles** of alternating messages of judgment and salvation:

CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
Judgment (4:1–5:15a)	Judgment (6:4–11:7)	Judgment (11:12–13:16)
Salvation (5:15b–6:3)	Salvation (11:8–11)	Salvation (14:1–9)

This structure reflects that though the Lord would punish Israel severely for its many sins, He would not reject His people forever and would ultimately restore and bless them. The Lord's purging judgment would turn Israel away from its worship of false gods and would cause them to recognize Him alone as their source of security and blessing.

A. Judgment for Israel's Rebellion (Hosea 4:1–6:3)

The prophet charged that Israel was guilty of **disobedience** to Yahweh's covenant commands, specifically calling attention to their violation of six of the Ten Commandments. Ultimate fault lay with Israel's priests and prophets who had failed to teach the word of the Lord. Consequently the people were perishing for their lack of knowledge. Israel's spiritual leaders were greedy and selfish, and the priests loved to feed themselves



A Canaanite altar located at Megiddo in Israel.

on the sacrifices and offerings the people presented to the Lord. Selfish priests had produced a pleasure-seeking people who turned to the worship of false gods and the practice of abhorrent Canaanite fertility rites as a means of satisfying their sinful lusts. Some Israelites were outright polytheists and worshipped other gods; more of the people likely gave into subtle forms of syncretism in which pagan beliefs and practices were integrated into the worship of Yahweh. Such syncretism had begun with the worship of the calf gods at the sanctuaries in Dan and Bethel. Hosea announced that God's judgment would fall on both Israel and Judah for their sin and rebellion. Because they had turned away from the Lord, the Lord would abandon them in their day of distress.

Nevertheless, for now God would wait for a while to see if some would seek Him, desire to return to God, and trust Him for healing and revival. If those individuals were truly determined to know Him, God would surely pour out His blessing on them (5:15–6:3)

B. Judgment Results in Israel's Ruin (Hosea 6:4–11:11)

In the second phase of his covenant lawsuit against Israel, Hosea delivered **two extended indictments** of Israel's sins against the Lord (6:4–7:16 and 10:1–15) and a detailed description between them of how the Lord intended to punish them for their crimes (8:1–9:17). Injustice and violence characterized Israelite society because the people did not think the Lord saw or took notice of their actions. The people defrauded one another in their business dealings, and drunken princes conspired against each other and engaged in bloody conflict for control of the throne. Four of Israel's last six kings came to the throne by murdering their predecessors.



Statue of a lion standing over a bull's head.

Israel's **military alliances** with other nations were as much a form of spiritual adultery as their worship of false gods. Israel was caught in a vise between two superpowers—Egypt to the south and Assyria to the north, and Israel's officials vacillated between the two powers in seeking the assistance of one against the other. They trusted in their treaties with Assyria and Egypt as their ultimate source of security rather than trusting in the Lord. By mixing with other peoples, Israel became like a half-baked cake, raw on one side and burnt on the other. Israel's foolish officials were like doves flitting back and forth between Egypt and Assyria (7:11). By entering these political alliances, Israel sowed the wind of folly, and they would reap the whirlwind of military invasion (8:7).

Hosea employed a series of **four extended metaphors** that contrasted both the Lord's faithfulness to Israel with Israel's unfaithfulness to Him. Israel was compared to spoiled grapes, a wild vine, a trained heifer, and a rebellious son. Even in judgment, however, Yahweh's fatherly love would trump His anger, and He would not completely destroy His people (11:8–11). The Lord would preserve a remnant and restore them to their homeland. His roaring as a lion in judgment would cause the survivors of the exile to come trembling before Him in repentance.

C. Judgment Turns to Restoration (Hosea 11:12–14:9)

In the third segment of his indictment against Israel, Hosea compared the people with their deceptive forefather **Jacob**. Jacob struggled with his brother in the womb, wrestled with God, and earnestly sought His blessing as a man. However, Israel did not seek the Lord and ignored the many messages of the prophets who attempted to call them back to God. Instead of acknowledging the Lord as the source of their blessings, Israel attributed their wealth and prosperity to their idols and their calf gods. Because of her rebellion against Yahweh, the capital city of Samaria would fall in battle, and the pregnant women and small children of the city would be torn to pieces by their vicious attackers.

The final message in the book of Hosea is one of **hope and promise**. The consistent message of the prophets was that Israel's salvation and restoration would follow its time of judgment. In spite of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, Hosea called on the people to return to the Lord with confession of their sin and repudiation of their trust in military alliances and false gods. When Israel "returned" (*shub*) to the Lord (14:1), then the Lord would "turn" (*shub*) from His anger and would freely love them again (14:4). Hosea employed agricultural imagery to portray the great blessing the Lord would pour out on His repentant people. Like the refreshing dew, Yahweh would be Israel's source of life and vitality. Israel would become fruitful once again, its beauty like the lilies and its strength like the trees of Lebanon. Israel would flourish like the olive tree, the grain, and the vine. Like an evergreen tree the Lord would be a constant source of blessing, and He would provide for Israel everything they had wrongly sought from their false gods.



"They will follow the Lord: He will roar like a lion. When He roars, His children will come trembling from the west" (Hos 11:10).

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Hosea presented the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel as a marriage. The **marriage metaphor** communicated the depth of the Lord's love for Israel and the intimacy of their relationship. The portrayal of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel as a marriage also highlighted the treachery and betrayal behind Israel's sin. Israel was to give exclusive love and worship to the Lord as her husband, but they committed spiritual adultery against Him by following after false gods. The prophets employed graphic sexual imagery in order to shock the people into seeing how

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disgusting and repulsive their behavior was in the eyes of God (cf. Jeremiah 2–3; Ezekiel 16; 23). The sexual nature of this metaphor was also appropriate in light of Israel's involvement in pagan fertility rites (Hos 4:13–14).

Israel did not simply break God's laws; they broke His heart. Adultery was a capital offense in Israel, and the infidelity of the wife also brought shame and dishonor on the husband. The marriage metaphor also conveyed hope for Israel's future because of the Lord's **unfailing love** for His wife. Even in judgment the Lord could not give up His feelings of love for Israel, and He would not destroy them completely (Hos 11:8–9).

The marriage metaphor carried over into the New Testament as a picture of Christ's love for the church. Christ bought the church through His death on the cross so that she could be His pure and holy bride, and husbands are to follow His example of sacrifice in loving their wives (Eph 5:25–27). Paul ministered on behalf of the church so he could present her as a pure virgin to Christ at the time of the Second Coming (2 Cor 11:2), and the second coming of Christ to earth will be the time for the eschatological banquet and the marriage supper of the Lamb when Christ is finally joined to His bride to live with her for all eternity (cf. Matt 22:1–14; Rev 19:6–10).

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Study Questions

1. Why did God lead Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman?
2. What did the names of her three children signify?
3. How did God use Hosea's personal problems to speak to the people of Israel?
4. Did warnings of divine judgment mean that Israel was beyond hope in the future?
5. What lessons can we learn from Hosea about forgiving those who have wronged us and hurt us?

Chapter 35

JOEL Day of the Lord

The book of Joel derives its name from its central character. His Hebrew name *yo'el* combines the names Yahweh and Elohim, meaning "Yahweh is God." Nothing is known today of the prophet Joel except that he was the son of Pethuel. The temple references found throughout the book (1:8–10, 13–14; 2:17) have caused some to speculate that he may also have been a priest. The book's multiple references to Zion and the house of the Lord (1:9–14; 2:15–17; 3:1–6, 16–21) indicate that he probably lived near Jerusalem.

BACKGROUND

No chronological data is disclosed in the book. Therefore, biblical scholars have to depend on internal factors to date this prophecy. Three completely **different dates** have been suggested for the original composition: (1) early preexilic (835–830 BC), (2) late preexilic (609–585 BC), and (3) postexilic (515–350 BC). The latter view is argued on the basis of the reference to Greeks (3:6) and the assumption that the temple references are to the rebuilt second temple. Conservative scholars have generally preferred either of the preexilic dates, arguing that the reference to the valley of Jehoshaphat (3:12) fits with preexilic times since Jehoshaphat (872–848 BC) was the last godly king of Judah prior to Joash. Also, the prophet lists Judah's preexilic enemies as Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt, Edom, and the Sabaeans (Joel 3:2–19) while failing to mention Assyria, Babylon, and Persia from exile and postexilic times.



Valley of Jehoshaphat (Kidron Valley) in Jerusalem.

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JOEL Day of the Lord

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The daring of Joel does not significantly affect its message, for if Joel ministered before or after the exile, his message demonstrates that the people had not fully accepted the warnings and admonitions of earlier prophets. They continued to struggle with spiritual lethargy, misplaced priorities, and outright disobedience to Yahweh's commands. Joel announced that God sent the recent locust plague in order to awaken His people from the spiritual dullness and warned that even greater disaster in the form of yet another **military invasion** would occur if the people did not soon change their ways. The positive and repentant response of the people to Joel's message ultimately transformed this warning of judgment into a promise of blessing.



Locust swarm.

Hebrew Highlight

Locust: Hebrew גָּזָל (g'zalah) is the common Hebrew term for locust, as in the plague against Egypt (Exod 10:4). The unique use of four different Hebrew words for "locusts" in Joel 1:4 emphasizes the totality of their destruction. The *chasil* indicates the caterpillar stage, *yaleg* is a "young locust" that could hop but not fly, *gazam* is the "devouring locust," and *govai* means a "swarm of locusts."

Outline

- I. The Locust Plague and a Call to Lament (Joel 1)
- II. The Imminent Day of the Lord and Call to Repent (Joel 2:1–17)
- III. The Ultimate Day of the Lord (Joel 2:18–32)
- IV. The Future Judgment of the Nations (Joel 3:1–21)

MESSAGE

I. The Locust Plague and a Call to Lament (Joel 1)

In the aftermath of an unusually severe **locust plague**, the prophet Joel called the people of Israel to come to the temple and lament. Moses had warned the nation that if Israel was disobedient to Yahweh's commands, the covenant curse of locusts would fall on them (cf. Deut 28:38, 42). The Lord sent locusts as one of the plagues

What Is the "Day of the Lord"?

The "Day of the Lord" is a prominent motif in the Old Testament prophets and refers to a day of battle when Yahweh would dramatically intervene on earth to accomplish His work of judgment and salvation. Kings in the ancient Near East often boasted of their ability to defeat their enemies in a single day, and Yahweh would destroy His foes in the same decisive manner when He came down to earth in His awesome power as the great King and Warrior (cf. Amos 1:2; Hab 3:2–15). The concept of the Day of the Lord was likely rooted in Israel's holy war traditions which celebrated how Yahweh intervened to deliver Israel from her enemies (cf. Exod 15:1–18; Judg 5:4–5). The prophets also emphasized that the Day of the Lord would first be a time of judgment for Israel. The people mistakenly looked forward to this day as a time of God's deliverance and failed to realize that they had become the Lord's enemies through their disobedience and unfaithfulness (Amos 5:18–20). The Lord would first lead the armies that fought against Israel and then would ultimately turn and deliver His people (Isa 29:1–8).

The prophets employed "Day of the Lord" terminology to refer both to the near events of their own day and to Yahweh's work of judgment and salvation in the eschatological last days. Thus, the prophets could warn that the Day of the Lord was "near" as enemy armies prepared to attack Israel and Judah (cf. Joel 1:15; Zeph 1:7), but they also anticipated a final Day of the Lord that would involve all peoples and nations (cf. Isa 2:7–22; Zech 14:1–21). In continuity with the prophets, the writers of the New Testament employ "Day of the Lord" terminology to the judgments and salvation of the last days associated with the second coming of Christ (cf. Matt 24:42; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Thess 5:2–5; 2 Thess 2:2–3; 1 Pet 3:10–12).

against the Egyptians in the exodus (Exod 10:4–19), but now He punished His own people with the destructive insects (cf. Amos 4:9). Joel views the locust like an invading army; wave after wave of locusts had decimated the land. Drunkards awakened to discover they had no more wine. The priests were no longer able to present their grain and drink offerings, and the farmers mourned the destruction of their crops. The prophet mentioned eight specific crops to highlight the extent of the food shortages.

This crisis called for the people to **lament (1:13–14)**. They were to call a public fast and a solemn assembly to cry out to the Lord in lamentation. Although initially there is no call for repentance, we can assume that some of these lamenters would also confess their sins and pray for the Lord's forgiveness and mercy. Joel warned that failure to seek God's mercy might bring more judgment. The "Day of the Lord" was near, and the Lord was about to bring even greater destruction upon Israel. The prophet himself modeled how the people could turn to the Lord. He lamented the devastating effects of the famine in Israel and called for Yahweh to help His people.

II. The Imminent Day of the Lord and Call to Repent (Joel 2:1–17)

The prophet called for the sounding of an alarm and warned of a second locust invasion that would attack the land. These locusts blackened the sky because of their mass numbers and devoured the crops and vegetation of the land like a consuming fire. Israel's defensive walls provided no barrier to this invading enemy. While Joel may have warned of an actual locust plague even greater in scope than the one depicted in the first chapter, the locusts in chap. 2 more likely represent the human army of an enemy nation that would sweep through the land. The Assyrian annals and other ancient Near Eastern literature compared human armies to locusts, and the numbers, movements, and sounds of a locust swarm resembled that of an invading army.¹ Whereas Yahweh had fought with and for the people of Israel at many times in the past, He would now lead this powerful army against Israel. Failure to respond to the locust plague in chap. 1 would lead to the greater judgment of an **enemy invasion** (depicted as a locust swarm).

Joel repeated his call for repentance, fasting, and a solemn assembly (2:12–17), stressing that true repentance not only involved the external wearing of sackcloth but also an internal rending of the heart. The motivation behind the call to repentance was Yahweh's gracious and merciful character, which meant He might turn from the judgment He had threatened to send if the people turned from their sinful ways. Even in judgment the Lord acted graciously in sending the lesser judgment of the locust plague as a wake-up call that He was about to send the greater calamity of military invasion. Although the text does not state it explicitly, between 2:17 and 18 there appears to be a **rare example of obedience** to prophetic preaching. Priests took Joel's warnings of judgment seriously and called a sacred assembly as the prophet instructed. With contrite hearts people prayed that the Lord would spare them from the coming judgment.

III. The Ultimate Day of the Lord (Joel 2:18–32)

At some point Israel's genuine repentance and heartfelt prayers for mercy will mark a turning point, and God's action will change from one of judgment to one of **promise and hope**. In His zeal for Israel, the Lord will restore the crops the locusts destroyed and drive away the army that threatened the land. The people will rejoice in their abundance and prosperity, and the Lord would even repay them for what the locusts had destroyed. Yahweh's covenant faithfulness to Israel will lead them to acknowledge Him as their Lord, and they will never again need to experience judgment if they remained faithful to Him.

Joel anticipated an even **greater future restoration** when the Lord would pour out His Spirit on all peoples in 2:28–32. In past times the Lord primarily gave His Spirit to select leaders, but at this future time He will give His Spirit to all kinds of people—young and old, male and female. The prophets Isaiah (Isa 59:21) and Ezekiel (Ezek 36:26–27) also promised that this age of future blessing would involve the pouring out of God's Spirit in new and fresh ways. This outpouring of the Spirit would occur at a time when cataclysmic signs in the heavens and on the earth warned of the

impending arrival of God's final judgment. Even in this terrible time of judgment, those who genuinely call upon the Lord will be saved.

The apostle Peter announced that Joel's prophecy was fulfilled typically and analogically with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:15–21). Pentecost and the giving of the Spirit to believers today is the initial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, but the **ultimate fulfillment** of this prophecy awaits the catastrophic events of the end times (Rev 6:12–17) and the full restoration of Israel at the time of Christ's earthly kingdom (cf. Acts 3:19–21; Rom 11:26–27). Joel's original prophecy focused on the giving of the Spirit to all Jews and whoever calls on the name of the Lord, but the fuller revelation in Acts clarifies that the prophecy even includes Gentiles as well. The outpouring of the Spirit on Gentiles is an important focus in the book of Acts (Acts 10:44–48; 11:15–18; 15:8–9).

IV. The Future Judgment of the Nations (Joel 3:1–21)

The future restoration of Israel will also involve the judgment of the nations. Like other prophets Joel prophesied a final assault on Israel by the **armies of the nations** (Ezekiel 38; Zeph 3:1–8; Zechariah 12; 14; cf. Rev 19:11–21), and the Lord will gather these nations to destroy them in retribution for their mistreatment of Israel. The book of Joel begins with the "Day of the Lord" as a time of judgment upon Israel (1:15) and concludes with this day as judgment for the nations. Also in line with the Old Testament prophetic tradition, Joel announced that the Day of the Lord included both the imminent judgment of Israel's historical enemies responsible for her exile and the future enemies of the Lord and His people in the last days (see p. 380). Joel's command for Israel to beat their plowshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears (3:10) reversed the prophecies of peace and the end of warfare in Isa 2:2–4 and Mic 4:1–4. The warriors of Israel would reap a great harvest when they defeated their enemies and would then enjoy a time of unending peace and prosperity.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Joel warned that the devastation of a recent locust plague was merely prelude to the judgment of military invasion if Israel did not turn from its sinful ways. When the people responded to the warning that "the Day of the Lord" was "near," the Lord promised to bless His people and to restore what they had lost in judgment. This blessing foreshadowed the **future restoration of Israel** when the Lord would pour out His Spirit, judge the nations, and enable His people perpetually to enjoy the security and abundance of the Promised Land. Joel's prophecy concerning the outpouring of the Spirit was initially fulfilled with the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, demonstrating that the last days prophesied by the prophets were inaugurated with the first coming of Christ. The Church presently enjoys a taste of the eschatological blessings promised by God in anticipation of Israel's full and final restoration.

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Study Questions

1. To what natural disasters did Joel compare the Day of the Lord?
2. In what way were Joel's prophecies of the Day of the Lord both imminent and ultimate?
3. How did Peter use Joel's prophecy in his sermon on the day of Pentecost?
4. In light of Joel's warnings and promises, how should we live our lives today?

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Mark W. Chavals. "Joel," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 5:45.

Chapter 36

AMOS

God's Ultimate Justice

Amos (“burden bearer”) prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah (792–740 BC) of Judah and Jeroboam II (793–753 BC) of Israel. The reign of Jeroboam II was a time of unprecedented prosperity in the northern kingdom, and Israel expanded its territories back to the borders of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire (cf. 2 Kgs 14:23–29). Unfortunately, this economic prosperity also brought **spiritual apathy and moral decline**. The northern kingdom began to worship calf idols shortly after breaking away from Judah and the Jerusalem temple (cf. 1 Kings 12). Another main area of disobedience took the form of social injustice, as the rich and powerful exploited the poor and needy: Wealth, possessions, and pleasure took priority over their relationship with God.

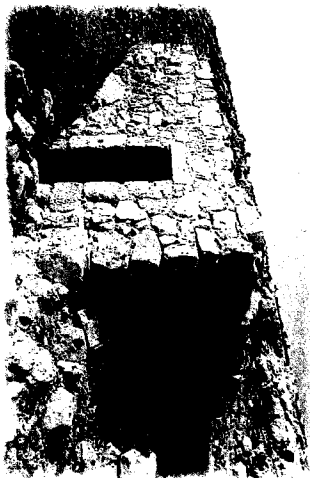
BACKGROUND

Amos prophesied around 760 BC, when the Lord sent Amos to warn northern Israel that their time of **unprecedented prosperity** was about to come to an abrupt halt. It would be replaced by a time of national calamity as the Lord judged the people for their sins. Two years after Amos preached in Israel, the Lord sent an earthquake as demonstration of His displeasure (1:1). Archaeological evidence from Hazor and several other ancient Israelite cities appears to confirm this event. Earthquakes were common because Israel lay on the Jordan Rift fault line. This quake was of such a magnitude that it was remembered by the prophet Zechariah some 200 years later (cf. Zech 14:5).

The larger threat facing Israel was the **Assyrian military invasion** that would lead to the fall of Samaria and the northern kingdom less than 25 years after the reign of Jeroboam II. Israelite kings had paid tribute to the Assyrians as early as the ninth century BC, but military threats and concerns closer to home kept the Assyrians occupied and allowed for Jeroboam’s expansion of Israel’s territories. These conditions would change with the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire under Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC). Assyria naturally looked to the West for tribute and the expansion of its territories, and Israel was unable to withstand the onslaught of the Assyrian army. While the Assyrians developed a formidable military machine, Israel’s apostasy rather than Assyrian military and political might have led to Israel’s fall.

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Amos was from the small village of Tekoa in Judah (2 Sam 14:2; 2 Chron 11:6), which was just a few miles south of Bethlehem, but God called him to travel north to Israel. He delivered a scathing message that denounced the sins of the **northern kingdom** and warned of the judgment God was preparing to send. Amos was a shepherd and farmer by occupation when the Lord called him as a prophet (1:1; 7:14). The term for “shepherd” (*noqed*) is not the normal Hebrew word for a common shepherd. This word appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only in 2 Kgs 3:4 to describe Mesha, the king of the Moabites, thus suggesting that Amos was a wealthy herdsman or was employed to care for the sheep of a wealthy herdsman when God called him to prophesy. Amos’s assertion, “I was not a prophet or the son of a prophet” in 7:14 reflects his situation when called by God. The unusual circumstances behind Amos’s calling reflected the urgency of his message, and Amos was obedient to the Lord’s calling even when it meant leaving behind his own business ventures. Ironically the Lord called a man who knew the failures of the prosperous herders and farmers in Judah to condemn the abuses of wealth and prosperity in Israel.



Ruins of a small building, probably dating from post-biblical times, at Tekoa, Israel. Amos’s hometown.

Outline

- I. Eight Oracles of Judgment Against the Nations (Amos 1–2)
- II. Three Sermons of the Coming Judgment of Israel (Amos 3–6)
- III. Five Visions of Israel’s Coming Judgment (Amos 7:1–9:10)
- IV. Five Promises of Israel’s Restoration (Amos 9:11–15)

MESSAGE

I. Eight Oracles of Judgment Against the Nations (Amos 1–2)

Amos opened his book of prophecies with the startling images of God as a **roaring lion** and a raging storm.¹ The Israelites who believed that God was obligated to protect them no matter what were being presumptuous, assuming that His grace would always be available. They needed to realize that God could not be trifled with or taken lightly. Rather than protecting them from His temple in Jerusalem, Yahweh would break out in judgment against them. The Lord’s powerful voice would melt and wither the land. This judgment would include an earthquake that occurred in Israel two years after

Amos's preaching and would culminate with Israel's military defeat and exile at the hands of the Assyrian army.

This section describes the sins and coming judgment of **eight nations**, six foreign nations as well as Judah and Israel. Each oracle begins with the formula, "For three sins . . . , even for four, I will not turn back my wrath" (NIV), a poetic way of expressing that the sins of these people were many and that God was calling them to account. The indictment of these foreign nations focuses on their violence toward Israel and other



Chasna at Tekoa, Israel, the hometown of Amos the prophet.

peoples as the prime example of their wickedness. Damascus tortured the inhabitants of Gilead, their abuse of these people being compared to a sledge with iron teeth for threshing grain. Gaza and Tyre sold Israelites into slavery to the Edomites after taking them as captives. The Edomites and Ammonites carried out ruthless slaughters that included the killing of pregnant women. The Moabites desecrated the royal tomb of the king of Edom and burned the king's bones as an expression of their contempt.

God's sense of **universal justice** meant that He held these nations accountable not only for how they treated Israel but also for how they acted toward one another. The treachery of international relationships reflected the corruption of the human heart. Edom (through Esau) and Ammon and Moab (through Lot) were blood relatives of Israel, but they showed no kindness or compassion toward Israel in times of warfare. In selling Israelites into slavery, the merchant city of Tyre acted treacherously in disregarding covenant commitments it made to Israel.

The judgment of these peoples reflected that the Lord was God of all nations and not just of Israel. Amos characterized their sins as "transgressions/rebellion" (*peshta*), indicating that these nations like Judah and Israel were guilty of **covenant unfaithfulness** toward Yahweh (see p. 387). The Mosaic covenant and its statutes and stipulations were only for the people of Israel, but all nations related to God under the terms of the Noahic covenant established after the flood, which stipulated that judgment would fall on those who practiced violence and bloodshed (cf. Gen 9:5-7). Throughout history God has judged wicked nations that violated His standards of judgment and righteousness, and Isa 24:1-5 pictures a final judgment of all nations based on "the everlasting covenant" established between God and all of humanity in the days of Noah.²

Amos's **Israeli audience** would have greatly enjoyed and approved of everything the prophet had proclaimed in his first seven oracles. He had announced judgment against the surrounding nations and against their bitter rivals to the south. They were led astray because they rejected God's covenant instructions. Many probably were surprised to hear Amos preaching judgment against his own countrymen.

Hebrew Highlight

Transgression/Rebellion. Hebrew, *psa* (*peshta*) is one of several Old Testament terms for sin, and its noun/verb form appears 12 times in the book of Amos: Amos used this term to characterize the sins of the eight nations that are the objects of Yahweh's judgment in Amos 1-2 (cf. 1:3,6,9,11,13, 2:1,4,6). The prophets commonly used this term to describe Israel's sins because it conveyed the ideas of willful rebellion and violation of covenant standards. At the human level, the verb *psaha* refers to the breaking of a political alliance or treaty (cf. 1 Kgs 12:19; 2 Kgs 1:1, 3:5,7) or to the breaking of an agreement between two parties (Gen 31:36). This rebellion is comparable to treason. Israel's sin was they had rebelled against Yahweh and had rejected His authority as covenant Lord over their lives (cf. Isa 1:2; Jer 2:8,29). Yahweh warned through the prophets that He would severely punish Israel for their rebellion and disobedience to His commands (cf. Amos 3:14; Hos 8:1), but the Lord would also forgive when sinners turned from their rebellious ways (Ezek 18:30-31).

However, after gaining their approval, Amos turned the tables on his audience by announcing that Yahweh's judgment would also fall on Israel. The prophet reserved the longest list of specific sins for the oracle against Israel, highlighting their excessive oppression of their own people, forgetting God's gracious acts, and rejecting God's word through the prophets. Thus God will destroy Israel's army, for they were no better than the pagan nations who worshipped other gods.

II. Three Sermons of the Coming Judgment of Israel (Amos 3-6)

This section of the book expands on the initial oracle of judgment against Israel in 2:6-16. With incredible bravery Amos left the security of Judah to travel north to call the northern kingdom to repentance. His first three messages are introduced by the call to "Hear this word" in 3:1; 4:1; and 5:1 (NIV) and the last two with the announcement of "woe" upon Israel (5:18; 6:1). The **prophecies of judgment** demanded a response because they were not absolute predictions of what must happen in the future as much as they were warnings of what would happen if Israel did not repent and change its ways. By

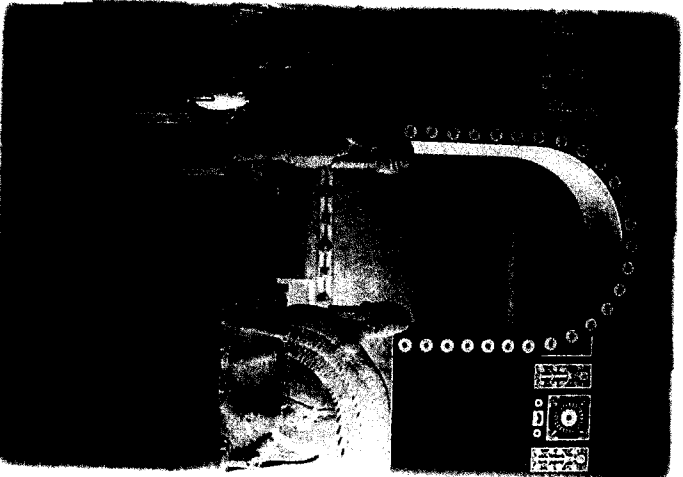


Sycamore fig on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Amos took care of sycamore fig trees.

seeking the Lord and practicing true justice, Israel could avert disaster and experience blessing instead of judgment.

Amos sounded the warning alarm by reminding the people of Israel that their covenantal status did not grant them exemption from God's judgment; in fact, it increased their **responsibility and accountability** (3:1–2). God would judge Israel because He held His chosen people to a higher standard of behavior. With a series of rhetorical questions taken from everyday life, Amos very simply illustrated the principle of cause and effect. Lions roar because they have prey, birds fall when a trap is set, and the Lord would be the cause of the disaster that would fall on the city of Samaria. If the people did not repent, judgment would be severe, and the invasion of a foreign army would leave Israel like a lamb torn out of the mouth of a lion. Ironically, the winged lion (*shediu*) was the national symbol of Assyria, which God would bring against the northern kingdom. God will destroy their temple in Bethel and all their opulent homes if they do not repent (3:14–15).

These human-faced monumental shediu from Assyria date from the time of Ashurnasirpal II (ninth century BC).



The theme of warning carries over into chap. 4. With biting sarcasm Amos compared the wealthy **women of Samaria** to well-fed cattle in that they oppressed the poor and were consumed with their own selfish pleasures. While they presently lived in pleasure, a time was coming when they would be led away as captives with hooks in their noses. These disasters were the specific covenant curses Moses had warned the Lord would bring against Israel if they were disobedient to His commandments:

- lack of food (Amos 4:6; cf. Lev 26:20; Deut 28:38–40)
- drought (Amos 4:7–8; cf. Lev 26:19; Deut 28:22–24)
- blight and mildew on their crops (Amos 4:9; cf. Deut 28:22)
- locusts invasions that destroyed their crops (Amos 4:9; cf. Deut 28:38)
- pestilence and disease (Amos 4:10; cf. Lev 26:16,25; Deut 28:21–22,27–28, 58–61)
- military defeat and exile (Amos 4:10–11; cf. Lev 26:17,36–39; Deut 28:49–57)

They were to prepare to meet God, not as their Savior but as their Judge.

The Prophets and Social Justice

In giving the Mosaic law, the Lord provided commandments that would remove the burden of poverty if Israel would obey them (Deut 15:4). The wealthy had a special responsibility to care for the poor and the needy. They were to lend money without interest (Deut 23:19–20) and to allow the poor to glean in their fields (Lev 19:9–10; Deut 24:19–22). Judges were not to deny justice to the poor (Exod 23:6) and were to have special regard for the plight of widows and orphans (Deut 10:18). Debts were to be cancelled every seven years (Deut 15:1) and land sold because of debt was to revert to the family of the original owner in the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25).

However, by the time of the writing prophets in the eighth century BC, the disparity between the rich and the poor in Israel was shameful because those with wealth and influence increasingly oppressed the disadvantaged. Thus, the call for justice was a recurring theme in the preaching of the prophets as they reminded the people of the uncomfortable truth that there was an inseparable connection between love for God and concern for one's neighbor.

Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:15 NIV)

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8 NIV)

The prophetic call for social justice carries over into the New Testament. Jesus demonstrated special concern for the outcasts of society (Luke 16:19–30; John 4:7–26) and reminded those who were His true followers to provide for others through simple acts of compassion (Matt 25:31–46). In the early church those who had more than they needed willingly shared with those who did not have enough (Acts 2:45; 4:34–37), and James instructed that concern for widows and orphans was at the heart of true religion (Jas 1:27). Christians today are embracing their responsibility to practice social justice by feeding the hungry, sharing with the poor, standing for the unborn, and caring for the sick as an essential component of gospel ministry.

Continuing to emphasize the severity of the coming judgment, Amos 5 opens with a **funeral lament** over the impending fall of Israel as a nation. Only 10 percent of the people would survive the military defeat, and Israel's only hope of avoiding national destruction and finding life was to "seek" the Lord. More than religious devotion, this seeking the Lord would involve practicing justice toward the poor and needy. As with the lament at the beginning of the chapter, the announcement of "woe" in 5:18–27 conveyed the somber mood of a funeral. They should lament because the people of Israel were deceived about their worship and what would happen on the Day of the Lord. God rejected their worship so the Day of the Lord would bring death, not great joy.

The recurring “woes” in 6:1–4 carry forward the message of doom and destruction. Amos contrasted the present luxury of the people of both Judah and Israel with the deprivation they would experience when they were taken away into exile. Amos again challenged Israel’s assumption that they were better than the pagan peoples around them. They were not exempt from disaster and would experience military defeat at the hands of the Assyrians, similar to the fate of Calneh in Mesopotamia, Hamath in Syria, and the Philistine city of Gath. The people had become spiritually and morally desensitized as they lounged on their ivory-inlaid couches and pampered themselves with meats, music, and wine. The term for “feasting” (*mitzah*) in v. 7 was used outside of the Bible to refer to pagan religious banquets that included drunken revelry and sexual immorality.³ Life had become one big party, but those who partied the most would be among the first taken away in exile.

III. Five Visions of Israel’s Coming Judgment (Amos 7:1–9:10)

Amos received five visions at the temple in Bethel that initially portray God’s grace in delaying the judgment against Israel, but in the end they display His resolve to judge and destroy if the people refuse to repent. In the midst of these visions is the narrative of the confrontation between Amos and the priest of Bethel, reflecting how the prophet’s message was ultimately rejected by Israel’s corrupt religious leaders in the north. In the first two visions Amos witnessed two natural disasters befalling Israel—a **locust plague** and a **fire** sweeping through the land. The locusts were about to consume all of the vegetation in the land. The fire was powerful enough to consume both land and water. Amos prayed for God to spare Israel, and God relented from sending these judgments. God’s decision to punish Israel was contingent upon human responses to the warnings of judgment, and the Lord was still willing to spare Israel if they repent.

In his third vision Amos saw the Lord measuring a wall with a **plumb line**. The plumb line was a string with a weight attached to it that determined the straightness of a wall. The point of the vision was that Israel did not measure up to God’s standards of righteous and that the nation was about to collapse like an unstable wall because of its many sins.

Amos saw a basket of **summer fruit** in his fourth vision, emphasizing that Israel was ripe for judgment. The striking word play between “summer fruit” (*qevias*) in 8:1 and “end” (*qets*) (8:2) highlighted that the Lord’s patience was exhausted and judgment was near.

The harvest of the summer fruits marked the end of Israel’s agricultural year, and the



An Arab date vendor.

judgment would bring an end to Israel as a nation. The joy of their past celebrations in times of prosperity would be turned to mourning.

In the fifth vision Amos once again saw a vision of Yahweh standing (cf. 7:4) and ordering the destruction of Israel’s idolatrous **sanctuary at Bethel**. The people of Israel viewed their religious rituals as their protection against calamity, but the site of these rituals would become a place of judgment. Instead of providing protection, the collapsing walls of the sanctuary would fall on those gathered there for worship. To this very day, the ancient ruins of Bethel stand as a witness to the fulfillment of Amos’s prophecy.

IV. Five Promises of Israel’s Restoration (Amos 9:1–15)

Amos concluded his prophecies of unrelenting judgment with a **message of hope** concerning Israel’s future restoration. Critical scholarship has tended to view these hopeful messages as later additions to the prophet’s original words. However, Israel’s prophetic tradition extending all the way back to the time of Moses was consistent in promising that restoration would follow the judgment of exile (cf. Deut 30:1–10). God promised: (1) to restore the Davidic dynasty, (2) to make Israel victorious over her enemies, (3) agricultural productivity, (4) future prosperity, and (5) permanent settlement in the land. Though the northern kingdom had broken away from the house of David, Amos promised that God would reunite Israel under Davidic rule. Yahweh would **restore the fallen tent** of the Davidic dynasty, and the future Davidic ruler, the Messiah, would lead Israel in triumph over her enemies. The Lord also promised to securely plant Israel in the land so they would never again be taken away into exile. Amos 9:9 foresees the day when Israel will be regathered the second time never to be removed again.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Amos warned that Yahweh, like a roaring lion, would bring **judgment** against Judah, Israel, and the nations around them. The Lord would judge the nations for their violence and war crimes and would judge Israel for their false worship and social injustice in violation of His covenant commands. This judgment would bring Israel to the point of national extinction. Despite the Lord’s anger, He was patient in providing Israel an opportunity to repent and avoid the impending disaster, but the people refused to turn from their sinful ways.

The Lord would ultimately restore Israel after this time of national judgment. The Lord would restore the Davidic dynasty, a promise that will be fulfilled in the rule of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah. The promises of peace, prosperity, and restoration ultimately will be fulfilled in the messianic kingdom when Jesus rules and reigns on earth for a thousand years (Rev 20:1–6). Amos spoke of the imminent judgment of Israel as the coming “Day of the Lord,” and this judgment from past history prefigured the greater judgment of the final Day of the Lord that will fall on all peoples as the prelude for Christ’s second coming to establish His kingdom on earth (cf. 1 Thess 5:1–3; 2 Thess 2:3–12; Revelation 7–19).

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Study Questions

1. How did Amos demonstrate his burden to declare God's message?
2. Where did Amos go, risking his life to confront evil?
3. What were the sins of Israel that provoked Amos's preaching?
4. What was the significance of the image of summer fruit?
5. How do acts of social justice demonstrate our faith in God?

ENDNOTES

1. J. A. Motyer, *The Day of the Lion: The Message of Amos* (London: IVP, 1974), 28. Motyer notes that the prophet reverses the normal Hebrew order of words (verb-subject) and places the name of Yahweh first to emphasize the Lord's emphatic displeasure.
2. Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 65–66, 381.
3. See Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: WJKP, 2001), 355–57.

Chapter 37

OBADIAH. Doom of Edom

BACKGROUND

Obadiah (“servant of Yahweh”) is the **shortest book** in the Old Testament. The short heading of the book of Obadiah provides no details about the prophet or the time of his ministry. Jewish tradition identified the prophet with the Obadiah who served in the court of King Ahab (1 Kgs 18:1–16), but this identification seems unlikely. Some scholars have placed the book in the time of Edom’s revolt against Judah in the early part of the ninth century BC (2 Kgs 8:20–22; 2 Chron 21:8–20), but others have suggested Obadiah prophesied in the aftermath of the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BC. Obadiah announced that God would judge Edom (also called Seir in the OT) because of its participation with Judah’s enemies in the plundering of Jerusalem.

Other Old Testament texts announce the **downfall of Edom** (Ps 137:7; Isa 34:5–17; Lam 4:21–22; Ezek 25:12–14; 35:1–15), and there are especially close parallels between Obadiah’s prophecies and the Edom oracle in Jer 49:7–22. If these texts all refer to the same event, Obadiah appears to be describing what happened shortly after the fall of Jerusalem. Malachi later testified to the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Edom’s downfall (Mal 1:2–4). The Babylonians annexed Edom in 553 BC and brought the Edomite Kingdom to an end. In the fourth century BC, the Nabatean Arabs took control of Edom and established Petra as their capital. The link to the prophecy about Edom in Amos 9:12 perhaps explains the location of Obadiah in the Book of the 12.

The Edomites were **descendants of Esau** and had a stormy relationship with Israel throughout their history. This mirrored the original rivalry between the brothers Jacob and Esau (see Genesis 25–27). During Israel’s wilderness wanderings, Edom denied Israel safe passage through their territories (Num 20:14–21). David later conquered Edom and brought it into his empire (2 Sam 8:13–14), and Edom remained under the control of the house of David until its successful revolt during the reign of Jehoram two centuries later (2 Kgs 8:20–22). Over the next 150 years, Judah and Edom had frequent skirmishes over territories and trade routes, and the bitter rivalry culminated with Edom’s involvement in the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.



A Nabatean temple—"the Khazneh"—carved out of the sandstone cliffs at Petra.

Outline

- I. Doom of Edom (Obadiah 1–16)
- II. Deliverance of Judah (Obadiah 17–21)

MESSAGE

I. Doom of Edom (Obadiah 1–16)

Edom was lifted up because of **excessive pride**. They trusted in their political and military advisors for their security, and they believed their mountain fortresses made them invulnerable to enemy attack. The narrow canyon leading into Petra insulated them from invasion. However, even though they nested like eagles in a lofty place in the mountains, the rocks and crags would not protect them from the army the Lord was bringing against them. Even their allies would turn against them and plunder their treasures.

The second reason God would judge Edom was their **treatment** of the descendants of their brother when Babylon defeated Jerusalem (vv. 10–14). Instead of helping Judah, the Edomites stood back and watched the Babylonians defeat Jerusalem. Then they went into the city and took whatever they found, laughed, and rejoiced over Judah's defeat. When some Hebrews fled to escape, the Edomites shamefully robbed and imprisoned these helpless refugees. Consequently, God's justice on Edom for violence against Judah on the Day of the Lord will bring God's judgment (vv. 15–16).

II. Deliverance of Judah (Obadiah 17–21)

While the doom of Edom was permanent, judgment was not God's final word for Judah. The Lord would **restore** His people and cause them to triumph over their enemies. Reversing what had happened with the fall of Jerusalem, Judah's exiles would subjugate Edom and rule over their territories. With this restoration of Israel, the kingdom of God would be fully established on earth, indicating an eschatological context for the ultimate fulfillment of Obadiah's prophecies. Ultimately, Mt. Zion will eclipse Mt. Seir. Isaiah 63:1 also predicts the Messiah will march through Edom on His way to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Rather than a nationalistic harangue against a hated enemy, Obadiah's prophecies against Edom are an expression of **God's justice**. The Lord would send a punishment against Edom that was appropriate to its crimes against Judah. Obadiah's prophecies also reflect the working out of God's covenantal promise to Abraham that He would bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him (Gen 12:3). Israel was the apple of Yahweh's eye (Zech 2:8), and any nation that attacked Israel would become the target of His wrath. The judgment of the Edomites is also a reminder that God stands opposed to all forms of human arrogance and pride. The Edomites are representative of all of God's enemies, and oracles against Edom appear in eschatological contexts in the Old Testament prophets pointing to the judgment of the last days (cf. Isaiah 34; 63). While judging Edom, God would also restore His people Israel, and the restoration of Israel would be essential to the establishment of God's eschatological kingdom.

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Study Questions

1. What was the connection between Edom and Esau?
2. How did the geography of Edom contribute to their pride and arrogance?
3. Why is the doom of Edom and the deliverance of Judah significant prophetically and eschatologically?
4. What lessons can we learn today from Obadiah's warning and promises?

Chapter 38

JONAH God's Universal Concern

Jonah ("dove" in Hebrew) was a prophet in Israel from the town of Gath-hepher near Nazareth, who prophesied to **northern Israel** during the reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC). Jonah prophesied Jeroboam's military successes in expanding Israel's borders to what they were during the time of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire (2 Kgs 14:25). Jonah's ministry of prophesying blessing and political expansion to Israel certainly stood at odds with his ministry to Nineveh where he provided an opportunity for the Assyrians as Israel's hated enemies to avoid the disaster the Lord planned to bring against them.

Because of the supernatural elements in the story and the implausibility of the people of Nineveh responding to the warnings of a Hebrew prophet, modern critical scholars tend to view the story of Jonah as an allegory, parable, or prophetic legend. The book clearly has a didactic purpose to teach about God's redemptive concern for the Assyrian people, but no literary clues within the book itself suggest that the book of Jonah should be read as anything other than a straightforward historical narrative. The **supernatural elements** are explained by God's involvement in Jonah's life, and similar miraculous events appear in the historical narratives of the lives of Elijah and Elisha (1–2 Kings). Jesus affirmed the historicity of the Jonah narrative on two separate occasions: when He compared His coming burial to Jonah being in the fish for three days and when He spoke of the judgment of Nineveh in connection with the cities of Israel in His own day (Matt 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–30).

Nineveh's repentance does not mean the whole city or the whole Assyrian nation was converted to Yahweh. The city temporarily turned from its wicked and violent ways, and the Lord spared the city from destruction in response to this repentance. However, it is doubtful if these changes were long lasting, for Jonah's warnings only delayed the city's destruction. In the **next century** the prophet Nahum announced the coming judgment of Nineveh for its violence and bloodshed. The Babylonians and Medes captured and destroyed Nineveh in 612 BC. Several incidents appear to have disposed the residents of Nineveh to take seriously Jonah's warnings of divine judgment. A total eclipse of the sun occurred in 763 BC, portending evil for all of the land of Assyria. An earthquake, another sign of divine displeasure, took place during the reign of Ashur-dan III (773–756 BC). Famine and general civil unrest were widespread

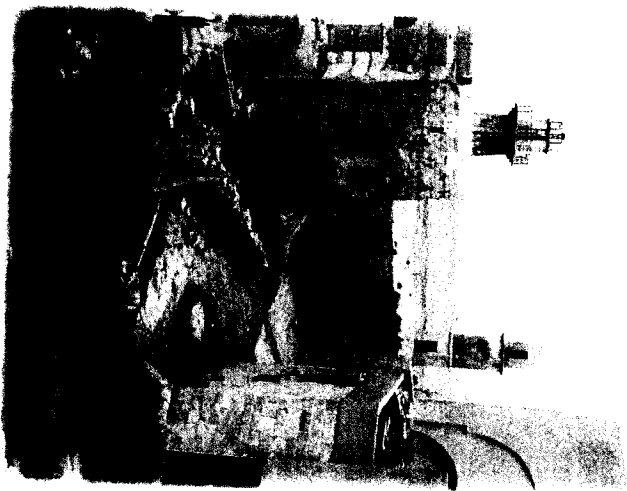
in Assyria from 765 to 759 BC. The Ninevites might naturally believe the gods were angry with them during such a time of national crisis.

BACKGROUND

Nineveh was a prominent Mesopotamian city located on the Tigris River. Its origin dates back before 3000 BC. The city was an important center for the worship of the goddess Ishtar, and its strategic location enabled the city to control important trade routes by land and river. The narrator portrays Nineveh as a “great city” (1:2; 3:2) and a “very important city” (lit. “a great city to/before God”) (3:3 NIV). The statement that “a visit required three days” in 3:3 (NIV) does not refer to how long it took to walk around the city walls. More likely it refers to how long it would take Jonah to communicate his message at the various city gates and public squares. The statement in Jonah 4:1 that Nineveh had a population of 120,000 likely refers to the entire administrative district of Nineveh rather than to just the city proper.

Critics have pointed to the mention of the “king of Nineveh” in Jonah 3:6 as a historical anachronism because Nineveh did not actually become the capital of Assyria until several decades after the time of Jonah’s ministry. However, evidence suggests that Nineveh was at least an alternate **royal residence** when Jonah preached there. The reference to the “king of Nineveh” rather than the “king of Assyria” conforms to Old Testament usage elsewhere in which a king is identified with the capital city or another prominent city in his empire (cf. 1 Kgs 21:1; 2 Chron 24:23). Another possibility is that the “king of Nineveh” in Jonah refers to the governor or noble who ruled over the city and its administrative province.

In the early seventh century BC, the Assyrian king **Sennacherib** made Nineveh his capital. Sennacherib expanded the city so that it covered some 1,800 acres, and he built an impressive palace there. Sennacherib’s Nineveh was surrounded by a protective double wall nearly 60 feet thick. The library built by Ashurbanipal (669–627 BC) was one of Nineveh’s most important buildings and a significant archaeological discovery from this period.



The ancient seaport of Joppa (1:3).

Outline

- I. Jonah Flees from His Prophetic Calling (Jonah 1–2)
 - A. Jonah’s Disobedience and Its Consequences (Jonah 1)
 - B. Jonah’s Deliverance and Thanksgiving (Jonah 2)
- II. Jonah Fulfills His Prophetic Calling (Jonah 3–4)
 - A. Jonah’s Obedience and Nineveh’s Repentance (Jonah 3)
 - B. Jonah’s Displeasure at the Lord’s Salvation (Jonah 4)

The book of Jonah is a **two-part story**. The first part of the book is about God’s mercy to His disobedient prophet. The Lord spared Jonah even when the prophet disobeyed the command to go and preach to Nineveh. The second part of the book is about God’s mercy to the wicked people of Nineveh. The Lord spared the city because of their repentant response when Jonah warned of their coming destruction. In this two-part structure, chaps. 1 and 3 parallel one another, as do chaps. 2 and 4. In chaps. 1 and 3, Jonah interacts with two different groups of people who worship pagan gods—the sailors on the ship to Tarshish in chap. 1 and the people of Nineveh in chap. 3. In both of these chapters, these foreigners come to fear the Lord and in many ways present themselves as more spiritually sensitive to the Lord than Jonah.

JONAH 1	JONAH 2	JONAH 3	JONAH 4
Jonah interacts with foreigners; the sailors come to know the true God	Jonah thanks God for his own salvation	Jonah interacts with foreigners; the Ninevites come to know the true God	Jonah complains to God about Nineveh’s salvation

This structure demonstrates that Jonah’s response to the salvation of the Ninevites is the real key to this story. Jonah confessed that “salvation comes from the LORD” (2:9 NIV) and rejoiced in how the Lord delivered him from drowning in the sea, but the prophet objected when the Ninevites received the same mercy and grace that was extended to him. The story of Jonah contains three great acts of salvation:

Three Great Acts of Salvation in the Book of Jonah

1. God spares the sailors, and the sailors worship (Jonah 1:16)
2. God spares Jonah, and Jonah worships (Jonah 2:1–9)
3. God spares Nineveh, and Jonah complains (Jonah 4:1–8)

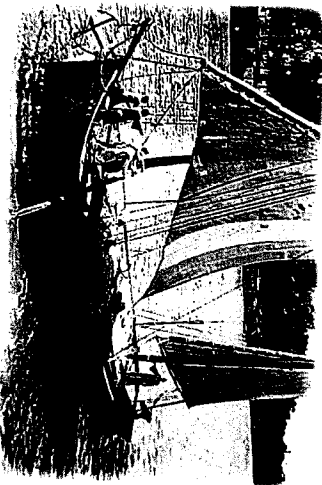
The real problem in the story is **Jonah’s prejudice** against the Assyrians. Jonah’s unresolved anger and the Lord’s unanswered question, “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11 NIV) at the end of the book reflect the difference between the Lord’s heart and the prophet’s. The Lord has a redemptive concern for all peoples, while Jonah believed that the Lord’s mercy and grace were only for Israel because of its special status as the chosen people of God. The lack of resolution as the book closes invites the reader to examine if his or her heart is more in line with the angry prophet or the merciful God.

MESSAGE

I. Jonah Flees from His Prophetic Calling (Jonah 1–2)

A. Jonah's Disobedience and Its Consequences (Jonah 1)

Jonah's disobedience to the word of the Lord led the prophet in a dangerous direction. Jonah boarded a **ship for Tarshish** (west) in the opposite direction of Nineveh (east), believing he could flee from the presence of the Lord. Jonah was in fact embarking on a downward path of destruction. The prophet "went down" (*yazad*) to Joppa to board the ship and then "went down" (*yazad*) into the ship itself (1:3 NASB). During the storm at sea, the prophet had "gone down" (*yazad*) to the lower deck of the ship. The sailors eventually threw Jonah down into the sea, and the prophet "went down" (*yazad*) (2:6) toward a watery grave until the Lord rescued him from drowning.

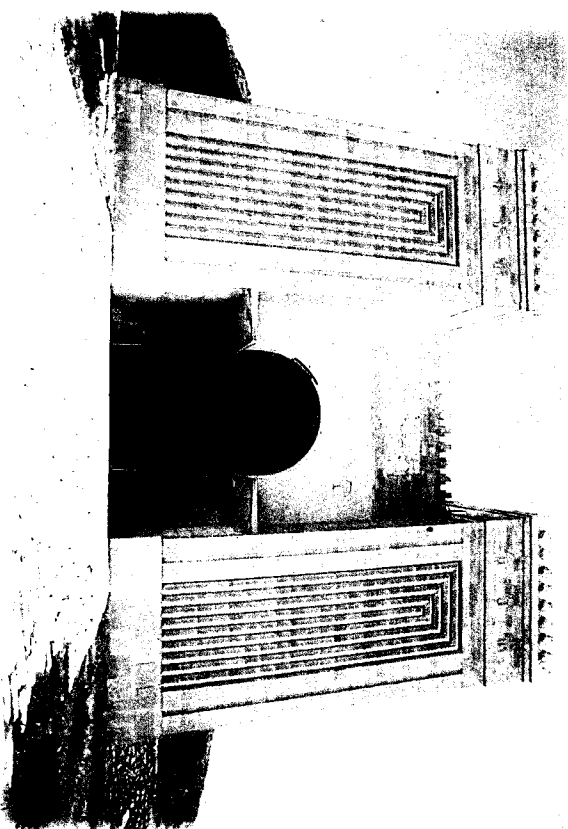


Phoenician trader (merchant).

When the Lord sent the storm on the sea, the pagan sailors on board the ship with Jonah were far more spiritually aware and sensitive to the involvement of some god than was the wayward prophet. While the storm was raging, the sailors prayed to their gods while Jonah slept. Jonah admitted his guilt to the sailors but not to God (1:10–12), while the sailors prayed for God not to hold them accountable for his death (1:14). Despite Jonah's direct disobedience, the **Lord remained sovereign**. Throughout the story, the Lord directs and controls the forces of nature to bring Jonah back into conformity with His plan. The Lord "sent" a storm onto the sea (1:4 NIV) and then He "appointed" (*manah*) a fish (1:17), a plant (4:6), a worm (4:7), and a hot wind (4:8) to fulfill His purposes in Jonah's life. The winds, animals, and plants obeyed the Lord, even if His prophet did not. No matter how much Jonah objected, the Lord made sure that His messenger would arrive in Nineveh. By providing the fish, the Lord spared Jonah from drowning and from the death he deserved for disobeying the Lord's command.

B. Jonah's Deliverance and Thanksgiving (Jonah 2)

Jonah's prayer is his response of thanksgiving to the Lord for saving him from death. The prayer closely follows the form of songs of thanksgiving in the Psalms where the worshipper expresses thanks to God for some specific act of deliverance. Hezekiah offered a similar prayer when the Lord healed him from his life-threatening illness and extended his life for 15 years (Isaiah 38). These songs of thanksgiving



Restored gate at the site of the ancient city of Nineveh, located on the left bank of the Tigris River (Iraq today).

accompanied the offering of sacrifices and the payment of vows the petitioner made to the Lord when praying for deliverance. From the belly of the fish, Jonah recalled how he cried out to the Lord as he was drowning at sea. Jonah portrayed himself as descending to the underworld (Sheol) because he was as good as dead. He said: "You raised my life from the Pit" (2:6). Therefore, Jesus referred to His own resurrection as "the sign of . . . Jonah" (Matt 12:39–41; 16:4).

II. Jonah Fulfills His Prophetic Calling (Jonah 3–4)

A. Jonah's Obedience and Nineveh's Repentance (Jonah 3)

The story turns from the salvation of Jonah to the **salvation of the Ninevites**. Jonah obeyed the second time the Lord commanded him to go to Nineveh, and once there he began to announce that the city would be destroyed in 40 days. The king and people of Nineveh took the warning of destruction seriously and expressed their repentance by fasting from food and drink, wearing sackcloth, crying out to God, and turning from their violent behavior. Because the people of Nineveh turned from their "evil" actions (*ra'ah*), the Lord turned from sending the "destruction" (*ra'ah*) He had planned for the city (3:10 NIV). The Assyrians repented and God relented. When the prophet announced judgment, even in an unqualified and unconditional way, the pronouncement included the possibility that true repentance would lead to the avoidance of the disaster that was threatened (cf. Jer 18:7–10; Joel 2:12–14; Zeph 2:3).

B. Jonah's Displeasure at the Lord's Salvation (Jonah 4)

Rather than rejoicing in his successful preaching mission and the salvation of the Ninevites, **Jonah was angered** that the Lord spared the city. The possibility that the Lord might show mercy to the Assyrians was why Jonah refused to go to the city in the first place. Jonah's statement about the Lord's grace and compassion appears elsewhere in the Old Testament with reference to the Lord's treatment of Israel (cf. Exod 34:6-7; Num 14:18-19; Joel 2:13), but Jonah is scandalized that the Lord would show the same grace to the people of Nineveh. Jonah hated the Assyrians as the enemy of his people and wanted the Lord to give them justice, not mercy. Jonah preferred death over going to Nineveh, and he asked the Lord once again to take his life. The Lord then used a vine, a worm, and a scorching east wind to show the prophet Jonah his misplaced priorities. If Jonah was absorbed in his own comfort and concerned about an insignificant plant that provided shade from the heat, should not the Lord be concerned about the welfare of the 120,000 inhabitants of Nineveh?

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The story of Jonah is a reminder that the Lord's plan of salvation extends beyond Israel to include **all the nations**, even those who were Israel's greatest enemies. The Lord promised Abraham that he would become a blessing to all peoples (Gen 12:3), and foreigners like Rahab, Ruth, and the queen of Sheba came to know the Lord as the true God. God even demonstrated His grace to the hated Assyrians. The promise of the Old Testament is that the salvation of Israel would extend to nations and that all peoples (Isa 49:6) would come to know and worship the God of Israel (Pss 22:27-30; 47:9; 145:10-13; Isa 2:1-5; Zeph 3:9-10; Zech 14:16). The prophet Isaiah even promised that Israel, Egypt, and Assyria would be the three peoples of God in the future kingdom (Isa 19:19-25).

The Lord demonstrates the wideness of **His mercy** by granting forgiveness to the worst of sinners. God's mercy to the Assyrians also provided hope to the Israelites. If the Lord was willing to forgive the people of Nineveh when they repented, then He would certainly forgive His own people if they turned from their sinful ways. Unfortunately, the Lord sent Israel and Judah away into exile because they did not respond to the warnings of the prophets.

Hebrew Highlight

Sackcloth. Hebrew *šāq* (שֵׂאֵף) comes into English from the Hebrew through Greek and Latin. Sackcloth was a rough, dark-colored, inexpensive cloth made of goat or camel hair (cf. Isa 50:3; Matt 3:4). It was used for storage bags but was also worn as a sign of mourning and repentance (Neh 9:1). Middle Eastern peoples often expressed grief by tearing their clothes and covering themselves with dust or ashes, but wearing sackcloth was an act of humiliation to indicate true repentance (Jer 4:8).

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Study Questions

1. What was Jonah's real problem: fear or prejudice?
2. Does everyone get a second chance to obey God?
3. What did Jonah do when the people of Nineveh repented?
4. What was God's real concern for the people and the prophet?
5. How should we express God's mercy to our enemies?

Chapter 39

MICAH Divine Lawsuit

Micah was a prophet in Judah during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (750–687 BC). Therefore, he was a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah. He prophesied concerning both the northern and southern kingdoms at the height of the Assyrian crisis. Micah and Isaiah shared a common belief that the Lord would **restore** Zion as the center of His worldwide kingdom of peace and righteousness (Isa 2:1–5; Mic 4:1–5). Micah's name means "Who is like Yahweh?" After the Lord revealed His plans of judgment and then salvation for Israel, the prophet himself exclaimed, "Who is a God like You?" (Mic 7:18).

BACKGROUND

During Micah's ministry Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC, and Judah became an **Assyrian vassal**. The Assyrian king Sennacherib invaded Judah and captured 46 cities. Jerusalem was spared in 701 BC when the angel of the Lord destroyed the Assyrian army that surrounded the city in response to Hezekiah's faith and prayer for the Lord's help (Isaiah 36–37). Micah was from the village of Moresheth (Mic 1:1) and even had the courage to announce the impending judgment of his own hometown (Mic 1:4). Micah and Isaiah made an interesting tandem. Micah was an outsider from a small village whose preaching influenced Hezekiah's repentant response when the Assyrians invaded his land (Jer 26:17–19). Isaiah, on the other hand, was an insider with access to the royal court who counseled Hezekiah to trust in the Lord during the Assyrian crisis (Isaiah 36–39).

Outline

- I. Message of Judgment: "Hear All People" (Micah 1–2)
- II. Message of Hope: "Hear, Heads of Jacob" (Micah 3–5)
- III. Message of Pardon: "Hear, O Mountains" (Micah 6–7)

The command to "**Hear**" (*shema*) introduces the three major sections of the book (1:1; 3:1; 6:1), and each section contains a message of judgment and salvation. The call to "hear" or "listen" reminded his Jewish audience of Deut 6:4 ("Hear, O Israel:

The Lord our God, the Lord is one," NIV). This basic statement of the Jewish faith is known as the *Shema* and would have immediately come to their minds as a call from God Himself.

MICAH 1:1–2:13	MICAH 3:1–5:15	MICAH 6:1–7:20
Judgment (1:1–2:11)	Judgment (3:1–12)	Judgment (6:1–7:6)
Salvation (2:12–13)	Salvation (4:1–5:15)	Salvation (7:7–20)

MESSAGE

The extended message of salvation at the center of the book, as well as the emphasis on salvation at the end of each section, reflects Micah's focus on the hope of Israel's future salvation. In each section the message of hope directly reverses the preceding message of judgment. In the first section Micah warned that Judah would go into exile (1:16; 2:4,10), and then God promised that a **remnant** would return from exile (2:12–13). In the middle section the temple would be reduced to a heap of ruins (3:12), but the next verse promises that Zion will become the most exalted place on earth. In the final section, Micah initially laments over the present ruin of Israel and Judah (7:1–6), but then he ends the chapter with a praise song in anticipation of the future deliverance (7:18–20). The Lord's grace and covenant faithfulness would triumph over Israel's sin and infidelity.

I. Message of Judgment: "Hear All People" (Micah 1–2)

Micah portrayed the Lord marching out from His holy temple as a warrior and the earth crumbling and melting at His presence. The object of the Lord's anger was Israel and Judah, His own people. The Lord would first judge Samaria for its idolatry, and then the same fate awaited Jerusalem. Seeing the destiny that awaited his homeland, Micah composed a **lament** for the towns in Judah that would lie in the path of the invading Assyrian army. Word plays on the names of these cities made this lament

The Problem of Social Injustice

"Perhaps, after the fall of Samaria, the social injustices of elite classes are exacerbated by a flood of refugees into Jerusalem from the North. The swollen numbers of refugees into Jerusalem increase the demand for food and lower the price of labor. Moreover, in times of drought or other misfortunes, the rich, contrary to the Law, loan money to the poor at exorbitant interests, leading to foreclosures on the property, thereby forcing the free landholder into indentured slavery (cf. 2 Kings 4:1; Neh 5:1–5; Amos 2:6). In other words, by adding field to field the rich cannibalized the poor (Mic 3:1–5; cf. Ezek 34:2–3; Pss 14:4; 53:5; Hab 3:14)."¹

particularly vivid and would make the inhabitants of these towns take notice as the prophet announced their downfall:

- *Beth Le'aphrah* would roll in the "dust" (*apar*) as a rite of mourning.
- The residents of *Shaphir* ("Beautiful town") would pass by in nakedness and humiliation.
- The residents of *Maroth* (sounds like *maru*, "biter") would vainly hope for something "good."
- Disaster would come to *Jerusalem* (the city of *shalom*).
- Residents of *Lachish* would hitch up the "horses" (*rakesh*) to their chariots to flee from the enemy, not to fight against them.
- The town of *Moreseth* (sounds like "betrothed") would be given away as a dowry to the invading army.
- A "conqueror" (*yoresh*) would take possession of *Mareshalh*.

The invasion would bring a time of disaster to Judah, like when David commanded that news of Saul's death not be broadcast in the Philistine city of Gath or when David himself fled from Saul to caves in Adullam. In his campaign against Judah, Sennacherib captured 46 cities in Judah and surrounded the city of Jerusalem with his troops.

The Lord was angry that **social injustice** became common in Israel and Judah. Through various legal and illegal means, the wealthy and the powerful conspired to steal the land of needy families (2:1–11). In ancient Israel, the land belonged to the Lord, but He gave this land to His people Israel as a special gift. God gave every tribe, clan, and family their property as an allotment from the Lord (Joshua 14). For this reason property in Israel was not permanently to change hands. Land sold because of debt was to be redeemed by the individual or family, and all land reverted to its original owners in the Year of Jubilee, every fiftieth year (Leviticus 25).



Assyrian kings were known for their exceptional cruelty.

To steal family property, as Ahab and Jezebel did with Naboth's vineyard, was to steal the family's inheritance from the Lord, and that was considered a serious crime (1 Kings 21). Because this practice was common, Micah announced that a foreign army would take possession of the land as Israel went away into exile. Because the rich deprived the poor of their land, the Lord would now do the same to them.

The people wanted nothing of Micah's words of judgment. Because of their **mis-taken belief** that their covenant with the Lord guaranteed their blessings apart from their responsibility to obey the covenant, they believed it was the prophet's job to

announce only good things from the Lord. Micah sarcastically responded that the perfect prophet for them would be one who promised them more beer and wine.

When the Lord finishes His work of judgment, He will restore the remnant of Israel (2:12–13). Like a shepherd He will gather the remnant into His fold so they will be safe and secure from enemy attack. Like a conquering king He will lead His people into battle. The surviving remnant will once again become a powerful nation.

II. Message of Hope: "Hear, Heads of Jacob" (Micah 3–5)

Micah laid the blame for the spiritual and moral corruption of Israel and Judah with their **sinful leaders**. With their greed and disregard for the poor, their rulers had become like cannibals who chopped the people up and made them into stew. The prophets misted the people with their empty promises of "peace" for their own financial gain when the people needed to hear of the Lord's coming judgment. When judgment fell, the Lord would not respond to these corrupt leaders. When they cried out to Him, the Lord would give no answer to those who had failed to show mercy to others, and there would be no revelation from God to guide them through their darkest hour.

Unlike the false prophets of peace, Micah was empowered by the Spirit of God to proclaim the sins of Israel and Judah and to announce that Jerusalem would be destroyed and reduced to a heap of ruins (3:8). In the next century an elder in Jerusalem reflected on how Micah's message prompted the repentance of King Hezekiah (Jer 26:17–19). When Hezekiah heard Micah's warnings, he feared the Lord and sought His face, leading the Lord to relent from destroying Jerusalem. A prophet's words of judgment were not set in stone. If the people repented, there was always the possibility that judgment could be avoided (cf. Jer 18:7–10). Unfortunately, Hezekiah's obedient response to the Lord only delayed the judgment Micah predicted. Subsequent generations turned away from following the Lord, and Micah's prophecies concerning the fall of Jerusalem were ultimately fulfilled.

An extended promise of **Israel's future salvation** stands at the center of the book of Micah in 4:1–5:15. The prophet contrasted the present pitiful condition of Israel with the glories of the future messianic kingdom. Zion soon would be trampled down, but eventually it will be exalted as the center of the Lord's future kingdom. The nations will stream to Zion to worship the Lord and learn His ways.

The Lord's rule will bring international peace, and the nations will turn their weapons of warfare into farming implements. But before this happens, Jerusalem will find itself like a woman in labor,

experiencing the pain of exile and having no king. But then the Lord will redeem His people and destroy the enemy armies that will attack Jerusalem. Israel would



Tel Sandahannah, Old Testament Moreseth-Gath, home of Micah the prophet.



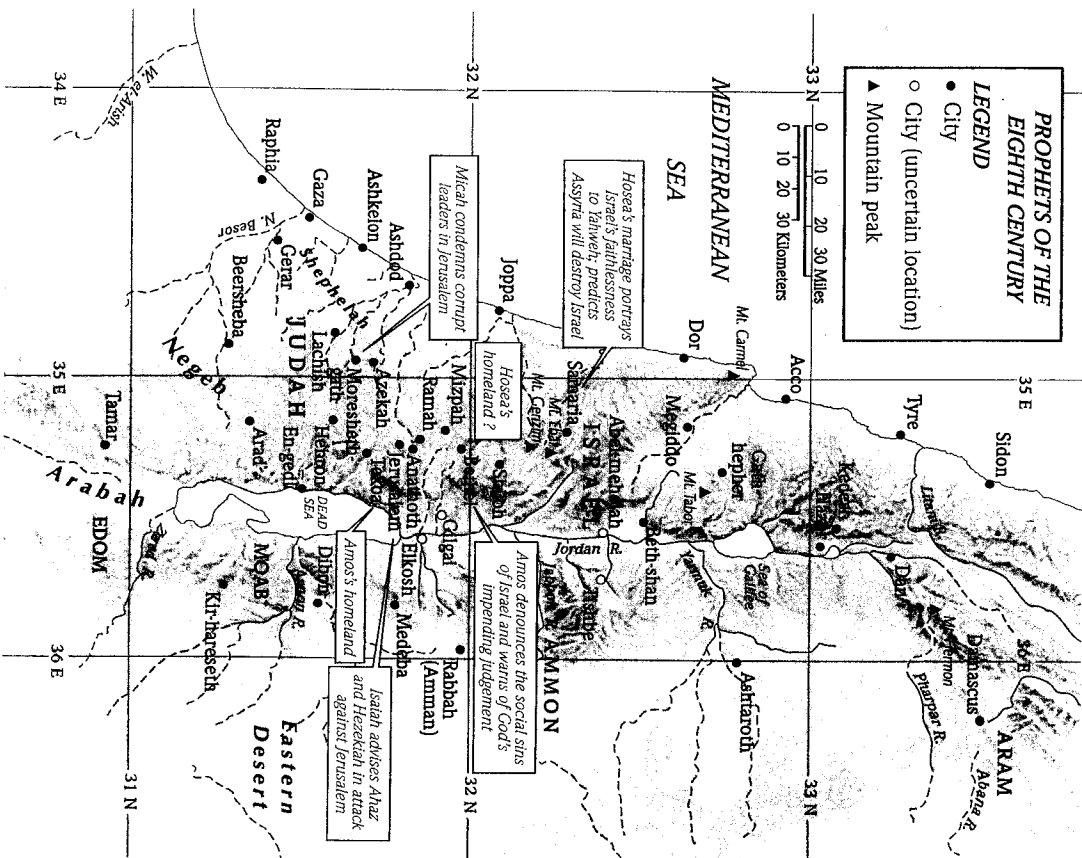
Stairs up to Ahab's palace at Samaria.

experience the humiliation of defeat until the Lord raised up for His people a new David who would shepherd the people in the strength of the Lord and gain international renown. The Assyrians, who attacked Israel in the days of Micah, prefigured the enemy nations that would attack Israel in the last days when the Lord would ultimately deliver Israel from all enemies. The rule of Messiah and His people would even extend over the nations that were Israel's oppressors. In the future kingdom Israel would become a powerful nation and a source of blessing to all peoples.

This section includes Micah's famous prophecy of the future **birth of the Messiah at Bethlehem** (5:2). God promised to raise up another "ruler over Israel" who would come from Bethlehem, David's hometown. Matthew 2:3-6 quotes this passage on the lips of the chief priests and scribes in response to Herod's question about where the Messiah would be born. Matthew, in turn, sees the fulfillment of Micah's prediction of a future Davidic king whose "origin is from eternity" in the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem.

III. Message of Pardon: "Hear, O Mountains" (Micah 6-7)

In the final judgment section of the book, Micah called the people into the courtroom as the Lord brought a **lawsuit** against His people. The mountains and heavens were called as witnesses to hear the Lord's indictment against Israel because they witnessed the formal sealing of the covenant between the Lord and Israel in the days of Moses (Deut 4:26; 30:19; 31:18). In His indictment the Lord contrasted His past faithfulness to Israel's unfaithfulness and reminded the people of what He expected from them as His covenant partner. The Lord was not primarily interested in Israel's



Hebrew Highlight

Remnant. Hebrew מְרֵאמָה (*she'erit*) The noun "remnant" (*she'erit*) is related to the verb "to remain/to be left over" (*sh'ar*) and is used five times in Micah to refer to the survivors of the Lord's judgment who would become the objects of His blessing and favor when God restored Israel (Mic 2:12, 4:7; 5:7–8; 7:18). Other prophets made similar promises of a blessed and restored remnant. In spite of pervasive unbelief, a few true believers (a remnant) would survive.

The promise of blessed survivors in no way diminished the severity of the prophets' warnings of judgment. The term "remnant" implied that a great destruction would leave Israel small and few in number (Isa 10:22). Isaiah pictured Israel following the judgment as a few olives left over in the top of the tree (Isa 17:6). Amos warned that 90 percent of the people would die in the coming judgment (Amos 5:3) and that what was left of Israel would be like pieces of a lamb torn out of the mouth of a ravaging lion (Amos 3:12).

sacrifices and offerings, no matter how extravagant they might be, but rather in their humble obedience to Him reflected in a lifestyle of mercy and justice toward others.

The Lord would judge those who oppressed others by taking away the wealth they gained through their dishonest business practices. The wicked would never enjoy the ill-gotten treasures they stole from others.

The prophet concluded his words of judgment by lamenting the corruption of his people (7:1–6). Violence and injustice were running rampant, and the godly perished from the land. Even when it became difficult to trust family members and neighbors, Micah confessed that he would trust in the Lord and wait for His salvation.

The concluding word of hope in Micah is a **song of praise** to the Lord for His promised deliverance (7:18–20). The righteous would endure the time of God's discipline for Israel, knowing deliverance and vindication were on the other side of judgment. Israel would enjoy a second exodus when the Lord brought them home from their exile and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. The nations of the earth would submit to the Lord with trembling in recognition of His sovereign power. The greatest blessing promised to Israel was the forgiveness of their past sins. In the same way the Lord would destroy Israel's enemies (7:10). He would also trample down their sins and cast them into the sea (7:19). The Lord's anger over Israel's sin would give way to His mercy and covenant love.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Micah announced that the Lord's plans for Israel and Judah involved **judgment and salvation**. Israel and Judah were deserving of judgment because they worshipped idols and abandoned the practice of social justice. Following the judgment, the Lord would preserve a remnant and would restore Israel. The future Messiah would come from the line of David, would be born in Bethlehem, and would reign over a kingdom

of peace and righteousness. The Lord would deliver Israel from its enemies, and the nations would come to Zion to learn the ways of the Lord.

The Lord revealed to Micah that the salvation of Israel would follow His work of judgment, but the exact timing of those events was not made clear to the Old Testament prophets. Micah's prophecies merge together promises of deliverance from the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles with promises of the future kingdom of God (4:9–10; 5:4–5). There is no indication of a time gap between these events or between the first and second comings of Christ (5:1–5). The first coming of Christ and the additional revelation of the New Testament clarified the working out of God's prophetic timetable and His plans for the church and Israel. Like the Old Testament prophets Jesus also warned that the judgment of Jerusalem would take place in the near future and that there would be a future renewal and restoration at His second coming (Matthew 24).

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Study Questions

1. What key word did Micah use to address his listeners?
2. How do social injustices reveal the depth of human sinfulness?
3. What aspects of social injustice concern you in society?
4. Why is the prophecy of a future king born in Bethlehem significant in light of the Messianic promise?

ENDNOTE

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Chapter 40

NAHUM

Destruction of Nineveh

Outline

- I. Destruction of Nineveh Decried (Nahum 1)
- II. Destruction of Nineveh Described (Nahum 2)
- III. Destruction of Nineveh Defended (Nahum-3)

MESSAGE

I. Destruction of Nineveh Decried (Nahum 1)

Nahum began his prophecy with a portrayal of Yahweh as the **Divine Warrior**. As a holy God who is rightly jealous for His honor and reputation, the Lord exacted vengeance on His enemies. At His approach the earth trembled, the sea and rivers dried up, and the mountains melted. The Lord's attributes combined absolute power with perfect righteousness so that He is both a refuge for those who humbly trust in Him and the destroyer of those who arrogantly oppose Him. Metaphors are prominent in this book, and the Lord's enemies were like thorns quickly consumed by the fire of His judgment and like drunkards who staggered after drinking the wine of His wrath. Yahweh's destruction of His proud and idolatrous enemy would bring deliverance for Judah, His oppressed people.

II. Destruction of Nineveh Described (Nahum 2)

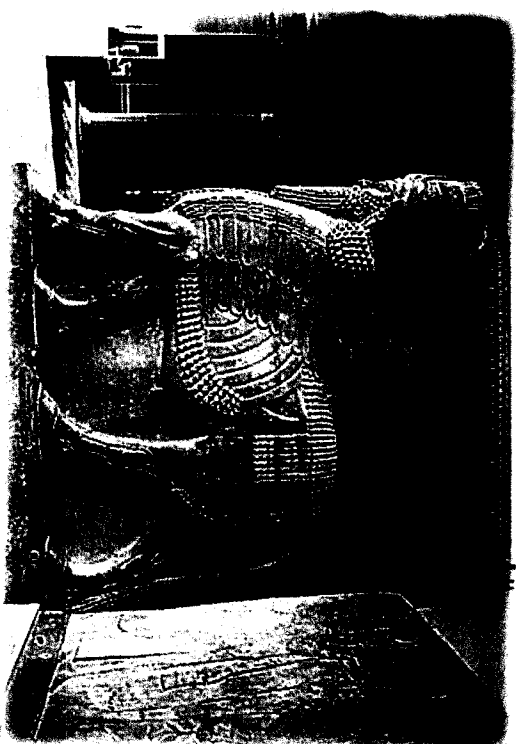
Nahum's second oracle turned more directly to the destruction of Nineveh. Assyria had perfected the brutal techniques of siege warfare but would now become

We know nothing about Nahum beyond his name and that his hometown was Elkosh. Nahum means "comfort," and his message of the coming judgment on Nineveh gave hope and encouragement to the people of Judah who were living under Assyrian oppression at the time of his ministry. The message of Nahum provides the **counterpart** to the book of Jonah in the Minor Prophets. In the previous century, the Lord spared Nineveh from threatened judgment because of their repentant response to the preaching of Jonah. The book of Jonah testified to the Lord's redemptive concern even for the hated Assyrians. However, a generation later, the Assyrians were again brutalizing Judah and the surrounding nations in the Middle East, so God decided to destroy this violent nation.

Both Jonah and Nahum end with a **question**, and both reference the Mosaic confession that the Lord was both gracious and slow to anger as well as just and unwilling to excuse the guilty (Exod 34:6-7; Jonah 4:2; Nah 1:3). These attributes of the Lord applied to His dealings with the nations as well as His treatment of His chosen people, Israel. The Lord in His compassion delayed the judgment of Nineveh, but His justice also demanded that the Assyrians be held accountable for their violence and atrocities.

BACKGROUND

Nahum delivered his message against Nineveh and the Assyrians sometime between 663 and 612 BC. The fall of the Egyptian city Thebes (No-amon) referenced in Nah 3:8 occurred in 663 BC, and Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612 BC. The **fall of Nineveh** appears imminent (2:1; 3:14,19), and so it seems likely that Nahum delivered his messages during the reign of Josiah around the same time that Jeremiah commenced his prophetic ministry (c. 627 BC). Babylon and Assyria were longtime rivals; and Babylon, under the leadership of Nabopolassar, gained its independence from the Assyrians. The Medes captured the Assyrian capital of Ashur in 614 BC, so the Assyrians transferred their capital to Nineveh. Nineveh was a magnificent city of impressive architecture with temples and palaces. The Medes and Babylonians joined together in the capture and destruction of Nineveh in 612 BC. The Babylonian Chronicles provided an account of the fall of Nineveh, which still remains in ruins today.



A colossal splintered bull with human face from the time of Sargon II of Assyria.

Does the Lord Endorse the Abuse of Women?

Nahum 3:5-6 depicts the Lord as punishing Nineveh the prostitute by publicly exposing her nakedness and pelting her with filth, a common punishment of unfaithful wives in the ancient Near East. In light of these verses, some feminist critics have labeled Yahweh as a divine rapist, but this imagery does not legitimize spousal abuse or the rape of women taken as prisoners of war. Nahum and other prophets used this type of imagery for theological and rhetorical impact, not as a guide for the treatment of women or a model for human relationships. The Old Testament reveals Yahweh as a God who has a special concern for oppressed and needy women (cf. Gen 21:14-19; Deut 10:18; Ps 146:9). The Mosaic law limited Israel in its normal practice of warfare from acts of violence against noncombatants (Deut 20:13-15). A captive woman taken in battle was to be treated with dignity (Deut 21:10-14). Amos condemned the nation, particularly their abuse of women (cf. Amos 1:3,6,9-10,13, 2:7), and the larger message of Nahum was that Nineveh was the object of God's judgment because it also practiced such atrocities.

the victims of an invading army led by the Lord Himself. The prophet dramatically portrayed the **chaos** that would engulf the city of Nineveh in the present tense as if these events were occurring before his eyes, enabling the reader to sense the terror of the residents of Nineveh. The shields and uniforms of the enemy soldiers are scarlet because they are covered in blood. Their chariots dart through the city like torches and flashing lightning. The results of the attack is like the opening of the floodgates that protect Nineveh from the waters of the Tigris River. The inhabitants of the city are seen being taken away into exile, and the treasures of the city are being plundered.

III. Destruction of Nineveh Defended (Nahum 3)

Nahum's woe oracle pronounced a **death sentence** on Nineveh and explained more fully the reasons for the Lord's judgment of the city. God's justice demanded that the Assyrians experience the suffering and degradation they inflicted on others. Assyrian armies had slaughtered its enemies, but now the corpses of the dead Assyrians would be piled high in Nineveh. Like a prostitute Nineveh had seduced other nations into alliances and then had betrayed them because of her greed and lust for wealth. As punishment for her prostitution, the Lord would expose her nakedness and pelt her with filth. Other peoples would flee in horror when they observed what happened to Nineveh, but none would grieve or feel sympathy for her because of what she had done to others.

Nahum warned that the city was no better than the Egyptian city of **Thebes** (No-amon) that the Assyrians themselves plundered in 663 BC. Thebes fell even though it appeared invulnerable because of its strategic location on the Nile, and the same thing would now happen to Nineveh. Nineveh's fortresses would collapse like early figs easily shaken from the tree, and the mighty Assyrian warriors would become like frightened women. Nahum sarcastically ordered the residents of the city to prepare

for the coming siege, but nothing would be able to save them. Disaster would consume them like a sweeping fire and a swarm of locusts.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Nahum's message against Nineveh and all of the oracles against the nations reflect that Yahweh is the Sovereign King and Judge over **all peoples** and not just the God of Israel. God is just in His judgment. He punished the Assyrians according to their crimes of violence and cruelty toward all the nations she plundered and not just Israel and Judah. The Lord used Assyria as His instrument of judgment against Israel and Judah (Isa 10:7-9), but Assyria was held accountable for going beyond the Lord's intent and plundering Israel and Judah for their own selfish reasons. The Assyrians were guilty of pride and blasphemy in believing that their gods were superior to Yahweh. The judgment of Assyria would bring about the salvation and restoration of God's people (Nah 1:13-15; 2:2).

The Lord's judgment of Assyria in history is a preview of His final eschatological judgment of all nations and peoples. As with Assyria in the past, all peoples will be judged according to the Noachic covenant and its prohibition of violence and the shedding of blood (Gen 9:5-6; Isa 24:1-5; Amos 1:3-2:3). The Noachic covenant was the basis for judgment of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Empire as much as it was for ancient Assyria, and the Lord will judge America and all other nations in the future on the basis of this covenant as well. In the Old Testament the Lord came down to earth as the Divine Warrior and destroyed the wicked in His day of judgment; in the New

The Cruelty of Assyria

Assyrian artwork reflects how much the Assyrians glorified the violence of warfare and used such violence to intimidate other peoples into submission. Assyrian depictions of their conquests include the flaying of enemy soldiers, victims impaled on wooden poles, dismembered bodies, and severed heads stacked in front of city walls. The inscriptions of Assyrian kings also detail their brutal treatment of conquered foes:

"Like fat steers . . . I speedily cut them down and defeated them. I cut their throats like lambs. I cut off their lives as one cuts a string." *Sennacherib*

"I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and draped] their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on statues upon the pile . . . I flayed many right through my land [and] draped their skins over the walls." *Ashurbanipal*

"Their dismembered bodies I fed to the dogs, swine, wolves, and eagles, to the birds of the heaven and the fish in the deep." *Ashurbanipal*

Testament Christ will come to earth as the Divine Warrior and strike the nations that oppose Him with the sword of His mouth (Rev 19:11-21). As with Nineveh in the book of Nahum, the final Babylon of the end times is also portrayed as a prostitute because of its materialism, idolatry, and evil influence on other peoples (Revelation 18).

At the same time, the work of Christ provides a **new perspective** on Nahum, and we must read this prophet like all others in the Old Testament from the perspective of the cross. On the cross Jesus as the Divine Warrior waged war on Satan, the enemy who is the cause of all evil in the world. He triumphed in His battle over sin, death, and Satan by laying down His life. Because of the cross God extends His offer of grace and forgiveness to all, and Christ calls on His church to spread this good news to all peoples and nations. Even in the Old Testament the Lord demonstrated His redemptive concern for all peoples by sending the prophet Jonah so the people of Nineveh might avoid judgment and destruction. God was not willing that even the cruel and wicked Assyrians perish without the opportunity to repent.

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Study Questions

1. What city in Assyria was the focus of Nahum's prophecy?
2. What other Hebrew prophet dealt with Assyria and ended his book with a question?
3. What does God's judgment of Assyria tell us about God's universal justice?
4. How did Jesus function as a Divine Warrior?

Chapter 41

HABAKKUK.

Destruction of Babylon

Habakkuk ("embrace") prophesied in Judah prior to the Babylonian invasion and warned that the Lord would send the Babylonians to punish His people (1:6). Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zephaniah as well as Daniel and Ezekiel. Even in this time of national judgment, the Lord would not leave His people without a prophetic voice, and even in its final days as a nation, Judah could have turned to the Lord in repentance. Habakkuk's message is a personal one in which the prophet **laments** and **dialogues** with the Lord over the justice of His ways in using the Babylonians to punish Judah's sins.

BACKGROUND

At the end of the seventh century BC, the **Babylonians** replaced the Assyrians as the dominant power in the ancient Near East. The Babylonians under Nabopolassar declared their independence from Assyria in 626 BC and then won a series of military victories over the Assyrians. The Medes and Babylonians captured the cities of Ashur in 614 BC and Nineveh in 612 BC and then finished off what was left of the Assyrian army at Haran in 609 BC and Carchemish in 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar's victory over the Egyptians and Assyrians at Carchemish brought Syria and Judah under Babylonian control. Nebuchadnezzar marched south from Carchemish and took away the first wave of exiles (including Daniel) from Judah in 605 BC. Judah remained under Babylonian control until the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Nebuchadnezzar would take away two more groups of exiles in 597 and 586 BC. Habakkuk appears to have prophesied just prior to the first Babylonian invasion in 605 BC when Egypt was controlling Judah and Jehoiakim was king over Judah (2 Kgs 23:31-24:16).

Outline

- I. Faith Tested (Habakkuk 1)
- II. Faith Taught (Habakkuk 2)
- III. Faith Triumphant (Habakkuk 3)

I. Faith Tested (Habakkuk 1)

Habakkuk's first question was, **Why does the Lord not punish injustice in Judah?** (1:1-4).

Habakkuk complained that the Lord had not answered his prayers to judge violence and injustice in the land. The Lord often delays judgment in order to show mercy, but the prophet believed that the Lord's inactivity only made the problem of injustice worse. The law of Moses no longer had any impact on people's lives, and the wicked outnumbered and took advantage of the righteous. The wicked become emboldened in their sin because the Lord had not punished them for their crimes. How can a person continue to have faith in God when He does nothing to stop these evil people?

The Lord explained that He was not ignoring Habakkuk's prayer or the violence in Judah but was in fact answering his prayer in a manner that was even beyond the prophet's understanding. The Lord was raising up the **Babylonians** (Chaldeans) to punish the wicked people in Judah for their sin. The Lord is the sovereign Lord over the nations and will accomplish His purposes through them. Earlier Isaiah explained how God used the empires of the ancient Near East to punish Israel and Judah for their sins and then to restore them to their homeland. The Assyrians were the "rod" of the Lord's anger (Isa 10:5), the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar was His "servant" (Jer 25:9; 27:6), and the Persian king Cyrus was "His anointed" (Isa 45:1). While the Lord worked out His purposes through these nations, He in no way approved of all of their evil actions. When the Babylonians came, they did not attack Judah to do the Lord's bidding but rather to satisfy their own greed and lust for violence. Rather than acknowledging the Lord, the Babylonians in their arrogance made a god of their own military strength.

II. Faith Taught (Habakkuk 2)

Habakkuk's second question was, **How can God use the Babylonians to punish Judah?**

Habakkuk did not understand how a holy God, too pure even to look on evil, could use the **evil Babylonians** to punish Judah when the Babylonians were even more wicked and violent than Judah. The prophet compared the Babylonians to fishermen who trapped their enemies like helpless fish in nets and destroyed other peoples so they could live in luxury. It again appeared to the prophet as if the Lord was promoting injustice in the world by failing to punish the wicked.

The Lord's response was that His **sovereign purposes** were beyond human understanding and could not be reduced to Habakkuk's simplistic formulas regarding who was most deserving of judgment. The Lord would ultimately punish sinners but in His time and His way. He would first judge Judah and then would judge Babylon. The Lord commanded Habakkuk to record the vision of His future plans in order to encourage the righteous as they waited for the Lord to execute justice and fulfill His promises.

The righteous should trust in God's promise, while the wicked, represented by the Babylonians, would proudly trust in their own violence to satisfy their greed and lust. The promise in 2:4 that "the righteous one will live by his faith," actually reads in Hebrew "the righteous will live by his faithfulness." Because of their

promised deliverance, the righteous should remain faithful to the Lord and maintain their integrity and godliness **by faith**. Habakkuk questioned the ways of God's justice, but the Lord promised that He would protect and preserve the faithful even as He accomplished His work of judgment against the wicked. In the New Testament, Paul applied Habakkuk 2:4 to argue that justification (a right standing with God) was by "faith" in Christ alone rather than by the Mosaic law and works of righteousness (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11). Both the original context of Hab 2:4 and Paul's later usage of the verse stress the importance of trust in God's promise. The believer today trusts in the work of Christ as the basis of salvation in the same way that the faithful in Habakkuk's day trusted the Lord's promise for their ultimate deliverance. The writer of Hebrews also quoted Hab 2:4 to encourage faithfulness to the Lord in the midst of the difficult circumstances that his readers were encountering (Heb 10:38).

Though the Lord had delayed in executing judgment, the **five woe oracles** in 2:6-20 guaranteed the final destruction of the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians violated the Noachic covenant through their violence and bloodshed (Gen 9:5-6), and they would now experience the violence they inflicted upon others as fitting retribution for their crimes. Former victims would celebrate Babylon's demise with taunts and ridicule. The nations would plunder Babylon as Babylon once plundered them. Babylon made other nations drunk and humiliated them; Babylon would now be exposed and shamed as they became intoxicated with the wine of God's wrath. The Lord would even hold the Babylonians accountable for their wanton destruction of the animals and forests of Lebanon. Babylon's idols and false gods would not be able to deliver them



The site of the ancient city of Babylon in modern Iraq.

in their time of disaster. Two statements about God in 2:14 and 2:20 break up these five woes against Babylon and contrast the greatness of the Lord with the shame of Babylon. The Babylonians would go down to destruction as the nations mocked and taunted them, but the glory of the Lord would fill the earth. The idols of Babylon were worthless and speechless gods, but the Lord was the sovereign ruler over all before whom the whole earth was speechless.

III. Faith Triumphant (Habakkuk 3)

Habakkuk's third question was, Will the Lord have mercy?

After hearing the Lord's responses to his complaints, Habakkuk concludes with a prayer for deliverance and a confession of trust in the Lord to do what was right in the midst of Judah's national crisis. This prayer was a hymn to be sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. Habakkuk heard of the Lord's great works in the past and prayed for the Lord to act once again in a powerful way on behalf of His people and to temper His anger against Judah with mercy.

In answer to this prayer (3:3–15), the Lord appeared to Habakkuk in a **theophany** and revealed to him that when God comes to earth He shakes the earth and causes the mountains to disintegrate when He marches out in His glory as a warrior to fight on Israel's behalf. He terrifies His enemies with lightning bolts, plagues, and torrential storms. Long ago the Lord subjugated the seas, demonstrating His power over everything that stood in opposition to Him (cf. Pss 65:6–7; 74:12–17; 89:9–10). He even used the sea to defeat the Egyptians in the exodus (Exod 15:1–18). God's ultimate purpose on earth is always to destroy evil and bring forth salvation to His people (3:12–13). Even though the Babylonians had supreme confidence in their military might, they would be no match for the Lord.

Habakkuk longed for the Lord's deliverance even as he feared what the day of the Lord's anger would mean for Judah. In one of the greatest confessions of faith in all of Scripture (3:16–19), the prophet affirmed that he would rejoice in the Lord and would wait for His deliverance even in the darkest hour of judgment when Judah was deprived of crops and food. Habakkuk was confident that judgment would turn to salvation.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Habakkuk asserts the **Lord's absolute sovereignty** over the nations. The Lord uses nations and their rulers to accomplish His purposes but also holds them morally accountable for their own actions. Through the working out of God's plan and His administration of justice are often mysterious and incomprehensible, He will ultimately punish the wicked and reward the righteous. On the basis of the Noahic covenant, the Lord judges nations for their violence and bloodshed. The judgment of the Babylonian Empire in history is confirmation of God's final judgment of all wicked and oppressive nations. In the commentary on Habakkuk in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Qumran community applied the promises that God would judge His enemies to the Romans. In the book of Revelation, the empire of Antichrist that will stand in

opposition to God and His kingdom in the last days is presented as a second Babylon (Revelation 18).

Habakkuk's interaction with God is also a reminder that the life of faith often involves lament, complaint, and the pouring out of one's honest emotions and feelings to God. **Questioning God** and His ways, when done with the right attitude, can lead to a deeper faith and a greater understanding of God's ways. The Lord does not rebuke or turn away the person that comes to Him with honest questions. Though God spoke in special revelatory ways to Habakkuk as a prophet, true prayer is a dialogue with God and involves waiting on God and listening for Him to speak. God is more than a cosmic force and the dispenser of divine blessings, so vibrant prayer is personal communication with God that involves our intellect, will, and emotions. Believers not only have the right to petition God passionately but also to present the reasons and arguments for why God should answer their prayers. True faith leads to boldness before God but also humbly submits to God's sovereignty even when His ways are not fully understood. After his dialogue with God, Habakkuk confidently trusted in the Lord's promise to deliver His people and patiently waited on God's timing. Even in the most adverse circumstances, Habakkuk resolved to trust in the Lord and to rejoice in the Lord's goodness.

For Further Reading

- Baker, David W. *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary*. TOTC. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988.
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Study Questions

1. What did Habakkuk's questions reveal about his personal struggle with his faith?
2. Why was God's answer difficult for the prophet to comprehend?
3. What questions do you have about God's righteousness and justice in today's world?
4. How is God growing your faith in response to those questions?

Chapter 42

ZEPHANIAH Disaster Is Imminent

MESSAGE

I. Judgment of Judah (Zephaniah 1:1–2:3)

The **Day of the Lord** is the central theme of the book of Zephaniah. The prophet warned that the Day of the Lord was “near” (1:7, 14) and made repeated references to the “day” of God’s wrath. The Lord’s judgment would fall on the entire earth. Reversing His work of creation, the Lord would destroy all living things. After warning of this worldwide catastrophe, Zephaniah focused his message on Yahweh’s impending judgment of Judah. The Lord would judge Judah because they had worshipped Baal, Molech, and the astral deities of the peoples around them (1:4–6). They were violating their central covenantal responsibility to give the Lord alone their loyalty, worship, and service (Exod 20:3; Deut 6:4–5). The people presumptuously believed that no harm would come to them because they were the Lord’s chosen people, but the Lord would in fact search the city of Jerusalem with a lamp to make sure every evildoer and idol worshipper was punished. The people of Judah would wail over the loss of their houses, fields, and wealth.

With these warnings Zephaniah supported **Josiah’s reform** movement by calling the people of Judah to humble themselves and gather together at the temple to seek God’s mercy before the Day of the Lord arrives. Only those who truly turn to the Lord will be spared from the devastation (2:1–3).

II. Judgment of the Nations (Zephaniah 2:4–15)

The Lord is sovereign over **all peoples** and would also judge the nations for their wickedness and evil. Zephaniah referenced nations from all points of the compass—Philistia to the west, Moab and Ammon to the east, Cush to the south, and Assyria to the north—to demonstrate the encompassing nature of God’s judgment.¹ Although the surrounding nations will arrogantly taunt the people of Judah, the remnant of Judah will possess these nations when the Lord restores His people. Judgment would fall not only on the smaller nations surrounding Judah but also on the imperial power of Assyria. Despite their military prowess, they would not be able to stand against the

According to the book’s heading, Zephaniah (“hidden”) was of **royal descent**, the great-great grandson of Hezekiah who ruled in Judah from 715 to 686 BC. Zephaniah’s ancestor is not specifically identified as the king, but this connection provides the best explanation for the extended listing of four generations of the prophet’s genealogy. The superscription also informs us that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of the godly king Josiah (640–609 BC). The evil reigns of Manasseh and Amon had plunged Judah into apostasy, but Josiah carried out a series of reforms in response to the discovery of the Book of the Law in the eighteenth year of his reign. Then he sought to purge the land of idolatry and to bring the people back to the Lord (2 Kings 22–23).

BACKGROUND

Zephaniah’s condemnation of **Judah’s idolatry** in his opening message (1:4–6) indicates that he likely began his ministry prior to Josiah’s major reform. Zephaniah’s preaching thus helped influence perhaps the greatest revival in Judah’s history. Zephaniah began his ministry at approximately the same time as Jeremiah, who began to prophesy in Josiah’s thirteenth year (627 BC). Unfortunately, after Josiah’s death, Judah quickly returned to its sinful ways. They did not follow the Lord, and the Lord punished His disobedient people by sending them away into exile. Zephaniah ministered during an important transition time as the Assyrian Empire was coming to an end and the Babylonians were rising to power in the Middle East.

Outline

- I. Judgment of Judah (Zephaniah 1:1–2:3)
- II. Judgment of the Nations (Zephaniah 2:4–15)
- III. Justification of the Remnant (Zephaniah 3:1–20)



A representation of the god Baal on a relief from Ugarit.

Hebrew Highlight

Remnant. Hebrew *sh'ar* (שֶׁאֵרִית) The remnant is the "remaining portion" or "residue." The noun emphasizes the basic root idea of *sha'ar*, and "speaks of that which has survived after a previous elimination process or catastrophes" (TWOT, 2, 894-95). It is often used as a prophetic technical term for the final future righteous remnant of Israel.

Lord. The Lord would destroy Assyria and turn the great city of Nineveh into a barren wasteland.

III. Justification of the Remnant (Zephaniah 3:1-20)

Zephaniah warned that the day of the Lord's judgment was coming against Judah and the nations, but the prophet also viewed these near events as providing a pattern for the Lord's work of judgment and salvation for Israel and the nations in the eschatological Day of the Lord. Jerusalem stood under a **death sentence** because its people no longer trusted and followed Yahweh. The city's corrupt officials perverted justice, and the prophets and priests who were to provide spiritual leadership were concerned only for their own selfish interests (3:1-4). The rebellious city of Jerusalem will be destroyed because the people in it refused to accept correction from the Lord. The prophet blurred the distinction between near and far events in expanding the judgment of Jerusalem to include all nations. The Lord will pour out His burning anger on all peoples, and the earth will be consumed.

Judgment, however, was not the final word for Judah or the nations. In the last days the Lord would purify the speech of all peoples so they might worship and serve Him (3:9-10). He would purge evildoers from His own people and form a pure and **holy remnant** that would no longer practice injustice and deceit. Zephaniah stressed that the Lord's blessings were for the "humble" who put their trust in Him (3:11-12; cf. 2:3). The Lord would dwell among His people, and an enemy army would never subjugate them again. Those who trusted in the Lord could rest in the promise that He would deliver the afflicted and the oppressed.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Zephaniah affirmed that the Lord was king and judge over all nations and that the Day of the Lord would come as a **day of judgment** on Judah and all peoples. The Day of the Lord was both near and far. In the *immediate* future Yahweh would judge Judah and the surrounding nations. In the *eschatological* future the Lord's purifying of the nations would lead to the salvation of Israel and believers from the nations. The purifying of the lips of the nations (3:9) would reverse the curse placed on rebellious humanity at the tower of Babel (Genesis 11). The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy would come when people from every nation gather to worship in the Lord's future kingdom (cf. Ps. 145:10-13; Rev. 5:9-10). The Lord would also restore His people

Israel, and they would enjoy the blessings of His kingdom rule as He reigned over them from Mt. Zion.

For Further Reading.

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Study Questions

1. What did Zephaniah's preaching result in for the people of Judah?
2. What was the prophet's relationship to King Josiah?
3. What key discovery led to the revival in Josiah and Zephaniah's time?
4. In what way was the Day of the Lord both near and far?
5. What will it take to see a great spiritual revival in our own day?

ENDNOTE

1. J. Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 337.