



OT Survey Lesson 10. The Babylonian Captivity.

Prepared by Dr. G. Steve Kinnard.

Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Nahum, Habakkuk.

Two Prophets of Uncertain Date: Obadiah, Joel.

The Babylonian Empire

The book of Jeremiah coincides with the last days of Judah and Jerusalem. Along with his contemporaries Nahum and Habakkuk, Jeremiah saw the rise to power of Babylon with their forceful leader, Nebuchadnezzar. In fact the call of Jeremiah in 626 B.C. occurred at approximately the same time as the death of the great Assyrian emperor, Assurbanipal and the uprising in Babylon by their future leader Nabopolassar.

In 722 B.C., Samaria had fallen to the Assyrian sword largely because of her strategic position along the coastal plain in Palestine. Judah was now caught in a strategic vice between two powers. Babylon to the North lusted after countries with a lust that only expansionism and conquest would satisfy. To the South a weak but still sovereign Egyptian government desired control of Judah to serve as a buffer state between itself and Babylon. As Samaria experienced a century earlier, Judah now found herself caught between a rock and a hard place. After Josiah, the kings of Judah vacillated between seeking alignment with Babylon or with Egypt (639-609 B.C.).

Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.), the son of Josiah, was allowed to sit on his father's throne by the Egyptians after Josiah's death at Megiddo. This changed when the Egyptians and Assyrians were defeated by the Babylonians at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. Jehoiakim now became the vassal of Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonian empire. At 601 B.C. the Babylonians faced the Egyptians once again in a military conflict at an unknown site within Syria-Palestine. Although the

details of this conflict are sketchy, Babylon suffered enough of a setback to inspire Jehoiakim to rebel against their control.

The Babylonians did not immediately respond to Jehoiakim's protest, and in the meantime Jehoiakim died (598 B.C.). He was succeeded by his son, Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin's experience on the throne was short-lived because in 597 B.C. the Babylonian forces under Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem deporting back to Babylon the sharpest men and women of the city including the king and his family. The king of Babylon placed another of Josiah's sons, Zedekiah, on the throne.

Zedekiah ruled over Judah for a decade (597-587 B.C.). His reign was marked by weakness of character, vacillation to the opinion of his advisers, and an unwise decision to rebel against Babylon's control. The Babylonians were not as gracious with Zedekiah's rebellion as they had been with Jehoiakim's. Nebuchadnezzar responded with an iron rod. He laid siege to Jerusalem, surrounding the city for a year and a half until Jerusalem surrendered (587 B.C.). Nebuchadnezzar's forces destroyed the royal palace, the city walls, and the Temple. They then blinded Zedekiah taking him back to Babylon with many of the natives of Jerusalem. This second deportation to Babylon was more extensive and radical than the first. Babylon desired to consolidate into the empire, the countries surrounding her. The Southern Kingdom had now gone the way of her sister in the North. All that was left of Israel was a remnant scattered between Babylon, Palestine, and Egypt.

Nebuchadnezzar placed a Jewish governor over Judah at this time tightening the strings which held the province to Babylon. The new governor was Gedaliah. Gedaliah was murdered by a group of conspirators who felt he was too pro-Babylon for their liking. These conspirators then fled to Egypt forcing Jeremiah to come with them into exile. Tradition states that Jeremiah was later killed by these same men while exiled in Egypt.

Zephaniah

ZEPHANIAH BEN CUSHI

THE PROPHET OF THE YOM YAHWEH

“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save.”

--Zephaniah 3:17, NIV

1 & 2. Title & Author:

Three men in the Old Testament have the name Zephaniah (1 Chron. 6:36; 2 Kings 25:18; Zeph. 1:1) but are not connected. The author of Zephaniah traces his ancestry four generations to Hezekiah. It is uncertain why he does this but it is conjectured that he wished to identify with Hezekiah the king (715-687 B.C.) who reigned 100 years prior to Zephaniah. He could have been a part of the aristocracy

and a part of the royal family of Judah. If so, this would make his biting attack on the princes' and king's sons even more poignant (1:8-9).

Our biographical information about Zephaniah is scant. He is presumed to have lived in the city of Jerusalem. Zephaniah 1:12 hints at his character:

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps
and punish those who are complacent,
who are like wine left on its dregs,
who think, The Lord will do nothing,
either good or bad (NIV).

Because of this verse artists of the Middle Ages represented Zephaniah as a man with a lamp, roaming the streets of Jerusalem searching for sinners to bring to punishment.

3. Date/History:

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.), but it is not known whether he prophesied before or after Josiah's reform of 621 B.C. (2 Kings 22:8). Arguments have been advanced for both sides of the question. Most scholars believe Zephaniah prophesied before Josiah's reform because he spoke against many of the abuses prevalent during that time. The best date for Zephaniah is sometime shortly before or after 621 B.C. Being one of the prophets from the late seventh century, he was a contemporary of both Jeremiah and Huldah.

The reign of Josiah followed the turbulent reigns of Manasseh and Amon (2 Chron. 33:1-25; 2 Kings 21:1-26). During these years the "Voices of Yahweh" were silenced. There is no trace of prophetic activity in the first three-quarters of the seventh century B.C. From the time of Isaiah and Micah at the close of the eighth century until the rise of Zephaniah, Nahum, and Jeremiah in 621 B.C., the Old Testament does not mention any prophet. This could be explained by the Assyrian influence upon Judah and her kings during this time. This was the point of Assyria's greatest power. Manasseh and Amon totally accepted Assyrian influence in Jerusalem to the extent of permitting idols in the temple, persecuting Yahwistic worship, and allowing child sacrifices (2 Kings 21:1-9, 16).

The reign of Sennacherib was ended by his murder and the succession of his son Esarhaddon to the throne in 681 B.C. Esarhaddon extended the Assyrian hold as far west as Egypt by capturing Memphis in 671 B.C. He was succeeded by Ashurbanipal who further strengthened the Assyrian hold on Egypt by conquering Thebes, 440 miles south on the Nile from Memphis in 663 B.C. With Ashurbanipal the Assyrian aggression ended. With his death in 626 B.C. the power of the mighty Assyrian empire began to decay. With the rise of the Chaldean dynasty in Babylon Assyria faced an enormous threat from the south. The Babylonians were to stretch their muscles under the strong leadership of Nabopolassar (625-605 B.C.) and his

son Nebuchadrezzar--also know as Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C.). Joining the Aryan races of the eastern mountains, Babylon confronted Assyria in 607 B.C. succeeding to destroy her capital, Nineveh. At this time the young king of Egypt, Necho, moved north in 608 B.C. After marching through Judah, Necho headed toward Nineveh, but when he arrived the city had already fallen to the Babylonians. After three years of warfare between Babylon and Egypt, the forces of Egypt were finally defeated at Carchemish on the Euphrates in 605 B.C. This battle was the nail in the coffin of Egyptian domination in Palestine.

The death of Ashurbanipal in 626 B.C. also opened a door for Josiah's reform in Judah when the Book of the Law was found in 621 B.C. Josiah gained the crown of Judah at the young age of eight. When he was eighteen years of age, a copy of the Book of the Law was discovered during temple renovations (621 B.C.). This discovery initiated a sweeping reform in the religious life of Judah. The most symbolic gesture of reform was the great Passover celebration of 620 B.C. Messengers were sent throughout the country to ready people for this event, and it is noted that in all the history of Israel no king had planned such a celebration. This reform proved to be in vain and Josiah lost his life in a futile attempt to prevent Pharaoh Necho from aiding Assyria in her dying struggles against the rising forces of Babylon. Upon his death Josiah was succeeded by his second son, Jehoahaz,. Although he seems to have been the choice of the people, Necho of Egypt did not want another Josiah in Jerusalem. Necho visited the city, dethroned Jehoahaz taking him to Egypt in chains, and placed his elder brother Jehoiakim on the throne as a vassal king.

It did not take Jehoiakim long to undo what Josiah had done. T.H. Robinson writes of Jehoiakim:

"Jehoiakim was the oriental Sultan, extravagant, ostentatious, luxurious, with little or no regard for the rights of personality. To Josiah, his subjects had been brethren; to Jehoiakim they were slaves. Further, the glimpses of light we have of him show him to have been the typically strong but wicked oriental despot. He is the only king of Judah of whom it is recorded that he dared to put to death an accredited prophet of Yahweh."¹

Josiah's reform ended with his untimely death. Just 34 years after Josiah's reform, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon led his army into Judah, capturing her territory, exiling her inhabitants, imprisoning and blinding her king, and destroying her temple.

Zephaniah's was born probably during the reign of terror of King Manasseh, during the strongest point of Assyrian power. His ministry began sometime around the discovery of the Book of the Law in 621 B.C.

¹ T.H. Robinson, *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 104.

4. Major Themes:

A. Purpose. This book roundly condemns those who claim to follow God but do not live the life. Judah was condemned for worshiping Yahweh with one breath and Baal with the next (1:5-6). Some had settled back into such a sickening complacency (1:12). The day of Yahweh was approaching these people as a day of destruction and doom (1:7-9, 14-18). But even so, God did not leave his people without hope. "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion" was the cry, because "The king of Israel, Yahweh, is in your midst" (3:14-15).

B. Theme. The Day of the Lord is approaching for Judah.

C. Judah must pay for her sins.

As with the other prophets, Zephaniah was concerned that God's people recognize the consequences of their sins. For Judah, the sins were many:

(1.) Religious syncretism. Zephaniah accused Judah of forsaking God and following Baal, the host of heaven, and Milcom (1:4-5). Both Ahaz and Manasseh had promoted the worship of false gods in Judah.

(2.) Acceptance of foreign customs. The Israelites had not only accepted foreign religion, but they also had been influenced by the customs of other nations (1:8-9).

(3.) Violence and deceit filled the temples of the foreign gods (1:9)

(4.) The leaders of Judah--the priest, prophet, and judge--had become arrogant, treacherous, and violent (3:3-4).

(5.) People had accepted the belief that God was indifferent toward human behavior. Zephaniah insisted that Yahweh is a God of justice (1:12; 3:5).

(6.) Jerusalem had failed to learn from her past mistakes; therefore, she was destined to repeat them and suffer (3:2,7).

D. The Day of the Lord (Yom Yahweh) is approaching.

Amos was the first of the prophets of Israel to use the phrase Yom Yahweh, the day of the Lord. He probably did not coin the phrase, but he simply borrowed it from the conversational language in eighth century Palestine. The Jews had created a popular belief that a day would come in which Yahweh would crush the enemies of Israel and lift up his nation above every other nation.

Zephaniah picks up this phrase and develops it. God will call upon the nations around Judah to visit his people and punish them. The punishment is both for the

elite and for the common. Those needing to be punished will be sought out with a lamp and brought to justice (1:12).

The day of the Lord will be a day of catastrophe for Judah. The city will be shaken and nothing will be spared, not man, beast, bird, nor fish. Zephaniah 1:14-17 reads:

The great day of the Lord is near
near and coming quickly.
Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter,
the shouting of the warrior there.
That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of trouble and ruin
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness,
a day of trumpet and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the corner towers.
I will bring distress on the people
and they will walk like blind men,
because they have sinned against the Lord.
Their blood will be poured out like dust
and their entrails like filth.

Nothing will save Judah from having to face this terrifying Day of the Lord.

Jeremiah

JEREMIAH OF ANATHOTH
THE PROPHET PAR EXCELLENCE

1. Title:

This book is named for the seventh century prophet Yirme-Yahu whose name may mean "God establishes."

2. Author:

The book of Jeremiah is rich in biographical detail. We know more details about the life and personality of Jeremiah than about any of the other classical prophets. One reason for this is the vast duration of Jeremiah's prophetic activity. Whereas Amos' ministry possibly lasted only one week, Jeremiah was active in his ministry for over four decades. Jeremiah lived a long and productive life. He probably lived into his nineties, witnessing a tremendous change in world power during his lifetime. Jeremiah saw five kings of Judah come and go. Two of these

kings wanted to kill him, but he survived them both. Although Jeremiah would not have said his ministry was productive, it was certainly long and eventful.

The single most important event in the life of Jeremiah was his call. He received his call to be a prophet in 626 B.C. while he was still a young man. This was the first, but not the last time he would receive a message from Yahweh. The book of Jeremiah records many times that "the Word of Yahweh came to Jeremiah (1:2, 11, 13; 2:1; 3:6; 7:1; 11:1; 13:1; 18:1; 21:1; 25:1; 29:1; 32:1; 45:1; and many others).

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiyah of the priests of Anathoth (1:1), a small town about two miles northeast of Jerusalem, and thus, was most likely reared in the training of the Torah. Jeremiah felt deeply about the fate of his people (8:18-ff.; 14:17-ff.), but was even more strongly cognizant of the responsibility which God had given him (5:14; 23:28-29), speaking boldly the message of God in the face of personal danger (7:1-8; 18:18; 44:1-30).

Jeremiah was a man of contrasts. He was full of pathos. Various emotions worked through him. Christoph Barth, a noted Biblical scholar, has commented:

Jeremiah was a prophet of great authority, but often in his writings he seemed to have doubts about his calling and to come near to abandoning it. He was a major preacher and a poet, but often, surprisingly, he expressed uncertainty about what he should do. He was a prophet of doom, predicting condemnation, yet he was always ready to defend those who were about to, be condemned, and to bring consolation and hope when condemnation had fallen.²

In other words, he was a human being just like you and me. At times his humanity came through. He had his ups and downs. In spite of the low times, he consistently strived to be righteous.

Jeremiah's public ministry can be divided into four periods. The first of these, the Early Ministry (626-609), began when Jeremiah was 20 years of age in the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign around 626 B.C. Zephaniah was warning Judah about the enemy from the North descending upon Judah. Because of the rampant and blatant sin in Judah, Jeremiah picked up Zephaniah's theme envisioning a boiling pot in the north that was about to spill over onto the inhabitants of Judah (1:13-14).

Five years later Hilkiyah discovered the Book of the Law at the Temple in Jerusalem. This began the second major period in Jeremiah's ministry, the withdrawal from public life (622-609). Being a priest from Anathoth, Jeremiah experienced firsthand the fruit of Josiah's reform. It is unclear how Jeremiah

² Christoph Barth, *God With Us* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 331.

responded to that fruit. He might have retreated because he felt the reform was calling Israel back to the true worship and moral responsibility of her covenant relationship with Yahweh. Or Jeremiah might have viewed the reform as superficial and inconsequential—a band-aid on a mortal wound. Regardless of how he saw the reform, Jeremiah respected Josiah as a king and a leader. He lamented the loss of this king in his untimely death at Megiddo in 609 B.C.

Josiah's death began the third period of Jeremiah's ministry, His ministry under Jehoiakim (609-597). Jeremiah had little to say about Josiah's successor, Jehoahaz. He did hint at regret over Jehoahaz's deportation to Egypt. When we understand the relationship of Jeremiah and Jehoiakim, we see the reason for that regret.

Pharaoh Necho placed Jehoiakim on the throne to replace Jehoahaz. Jeremiah's feelings about Jehoiakim were not optimistic. When Jeremiah delivered his Temple sermon in chapters 7-10, he escaped arrest only with the help of some God fearing elders and princes. Uriah, a prophet who was with Jeremiah at this time, was not as fortunate. Uriah fled to Egypt only to be extradited back to Judah and executed there. Jeremiah must have been banned from the temple area because of this event. He remained silent until after the Battle at Carchemish. Then he sent his secretary, Baruch, with a collection of his oracles to be delivered at the Temple. Some nobles who were there took this collection to Jehoiakim. As Jehoiakim read through Jeremiah's words he steamed with anger. The king took his penknife and after reading a section, dissected it from the scroll and threw it into the fire.

Jehoiakim passed his crown to Jehoiachin. We do not know what became of Jehoiachin. He gained the throne at eighteen, and his reign lasted only three months which was spent in a disastrous war. The king himself was not to blame. Blame was due his mother, Nehushtan. She desired to continue her husband Jehoiachin's oppressive reign. Her time was cut short by the first wave of the Babylonian destruction of Judah.

Zedekiah was placed on the throne of Judah by the Babylonians in place of Jehoiachin, thus began Jeremiah's fourth and final period of ministry, The Ministry Under Zedekiah and Beyond (597-585?). Zedekiah, like many other kings before him, reigned in weakness instead of strength. Although he liked Jeremiah and respected his counsel, Zedekiah allowed nationalists to arrest Jeremiah because they believed him to be a traitor and his message to be subversive. Jeremiah was teaching that it would be better to surrender to the Babylonians than to try to resist them. Because of his message of doom, these same nationalists threw him into a cistern where he was left to starve to death. An Ethiopian eunuch, Ebedmelech, informed Zedekiah that these men had thrown the prophet of God into a cistern. Ebedmelech convinced Zedekiah that this was no way to treat a prophet. The king agreed and ordered Jeremiah released. It took over twenty men to drag him from the mud and muck at the bottom of the well. Jeremiah returned to prison, but he

continued his message, "Surrender and you will be safe; maintain the resistance and you will be destroyed."

When Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Jeremiah chose to stay with his kinsmen in Judah rather than join the exiles in Babylon at the king's request. The Chaldeans treated him kindly and allowed him to stay in Mizpah with Gedaliah. Jeremiah found hope once again in the person of Gedaliah. Here was a new leader who was brave, kind, and godly—could he restore Judah to her glory? When Gedaliah was murdered, Jeremiah's hopes were once again dashed upon the rocks. The new leader, Jochanan, questioned Jeremiah about the next course of the remnant in Mizpah. Should they stay put or go to Egypt? After ten days of silence Jeremiah's answer came--it was better to stay there and trust the kindness of the Babylonians than to flee to Egypt. Jochanan did not believe Jeremiah. He kidnapped the prophet carrying him to Egypt with the rest of the survivors.

The first message received from Jeremiah in Egypt was a pronouncement of doom for the Egyptian nation. In Egypt Jeremiah witnessed the final demise of the Hebrew people. People severed their ties with Yahweh taking up the worship of the Queen of Heaven. Jeremiah protested their behavior, but his protests were in vain. Tradition says that Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt at the hand of the Jews who had taken him there. This tradition seems believable. What other end could one expect of the prophet who spoke to a people who would not listen even though his message was the message of God.

3. Date/History:

Although the date of Jeremiah's birth is uncertain, we can estimate that he was born between 650 and 640 B.C. Jeremiah records that he began his prophecy in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (626 B.C.) until the captivity of Jerusalem (587 B.C.). Also, he records events which took place after the Fall of Jerusalem, to the time of the thirty-seventh year after the fall of Jehoiachin (c. 562 B.C.) at which time Jehoiachin was treated royally in Babylon (52:31-34). Thus, the time of writing would span the time of about 626-562 B.C.

See above.

4. Major Themes:

A. Purpose: The people of Jeremiah's time had stopped trusting in God and put their trust in the mere presence of the Temple. As a result they did all sorts of evil before him (7:1-8:3). Jeremiah warned of inevitable doom unless they repented. The book records history (not necessarily in chronological order) and expounds prophecy, leaving the message, "Judah will surely fall because of her sins."

B. Theme: Judah must surely fall because of her sins.

C. Yahweh controls the history of the world.

Like the prophets of the eighth century, Jeremiah viewed Yahweh as the Sovereign God who ruled the heavens and the earth. Since he was creator, he also controlled history, moving the destinies of nations and leaders as he saw fit. He selected Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire to overthrow the oppressive Assyrians and discipline the nation of Judah (27:6). Babylon stood to the north of Judah as a cauldron on a wind-stoked fire ready to boil over and scald anyone in the way (1:13-15).

Why was Judah facing destruction by Babylon? Judah had awakened spiritually under the leadership of the great spiritual reformer Josiah. Josiah's untimely death in 609 B.C. at Megiddo had smashed Judah's hopes against the rocks. Josiah's son, Jehoiakim, left the path of his father and took Judah into apostasy. This rebellion had to be punished. Yahweh, as sovereign used the nations as a instrument of discipline against Judah. Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish in 605 B.C. and soon thereafter ousted Assyria as ruler in the Middle East. God allowed Babylon to rise to power so that Judah might see her sin (4:6, 11-12; 5:15-17). Could God really act as an enemy of Judah and bring death to his own people? Jeremiah answered, "Yes."

D. God is concerned with the individual.

Jeremiah reveals that Yahweh is not just the God of covenant righteousness, but he is the God of pathos as well. God cares. He has invested himself in the community and the individual. He will give up on neither. God is more free and uncontrollable than a mere system of retribution can suggest. Jeremiah envisions God as a passionate father who desires to powerfully embrace his people. Jeremiah felt the touch of God in his own life. God called, taught, sustained, confronted, and enabled Jeremiah. His passion for Jeremiah was genuine and intimate. God cares for the individual with a passion that is impossible for humanity to understand.

E. Repentance comes before salvation.

Jeremiah understood that God did not desire the destruction of his people. He longed to save them and make them whole. But before they could be saved, they needed to repent. This was the sole remedy for the sin and unrighteousness that was so rampant in Judah.

Because of sin the society was crumbling. Judah had forgotten God and been unfaithful to him (5:7, 11). The people no longer treated each other justly, but fraud, deception, and lies filled the land (5:31, 6:13, 7:4). The people grew callous to sin acting as if perjury, exploitation, and adultery were acceptable. How could Yahweh accept their hypocritical worship with its tainted sacrifices? (6:20, 7:21). Judah had become evil.

Israel needed to radically repent before God would come to her aid. Yet the longer Jeremiah preached, the more certain he was that true repentance would not come. Judah would be spurned (6:30), abandoned (7:29), and punished (5:9) by God. He would hand her over to Babylon for her destruction.

But even if repentance did not come, God would never totally reject his people. Through his rod of discipline, he would attempt to reclaim their loyalty. After destruction and exile, God would work to win Israel back. The captivity would come to an end (25:11; 29:10), and Babylon would be overthrown (50:1-ff.). God would call his people back to the land of promise and he would promote their cause to a degree unseen before. Jeremiah 24:5-7 reads:

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land, I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. (NIV).

The glory of the restoration would be seen in the fact that even a remnant of the Northern Kingdom would be restored (31.4-ff.) and the Gentiles would be included in this community (3:17; 16:19; 30:8-9).

Nahum

NAHUM OF ELKOSH
THE POET

“The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished.”

--Nahum 1:3, NIV

1. Title:

Meaning of Name: The book is named for its author Nahum (1:1). The Hebrew Nahum, which means, “consolation, relief, comfort.”

2. Author:

All we know of Nahum is his name and the name of his town, Elkosh. The book contains no biographical material about him. The location of Elkosh has been disputed through the years. Five locations have been suggested. (1) Al-Kush, a village 24 miles north of Mosul, Iraq, just opposite the city of Nineveh. If Nahum lived here, then he was one of the deportees from Samaria when Israel was taken in 722. (2) Ain-Japhata, a town south of Babylon is rumored to contain the tomb of Nahum. (3) El-Kauze, a city in north Galilee was cited by Jerome as being the home

of Nahum. (4) Capernaum in Galilee actually means "the city of Nahum" in Arabic. (5) Beth-gabre in the tribe of Simeon and believed to be identified with the modern Beit-Jebrin, a town 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem is the only location in Judah which has been associated with Nahum. There is no substantial evidence to prove that Nahum was from any of these locations. The internal evidence from the book of Nahum favors a location in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

3. Date/History:

Nahum was a prophet of the seventh century and a contemporary of the early ministry of Jeremiah and the ministries of Zephaniah and Habakkuk. Nahum does not date his prophecy, but he obviously spoke after the fall of Thebes to Assurbanipal about 661 B.C., but before the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C. (Nahum 3:8-9). Since Nineveh's doom seems depicted as imminent, one may suggest a date around 615 B.C. Rationalists who deny the predictive element in Nahum's oracles are forced to date the prophecy after 612.

In a sense, the book of Nahum is a political-theological treatise against the nation of Assyria. It is impossible to understand Nahum without some knowledge of the relationship between Judah and Assyria. Much has been written in this work about the Assyrian empire. For the present discussion we will pick up with Ashurbanipal's march on Thebes.

The zenith of Assyrian domination was achieved during the reign of Esarhaddon and his son Ashurbanipal (668-627). When Ashurbanipal conquered Thebes in 663, the Assyrians controlled a territory reaching from the high Iranian plateau northeast of the Tigris River down to the region of Upper Egypt, an area of a thousand miles. With the capture of Thebes Ashurbanipal had succeeded in crushing the cultural and political heart of the Egyptian empire. With great booty of conquest and many deportees both male and female, Ashurbanipal went back to his capital in Nineveh to savor his victory.

Nineveh served as the capital of Assyria from 1100 to 880 B.C. The city of Asshur became the capital until Sennacherib restored Nineveh to its former glory at the beginning of his reign in 705 B.C. It continued to be the capital of the vast Assyrian empire until its destruction some 100 years later. Nineveh was located on the eastern side of the Tigris River, opposite what is now Mosul, Iraq. Sennacherib renovated the city of Nineveh repairing its fortifications, restoring the temples, providing a system of waterworks, and building a palace. Records show that as many as 10,000 men worked for twelve years to deposit over 15,000,000 tons of earth and brick for the palace in Nineveh. The wall around Nineveh was 7.5 miles in circumference and so wide that three chariots could drive on top of the wall abreast.

Upon the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 B.C., the city of Nineveh changed roles—from the mighty aggressor to the target of aggression. Ashurbanipal's son, Esarhaddon was the last Assyrian king to live in Nineveh. The legacy of Assyrian

cruelty was about to end. The land around Syria-Palestine cried out for vengeance against the enemies that had so cruelly devastated it.

It was now time for the violator to become the violated. The Medes had been held in check in the northeast by the Scythians whom Esarhaddon bought off with the gift of his daughter to the Scythian ruler. Both in Babylon and in Egypt powers were patiently waiting for the right moment to strike.

That moment came with the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 B.C. The next year a Babylonian prince, Nabopolassar, evicted the Assyrian forces from his home in Babylon. In 612, a coalition of the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians captured the city and set their minds to destroy it. The citizens of Nineveh fasted in an attempt to propitiate their gods and free the city. The fate of the city was sealed when the Tigris overflowed, breaking breaches in massive walls surrounding the city. When Esarhaddon received news of this he set fire to his palace burning himself alive. The end was at hand. Nineveh fell in 611 B.C. The city was so decimated that when Alexander the Great marched by a few centuries later he did not even recognize that a world empire was buried under his feet. Two mounds, Kouyunjik and Nebi Yunus, remain today of Nineveh--the capital of the great Assyrian empire.

4. Major Themes:

A. Like Jonah, this prophecy is concerned with Nineveh, but whereas Jonah prophesied to Nineveh directly, Nahum prophesied to Judah the comforting message of the destruction of Nineveh (1:12, 15). Complete and utter destruction is pronounced upon Nineveh as the just judgment of God on a sinful people.

B. Theme: The destruction of Nineveh. Nahum 1:2-10 is an acrostic poem relating themes of the salvation of Judah with the destruction of Nineveh.

C. Nineveh must fall because of her sins.

Nahum has nothing to say about the sins of Judah, her judgment, or her future. He is entirely taken over by thoughts of the downfall of Nineveh. Nineveh's destruction is an act of God. God is judging this city because of her sins. Her sins are listed as: atrocities, idolatry, and commercialism. She has been a city of brutality, and thus would brutally be destroyed.

He chants the death-dirge for one of the world's greatest oppressors.

The Assyrian nation was known throughout the Middle Eastern world to be one of the cruelest of captors. The Hebrews had much experience with the iron rod of the Assyrians. Assyrian kings had invaded Israel for generations: Shalmanezar II in 842, Tiglath-Pileser III in 734, Shalmanezar IV and Sargon II in 724 722, Sennacherib in 701, and Esarhaddon in 672. With Assurbanipal, the worst was yet

to come. Ashurbanipal was noted for his exceptional cruelty. George L. Robinson writes,

Ashurbanipal boasts of his extreme violence and shameful atrocities: how he ruthlessly tore off the lips and limbs of kings, forced three captured rulers of Elam to drag his chariot through the streets, compelled a prince to wear around his neck the decapitated head of his king, and how he and his queen feasted in a garden with the head of a Chaldean monarch whom he had forced to commit suicide hanging from a tree above them. No other king even of Assyria ever boasts of such inhuman and atrocious barbarities.

The time was right for Assyria to fall. In exceptional poetic language Nahum prophecies that the atrocities which Assyria dealt but were about to be handed back to her in spades.

D. Vengeance belongs to God.

Nahum has been criticized for his gleeful expectation of the slaughter of Assyria. We must remember that Nahum saw Assyria's downfall as being the vindication of God's vengeance and God's sovereignty. Nahum is not stating his own personal hatred of the Assyrians, but he is mindful of the character of a jealous God who wishes to set things right.

Nahum demanded justice. He knew that the cruelty of the Assyrian nation could not go unpunished. Nahum 3:19 reads,

There is no assuaging your hurt, your wound is grievous.
All who hear the news of you clap their hands over you.
For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?
--Nahum 3:19, RSV

It was not his place to administer justice, but it was God's place. And justice would be administered:

'I am against you,' declares the Lord Almighty.
I will lift your skirts over your face.
I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame.
I will pelt you with filth, I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle.
All who see you will flee from you and say,
Nineveh is in ruins--who will mourn for her?'
Where can I find anyone to comfort you?
--Nahum 3:5-7, NIV

Habakkuk

THE PHILOSOPHER

Habakkuk 2:4. "But the righteous will live by his faith."

1. Title:

Meaning of Name: The book is named for its author, *Habaqqua*, the meaning of which is uncertain. Several have seen the meaning derived from the Hebrew *habaq*, "to embrace", while others are led by the Septuagint rendering, *Ambakoum* to believe the meaning to be an Assyrian garden plant called *hambapupu*. If Habakkuk's name is a foreign word, this would suggest a high degree of foreign influence on Judah at that time.

2. Author:

We have no information about Habakkuk as a person. No reference is mentioned of his genealogy or home, and his name is not identifiable with any known Hebrew root. He describes himself as "the prophet", a term also used by Haggai and Zechariah. Due to a lack of information about Habakkuk, men created stories about him. One rabbinic tradition states that Habakkuk is the son of the Shunamite woman in 2 Kings 4:16-ff. He is said to have fled to Egypt after Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

Another tradition associates Habakkuk with the watchman in Isaiah 21:6 because he stood on his tower (2:1). The Apocrypha mentions Habakkuk in Bel and the Dragon chapters 33-39 as being connected with the tribe of Levi. An angel of God carried Habakkuk to Babylon by his hair to supply Daniel with porridge when Daniel was in the lion's den. Another story in Bel and the Dragon says that Habakkuk was the son of Jesus of the tribe of Levi. Ralph L. Smith ties many of these traditions together in an attempt to identify Habakkuk. Smith writes:

This later tradition that Habakkuk was of the tribe of Levi, along with the fact that he is one of only three men in the Old Testament to be called a prophet in the superscription of his book, and the fact that he is presented as a prophet in the musical chapter (3:1) of his book, suggests that he may have been a Levite and a professional or temple prophet. Prophets and seers were musical near the end of the Old Testament period (1 Chr.25:1-8).³

Although this is an interesting conjecture, it does not really help us to identify who Habakkuk really was. The information is just not available to enable us to draw up a portrait of Habakkuk.

3. Date/History:

³ Ralph L. Smith, p. 93.

The book contains no date, but internal evidence (1:6) suggests a date after the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.) and perhaps after the battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.) when the Chaldeans defeated Assyria once and for all.

Habakkuk is the first prophet chronologically to write when the power in Syria-Palestine was shifting from the Assyrians to the Babylonians. The Babylonians (also known as the Chaldeans) were a tribe of Semites from Southern Babylonia who under the leadership of Nabopolassar freed themselves from Assyrian control in 625 B.C. With the assistance of the Medes and the Scythians, they destroyed Nineveh in 612 B.C.

When Nineveh fell, Josiah (640-609) was on the throne in Judah. Josiah was the grandson of Judah's most wicked king, Manasseh. Yet Josiah attempted to right the wrongs of his grandfather encouraging the worship of Yahweh while destroying the altars, shrines, and idols of the foreign gods. Upon the death of Ashurbanipal in Assyria (627) and Nabopolassar's rise to power in Babylon (626), Josiah began to reassert Judah's independence in Palestine. He reclaimed cities in the Northern Kingdom which were lost to Assyria at the fall of Samaria in 722.

Josiah's reform became more aggressive with the discovery of the Book of the Law in the Temple in 621 B.C. Josiah rededicated the Temple and celebrated a Passover that rivaled all the other Passover celebrations in Israel's history. The purging of the foreign influences and the foreign gods continued in the land. With the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., optimism swept through the land of Judah that had not been felt since the days of Solomon. But this optimism was to be short lived.

After the fall of Nineveh, a remnant of the Assyrian empire survived in Haran and attempted to fight off the coalition of Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians. Pharaoh Necho marched north from Egypt in 609 to aid the Assyrian forces against this coalition. King Josiah met Necho at the battle of Megiddo and attempted in vain to block his advance north losing his own life in the process. The battle of Megiddo in 609 crushed the Judean's hope for independence. The great reformer Josiah was now dead, and once again the nation of Judah had to recognize the supremacy of an invader.

Pharaoh Necho placed on the throne of Judah a puppet king, a son of Josiah named Jehoiakim. He then continued north to help the Assyrians in their attempt to defeat the Babylonians.

Battle lines were drawn at Carchemish on the banks of the Euphrates River. The Babylonian army was now led by Nebuchadnezzar (also known as Nebuchadnezzar in the Old Testament) the son of Nabopolassar who seems to have grown sick. In 606 B.C. the last of the Assyrian forces along with Pharaoh Necho were defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians at the battle of Carchemish. Carchemish marked a shift of power in the Middle East from Assyria to Babylon.

The Neo-Babylonian empire under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar took control of the nation of Judah. Jehoiakim was forced to recognize Babylon as their sovereign, and he sent costly tribute to his new master. It was not long before Nebuchadnezzar began to dismember the Kingdom of Judah. In 597 B.C. Jehoiachin and a number of artisans were exiled to Babylon. In 586 Jerusalem was attacked and the city and the temple were destroyed.

4. Major Themes:

A. Theme: Faith is tested through difficult and perilous times.

B. Evil is self-destructive.

Chapter 2:3-4 shows that though an evil individual or nation abides a short time he soon falls. For "though it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come" (2:3). The Chaldeans were blind to the fact that they were no more than a rod in God's hand. Jeremiah and Habakkuk were contemporaries. Jeremiah taught that the wickedness in God's own people would be punished, and Habakkuk taught that the wickedness of the Babylonians would not go unpunished.

C. Faith is the condition of life.

"The righteous shall live by faith" is quoted 3 times in the New Testament: Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; and Heb. 10:38. Faith, as used by Habakkuk, involves trust, steadfastness, and loyalty.

The faith of the righteous determines their destiny--abiding in life and surviving in judgment.

The faith of the righteous gives courage in times of despair. Certainly God's people faced times of despair throughout history. Yet God always delivered them in his time. Habakkuk's faith urges us to trust in God even in the most perilous of situations.

Prophets of Uncertain Date:

Obadiah

OBADIAH

THE PROPHET OF GOD'S VENGEANCE

1. Title:

This book is entitled Obade-Yah which means "servant of Yahweh."

2. Author:

“The vision of Obadiah” is the title contained in the first line of this book. The name Obade-Yah is shared by about a dozen men in the Old Testament, none of whom are related, or identified with this prophet. Obadiah thought of himself as a prophet, and lie ascribed his words to God (vss. 1, 4, 8, 18). We have no information about him in his book or in parallel passages in the Old Testament. As Peter C. Craigie has noted, "his message was preserved, but the medium remains unknown."⁴

3. Date/History:

The date is uncertain since no specific date is mentioned in the text itself and the circumstances discussed in reference to the calamity of Jerusalem (vv. 10-14) are difficult to pinpoint. However there are three possibilities: (1) ca. 850 B.C. after the capture and plundering of Jerusalem by the Philistines and Arabians in the reign of Jehoram; (2) around 597 B.C. after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar; or (3) around 400 B.C. after the community of Judah had reestablished itself and is once again becoming a threat in the Palestinian area.

However few commentators are dogmatic as to a time of origin. Peter C. Craigie has written, “Proposals with respect to the book's date have ranged from as early as the ninth century B.C. to as late as the fifth century B.C. With such disparity, it is clear that the internal evidence of the book, upon which hypotheses of date must be constructed, is thoroughly ambivalent.”⁵

Historical Context.

The content of the book of Obadiah is the nation of Edom. To understand Obadiah one has to understand the history of Edom and Israel. Edom means "red" or "ruddy". Edom was the name given to the territory south of the Dead Sea on both sides of the Wadi Arabah. This land had a particular reddish color to the soil due to the sandstone of the district. Today Edom is the territory that makes up the southern part of the kingdom of Jordan. Although it is bordered to the east by desert, its rainfall in the plateaus makes farming possible.

The Old Testament mentions that Edom was a descendent of Esau (Gen. 36:1, 8) the older twin brother of Jacob. The scriptures predicted that the descendants of these two brothers would have conflict and the Bible proved itself true.

⁴ Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, vol. I, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 195.

⁵ Peter C. Craigie, p. 195.

Archaeological digs have discovered evidence of occupation in the eastern region of Edom which date back to at least five hundred thousand years. Edom seems to have been settled and to have developed a monarchy before Israel. Edom prohibited Moses and the children of Israel from passing through her territory on the journey out of Egypt (Num. 20:14-21). Edom was a strategically important area in ancient Palestine because of a highway named the King's Highway (Num. 20:17), which ran through the eastern section of Edom.

Historically, Edom and Israel were always at odds. Early in the monarchy of Israel, Saul fought successfully against the Edomites gaining control of Edom (I Sam. 14:47). David's conquest was particularly bloody as he instituted the holy ban against the males of Edom and established a permanent army in their territory (I Kings 11:15-17; 11 Sam. 8:13-14). During Solomon's reign he was able to control the land of Edom and use the port of Ezion-geber to receive materials for his building projects (I Kings 9:26). During the reign of Jehoshaphat (c. 874-850 B.C.), Judah controlled Edom and also used the port of Ezion-geber (I Kings 22:47-49). Between 849 and 942 B.C. the Edomites were able to escape the rule of Israel during the reign of Jehoram. They set up a king of their own and maintained their independence for fifty or sixty years (2 Kings 8:20-22). Between 900 and 785 B.C. King Uzziah recaptured Edom and built the city of Elath in her territory. During the time of Ahaz (c. 734 B.C.) the Edomites again rose to power and defeated Judah reclaiming her territory and the city of Elath (II Kings 16:6). From this time onward Judah was unable to exercise control over Edom. Edom fell to the Assyrians in 732 B.C. and continued to be a vassal of the Assyrian empire until they fell to the Babylonians in the late seventh century.

When Nebuchadnezzar conquered Assyria he demanded loyalty from the Edomites and the other nations of the Syria-Palestine territory. Edom attended the conference of King Zedekiah of Judah when he attempted to unite surrounding nations against the Babylonians hoping to gain freedom. When King Zedekiah finally revolted against the Babylonians, Edom joined with the Babylonians to help squash the revolt. The Hebrew people would not easily forget how Edom helped in their defeat. When the Jews were deported to Babylon, it left the Edomites free to inhabit the abandoned land of the Jews. They fled into the land of Hebron which later was known as Idumea. During the fourth century B.C. the Edomite land was invaded by a group of Arabs, the Nabateans, leading to further migration of Edomites into Idumea. When the Maccabean wars for Jewish independence were fought in the second century B.C., Jewish armies gained control of Idumea and forced her inhabitants to convert to Judaism. Thus the writings of Obadiah came into fulfillment, "For the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off for ever" (Ob. 10).

4. Major Themes:

A. Purpose: This book is not so much a warning to Edom, as it is a consolation to Israel. The contrast is made between Edom, which would completely

fall, and the house of Jacob which would remain. In the final outcome, Yahweh would rule all nations from Zion.

B. Theme. The destruction of Edom and the restoration of Israel.

C. Length: Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament.

Israel and Edom had a long history of animosity before Obadiah ever penned his book. Was the book written with a vindictive voice? Was Obadiah seeking retribution from one of Israel's most hated enemies? Not really, the book runs much deeper than that.

Certainly Israel could have been seeking retribution from Edom. Edom should have been the older brother of Israel looking out for her good. Instead, Edom betrayed Israel in an attempt to win favor with the Babylonians. Obadiah writes, "For the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off for ever"(verse 10). The Jews believed that the Edomites helped the Babylonians to burn down the temple of Jerusalem. Israel had every reason to hate the Edomites.

But the Law taught that God would take care of the enemies of Israel. This was the central theological teaching of Obadiah. God would punish the enemies of Israel and exalt Israel above every nation on earth. Why would God do this? In the Semitic mind the power of a country represented the power of its God. As God exalted Israel, he would be exalted. All the nations would take notice of the power of Israel and see that her God was powerful.

Ultimately, God was claiming Edom as his own. He ruled her as he ruled every nation on the earth. If a nation did not see this Sovereignty of God and honor him, then they would be forced to acknowledge him. Obadiah 21 reads, "Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's." God was going to crush Edom, so that Edom and all the surrounding nations would know that he was king.

Joel

JOEL BEN PETHUEL

THE PROPHET OF ZION'S FUTURE

1. Title:

The book is attributed to Yoel son of Pethuel. His name is also that of twelve other men in the Old Testament and means "Yahweh is God."

2. Author:

The Bible states that “the Word of Yahweh came to Joel” (1:1), thus attributing the book to him. However, very little is known about the author except what can be gained from the book itself. We do know that Joel was “the son of Pethuel” although it is impossible to identify Pethuel.

3. Date/History:

Some scholars date Joel as a pre-exilic book. They believe that Joel is describing a situation in Jerusalem that existed before the exile. Jerusalem is viewed as being in a fairly stable situation (yet impending doom awaits the city). Douglas Stuart, author of *Hosea-Jonah* in the Word Biblical Commentary, writes:

Ultimately, however, any dating of the book of Joel can be only inferential and speculative. It is on the basis of the sorts of conditions apparently reflected in the prophecy that one assigns a tentative date. ...Our assumption is that Joel is a unified work composed under the circumstances of an invasion against the city of Jerusalem (and thus, of course, Judah) by Mesopotamian enemy forces, either Assyria or Babylonia. If this admittedly speculative assessment is correct, the words of the book would likely have been spoken on one of these occasions: the Assyrian invasion of 701 BC, the Babylonian invasion of 598 BC, or the Babylonian invasion of 588 BC.⁶

Not many scholars hold to a pre-exilic dating of Joel.

Most scholars believe the book of Joel was written after the exile. The book seems to be describing Jerusalem after the exile in Babylon. The temple (1:14) and the walls of the city (2:9) have been rebuilt. The worship of the cultus has been restored and the priests are once again the most prominent officials in the city (1:13). These conditions point to a post-exilic date sometime around the year 400 BC for the prophetic activity of Joel.

Around 538 B.C. the Jews returned from exile in Babylon to Judah and began rebuilding the temple of Jerusalem. In 520 B.C. Zerubbabel was sent to Jerusalem to govern the state of Judah as a Persian ambassador. Around this time a resurgence for the care of the temple was started by the prophet Haggai and continued through his predecessor Zechariah. In 515 B.C. the New Temple of Jerusalem was completed and it was dedicated before the people. During this time Persia was the dominant world power, and she controlled the area of Palestine. Around half a century after the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (464 B.C.), Nehemiah led the Jews to rebuild the walls surrounding the city of Jerusalem. At this time Artaxerxes I was the king of Persia. He was succeeded by Darius II in 423 B.C. who in turn was succeeded by Artaxerxes II in 404 B.C. The situation in Palestine remained relatively calm during the second half of the third century B.C. Persia controlled the land and

⁶ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 227.

brought some degree of stability. This condition persisted until the year 336 B.C. when Alexander the Great became the king of the Greek empire. He later destroyed the Persian empire in 332 B.C.

Joel prophesied during a time of political and economic calm for Judah. The people were not concerned with outside threats on their security. The sudden locust attack upon the land as described in Joel 1 and 2 came as a surprise. Joel used this situation to wake the people from their stupor. He compared the attack to the sudden coming of the day of the Lord--a day of destruction for God's enemies and a day of hope for God's faithful people.

4. Major Themes:

A. The Day of the Lord is a day of destruction and a day of hope.

B. The Day of the Lord is a Day of Judgment.

Joel uses a theme that is also used by Amos (the day of the Lord) and applies it to his situation. The Day of the Lord will not be a day of national restoration or a day of realized hope for Israel—instead it will be a day of punishment. Israel had rebelled against God. God's justice requires punishment for Israel's rebellion. The Day of the Lord would be the realization of this retribution. Joel 2:1-2 describes this day:

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy
mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land
tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming,
it is near,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick
darkness!

C. Repentance Can Avert Disaster

As has been noted above, the national disaster that awaited God's people in the *Yom Yahweh* (day of the Lord) could be averted through repentance. The repentance must not be an outward ceremonial repentance, but it must be true repentance of the heart. Joel 2:12-14 states:

"Yet even now," says the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments."

Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and he repents of evil.

Who knows whether he will not turn
and repent, and leave a blessing behind him,
a cereal offering and a drink offering
for the Lord, your God?

Repent or disaster will come. Repentance is urgent. So urgent that the nation is called to fast. When a solemn assembly is called, even the nursing mothers and newlyweds are expected to attend (Joel 2:15-16). If the nation will urgently repent, then not only will the disaster be averted, but God will take back his curse and bless the land. Repentance averts disaster and produces blessing.