



### PROSTITUTION

Gomer's involvement with "the world's oldest profession" is a reminder that prostitution has flourished throughout the centuries.

A few argue that prostitution serves a necessary social function and should be legalized. Most find it demeaning and degrading.

How should the law treat prostitutes, pimps and johns?

Are most prostitutes victimized and abused girls? Should they be treated with contempt, or with pity?

Hosea ben Beerī prophesied in the northern Kingdom of Israel from about 750 BCE to the period immediately before or after the fall of Samaria in 721. He witnessed the prosperous years before the death of Jeroboam II in 747 BCE, the crucial events during the Syro-Ephraimite War, and the incursions of the Assyrians into Israelite territory beginning in 733.

Hosea himself probably wrote one of the three or more collections of his oracles that were eventually preserved in southern Judah. Later editors compiled and modified these traditions.

#### A. *Hosea's Marriage*

1. *His Marriage to Gomer and the Naming of Their Children (1:2-11)*
2. *Hosea/Yahweh's Oracle of Divorce from Gomer/Israel... (2:1-13)*
3. *...and an Oracle of Restoration (2:14-23)*
4. *Their Remarriage (3:1-5)*

#### B. *First Set of Oracles*

1. *Indictment of False Priests (4:1-19)*
2. *Prophecies of Israel's Destruction (5:1-9:17)*
3. *Description of the Destruction (10:1-11:7)*
4. *Restoration Oracle for Israel (11:8-11)*

#### C. *Second Set of Oracles*

1. *Warning to Judah (11:12-2:6)*
2. *Warning to Israel (12:7-14)*
3. *Prophecy of Israel's Destruction (13:1-16)*
4. *Restoration Oracles for Judah (14:1-8, 9)*

### THE MARRIAGE METAPHOR

Yahweh called Hosea to marry Gomer, who was either a common whore or a cult prostitute or a maiden "initiated" into the Baal fertility religion. When she proved unfaithful he divorced her, but after a time of separation he remarried her.

The prophet interpreted this as a symbol of God's dealings with Israel. Because the people had proved unfaithful to Yahweh by worshiping the fertility Baals, he would destroy the nation. Yet after a time of privation he would restore them. The naming and renaming of Hosea's three children underscored the pattern of marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Hosea's understanding of the unfailing love of God was central to his message. He saw Israel's impending destruction as an expression of Yahweh's disappointed love. The time of judgment would be God's way of disciplining his people and bringing them to a fresh beginning. After destroying the monarchy which led Israel away from him, Yahweh would renew the ancient covenants with his people and continue to be the lord of their land.

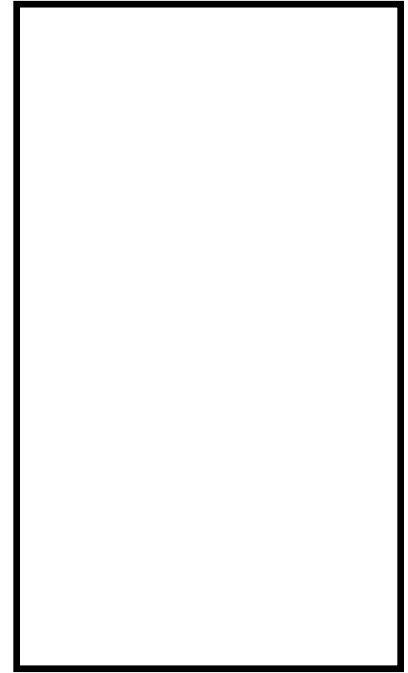
## **A STUNNING EFFECT**

Hosea's marriage metaphor was the boldest of a series of striking similes calculated to shock the people into reassessing God's relationship with them. He also described Yahweh as a physician, a fowler, a lion, a leopard, a she-bear, dew, a tree, pus or a moth, and rottenness.

He saw Israel as a sick person, a herd, a flighty dove, a balky heifer, a wild ass, a grapevine, wine of Lebanon, an early fig, a lily, a woman in labor, an unborn son, an over-baked cake, a slack bow, early morning mist and dew, and blown chaff.

## **THE WORLD NEEDS LOVE**

Modern readers can use Hosea's ministry to assess the real nature of love. Love is not so much an emotional affection as it is a very determined way of acting. This kind of prophetic "tough love" is not afraid to judge wrongdoing, nor is it too self-centered to try just about anything in order to restore a wrongdoer. It recognizes that it may be necessary for us to destroy false structures in order to release new possibilities for life together.





**WARMING OF THE EARTH**

Joel pictured the world's destruction in terms of a plague of locusts and the famine which would follow.

Today scientists warn of the potentially destructive effects of a similar natural process, the warming of the earth.

How seriously should we take these warnings about climate change?

What steps should we take to keep the earth's ecological systems in balance?

Are people willing to make the sacrifices necessary to counter the warming trend?

Nothing is known about the prophet Joel ben Pethuel other than that he no doubt ministered in Jerusalem sometime around 400 BCE, during the Persian period. His oracles indicate that the destruction of Jerusalem, the return from the Exile, and the rebuilding of the temple and city wall are events in the past.

His message was instigated by a plague of locusts which must have devastated the land. He saw it as an example of Yahweh's judgment upon his complacent people, and called upon them to repent. The fasting of the worshipping community would be seen as a turning point after which Yahweh would restore his people and help them prosper.

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*Superscription (1:1)*

- A. *First Description of Locust Plague*
    - 1. *Call to hear (1:2-3)*
    - 2. *Description of plague (1:4)*
    - 3. *Call for a lament (1:5-14)*
    - 4. *Lament fragments (1:15-18, 19-20)*
  - B. *Second Description of Locust Plague*
    - 1. *Cry of alarm at Plague-invasion (2:1-11)*
    - 2. *Call for repentance (2:12-14)*
    - 3. *Call for a day of fasting (2:15-17)*
  - C. *First Set of Restoration Oracles*
    - 1. *Promise of relief (2:18-20)*
    - 2. *Song of rejoicing (2:21-24)*
    - 3. *Promise of relief (2:25-27)*
    - 4. *Oracles on the Day of Yahweh (2:28-32 / 3:1-5)*
  - D. *Second Set of Restoration Oracles*
    - 1. *Judgment on the nations (3:1-3 / 4:1-3)*
    - 2. *...on Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia (3:4-8 / 4:4-8)*
    - 3. *Summons to battle (3:9-15 / 4:9-15)*
    - 4. *Restoration of Mount Zion (3:16-18 / 4:6-18)*
    - 5. *Vengeance for Judah (3:19-21 / 4:19-21)*
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**ORACLES IN SYMMETRY : BLENDED AND CHALLENGING**

It is difficult to determine whether the present form of the book is due to the prophet's own composition or whether later editors have reshaped Joel's oracles. In either event the book displays a striking symmetry:

call for attention	1:2-3	2:18	turn to repentance
plague of locusts	1:4-14	2:25-27	rescue from locusts
agricultural distress	1:15-20	2:19-24	agricultural bounty
invasion of armies	2:1-9	3:1-4, 9-14	preparation for war
cosmic convulsions	2:10-11	3:15-17	safety from distress
call for repentance	2:12-17	3:5-8	gift of the spirit



**CHURCH AND STATE**

Amos raises questions about how the church should address social issues today.

May the church or its clergy speak to political and social matters?

If so, what sort of issues are fair game? Taxes? Racial relations? Voting rights? State and national budgets? Economic policies? Military affairs?

Or does the “separation of church and state” mean that religious groups must stay out of politics and concentrate solely on “spiritual” things?

Amos was a native of southern Judah who ministered around 760 BCE in northern Israel, probably at the capital city of Samaria and the sanctuary at Bethel. Although he came from a rural background, rather than from prophetic or priestly circles, his oracles were the first to be collected and preserved as a separate book.

Some of the materials, such as the vision accounts and oracles of judgment, may have been written by the prophet himself. Oracles urging repentance and the biographical fragment may have been recorded by later followers. They would have been preserved in Judah around 620 BCE at the time of Josiah’s reforms. During the Exile later editors compiled the book in its present form and added other materials, such as the title, the hymn-like fragments, and the final restoration oracles.

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*Superscription (1:1, 2)*

- A. *A Sermon against the Nations and Israel*
  - 1. *Damascus (1:3-5)*
  - 2. *Gaza (1:6-8)*
  - 3. *Tyre (1:9-10)*
  - 4. *Edom (1:11-12)*
  - 5. *Ammon (1:13-15)*
  - 6. *Moab (2:1-3)*
  - 7. *Judah (2:4-5)*
  - 8. *Israel! (2:6-16)*
- B. *Oracles of Judgment against Israel*
  - 1. *Announcements of the coming punishment (3:1-15)*
  - 2. *Indictments for failing to repent (4:1-12, 13)*
  - 3. *Calls to seek Yahweh and life (5:1-7, 8-9, 10-15)*
- C. *Woes against Israel*
  - Introduction (5:16-17)*
  - 1. *Warnings against religious presumption (5:18-27)*
  - 2. *Warnings against scandalous living (6:1-10)*
  - Conclusion (6:11-14)*
- D. *Amo’ Five Visions and Related Oracles*
  - 1. *The Locusts; the Fire; the Plumb Line (7:1-3, 4-6, 7-9)*
  - 2. *Prophetic legend fragment: Amos vs. Amaziah (7:10-17)*
  - 3. *The Basket of Summer Fruit (8:1-3, 4-14)*
  - 4. *Yahweh by the Altar (9:1-4, 5-6)*
- E. *Oracles of Restoration*
  - 1. *Concerning Israel (9:7-10)*
  - 2. *Concerning Judah (9:11-15)*

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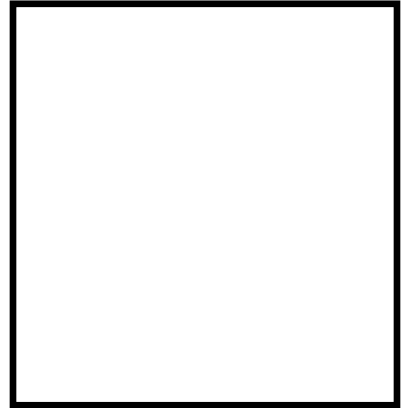
**A CALL FOR JUSTICE**

At a time when the Assyrian Empire was ruled by a series of weak kings, Jeroboam II expanded the borders of northern Israel into Syrian territory. The nobility and merchant classes prospered, and with them the religious institutions, often at the expense of the small farmers and land owners and poorer classes. In the style of a teacher of wisdom, Amos condemned the prospering classes for victimizing the poor. He warned them against relying on their cherished legal and cultic traditions and called for a return to basic justice and righteous dealings.

## **A MODERN AGENDA**

The issues of justice and fair play are part of the modern agenda. People today must still hear Amos' insistence that we treat the marginal members of our society with respect and that we protect their rights. According to the opening sermon, the demand for justice in one's own country is rooted in the divine claim for all the world.

If in our society the "have's" can mask their conspicuous consumption with a veneer of liturgical spectacle and can use religion for justifying their oppression of the "have not's," then we will have lost our integrity, and we will be headed on a downward slide to political oblivion.





## NUCLEAR ARMS

In modern times the most serious threat to international peace and the most devastating weapon of hatred has been the arsenal of atomic bombs and nuclear weapons stockpiled throughout the world.

How real is that threat?  
If nuclear war were to erupt, where would it likely occur? Who would have a chance to escape?

Can the presence of nuclear weapons enforce peace between nations?

What are some of the ethical choices modern citizens must make?

Could the use of nuclear arms ever be justified?  
As a defensive weapon?  
As a second-strike retaliation? As a first-strike offensive?

## OBADIAH A CASE FOR FRATRICIDE

The otherwise unknown prophet with the not uncommon name Obadiah or “Server of Yahweh” seems to have ministered in Judea shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Some scholars have suggested an earlier date, such as the revolt of Edom against Judah around 850; others as late as the 5<sup>th</sup> century when Arab tribes forced the Edomites out of their homeland.

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*Title (v. 1a)*

*Audition to a Summons for Battle (v. 1b)*

- A. *Oracles of the Destruction of Edom ( cf. Jer. 49:7-12)*
1. *A description of the impending destruction (vv. 2-9)*
  2. *Reasons for this retribution (vv. 10-16)*
- B. *Oracles of the Restoration of Judah (vv. 17-21)*
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## AN ANCIENT RIVALRY AND HATRED

The oracles of Obadiah must be understood against the background of the traditional animosity between Jacob/Israel and Esau/Edom. The prophet lamented the fact that the Israelites’ brother nation had participated in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Basing his hopes on the doctrine of divine retribution in “the Day of the Lord,” Obadiah looked forward to a time when the situation would be reversed: Edom will be destroyed and Judah-Jerusalem will be restored to a leading position.

This kind of saving hope, which may have been repeated at annual cultic observances of the Fall of Jerusalem, served to sustain the survivors during their years of adversity.

## MODERN POLITICS

Modern readers may feel uneasy about the tone of pure hate in such a sharp and bitter polemic. It helps to realize that the ultimate issue was about God’s sovereignty over all nations. We can still assess our present-day international political realities from the viewpoint that our nation dare not act as though we are a law unto ourselves, devoid of compassion and inconsiderate of our neighbors’ sensibilities.

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# JONAH

## A FISH AND A SHADE TREE



Unlike the other Minor Prophets, the book of Jonah is not a collection of prophetic oracles. Rather, it is a short story about a prophet. Unlike other prophetic legends, such as those about Elijah and Elisha, it does not exalt its hero.

Popular themes from folk literature, such as the fish which swallows a man, a psalm of thanksgiving, the legendary size and wickedness of Nineveh, the rapidly growing plant, and the prophet's desire to die, are skillfully combined in a story which shows that God's mercy extends to all people, even to the Gentiles.

The style of its language, its legendary features, and its universalistic outlook suggest that Jonah was written after the Exile, probably from 500 to 200 BCE, even though the central figure is linked with the historical Jonah ben Amittai who ministered in the mid-700s (2 Kings 14:25).

### RACISM

Jonah's prejudice against the foreign Assyrians almost kept him from fulfilling his prophetic calling. Today racial prejudice still demeans minority populations.

What role must Bible-believing people play in combating racism?

How has the church contributed to racist attitudes in the past?

Are such racist notions still present? If so, are we victims or perpetrators?



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#### A. *First Episode: Jonah Flees from God's Mission*

1. *Jonah refuses God's call and flees by ship (1:1-3)*
2. *He is thrown overboard in a storm (1:4-16)*
3. *Yahweh rescues him with a fish (1:17-2:10)*

*Jonah's Psalm of Thanksgiving (2:2-9)*

#### B. *Second Episode: Jonah Follows God's Mission*

1. *Jonah accepts the call to preach in Nineveh (3:1-5)*
2. *The Ninevites repent and God spares them (3:6-10)*
3. *Jonah becomes angry because the city is spared (4:1-5)*
4. *...and because his shade plant dies (4:6-10)*

*Moral: God takes pity on Nineveh (4:9-10)*

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### A UNIVERSALISTIC PERSPECTIVE

The two carefully balanced scenes and the delightfully ironic tone of the narrative mark this as a skillfully written short story. The improbabilities that heathen sailors would offer a burnt offering on board ship or that a pagan king would repent after a five-minute sermon add to its humorous impact. The closing verses, with the Lord's unanswered question, force readers to conclude that Jonah was wrong in refusing to preach to Nineveh and in being angry because God forgave that non-Jewish city.

This emphasis on the universal scope of God's mercy served as an antidote to times when many Jews had become intolerant and arrogant towards heathen people. The book hints that the purpose of God's people is to share the covenant blessings with the heathen. Thus in each episode the Lord's prophet saves the Gentiles. First he delivers the heathen sailors by being thrown overboard, and then he delivers the heathen city by his preaching.

The gentle ironies in this story still challenge us modern readers to critique our own prejudices, especially against foreigners and outsiders, and to assess our own understanding of the proper relationship between mercy and justice.



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**HOUSING FOR THE HOMELESS**

Micah castigated the wealthy landowners who seized others' houses. Today growing populations of homeless people do not have adequate housing.

What responsibility does the church have for making decent housing available?

How can economic forces be set in motion to enable landlords to upgrade sub-standard living quarters?

Do poor renters have rights that should be protected by law?

Micah lived in the farming town and military outpost of Moresheth, halfway between Jerusalem and the Philistine city of Gath. Most of his oracles originated during the reign of King Hezekiah, around 712-700 BCE. At that time Jerusalem's repressive economic and social policies, the dishonesty of the judges, priests and rulers, and their idolatry and immorality nearly turned all of Judah away from Yahweh.

During his career Micah witnessed the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 721 BCE, the enemy's invasion of Judah in 711, and Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701. Although Micah's predictions that Jerusalem would fall were not fulfilled in his lifetime, it appears that Hezekiah heeded his warnings and initiated the kind of religious reforms which helped stave off disaster.

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*Superscription (1:1)*

A. *First Collection of Oracles*

1. *Law Suit against Samaria and Jerusalem (1:2-7)*
2. *Lament for Micah's countryside (1:8-16)*
3. *Woe on evildoers (2:1-5, 6-11)*
4. *Restoration of the remnant (2:12-13)*

B. *Second Collection of Oracles*

1. *Judgment on rulers and prophets (3:1-4, 5-8, 9-12)*
2. *Restoration in the latter days (4:1-5, 6-8; Is 2:2-4)*
3. *Reversal of Jerusalem's fortunes (4:9-10, 11-13, 5:1-4)*
4. *Future restoration (5:5-6, 7-9, 10-15)*

C. *Third Collection of Oracles*

1. *Prophetic Law Suit (6:1-16)*
  - a. *The prophet's summons (6:1-2)*
  - b. *Yahweh's charge (6:3-5)*
  - c. *The people's reply (6:6-8)*
  - d. *Yahweh's verdict (6:9-16)*
2. *Liturgy of Repentance and Restoration (7:1-20)*
  - a. *A communal lament (7:107)*
  - b. *A dialogue promising salvation (7:8-10, 11-13, 14, 15-17, 18-20)*

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**A PATTERN OF JUDGMENT AND SALVATION**

Micah may have been influenced by other prophetic traditions, including those of his predecessor Amos and his contemporary Isaiah. His oracles were probably collected either by himself or by a close disciple.

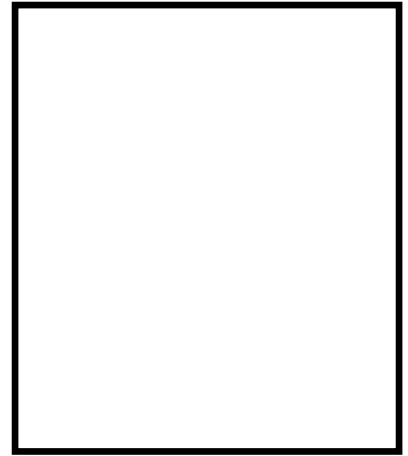
After the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, later editors living in Judea carefully arranged Micah's oracles in their present series of three groups, each with a pattern alternating between doom and salvation.

Materials dating from the century after Micah were added to the collection in order that Micah's 8th century prophecies about the Assyrian crisis could be relevant in the 6th century after the Babylonian crisis.

The judgment oracles are based on a strict law of retribution: the punishment will fit the crime. Here the focus is on such typical social sins as oppression, corruption and injustice. Guilt is placed on the leaders of the people and on the capital city itself. Divine punishment will come at the hands of the nation's enemies.

The promises of future restoration envision a time when Yahweh will gather his dispersed people, lead them back to their home, and reign over them in an age marked by universal prosperity.

The liturgical form of several portions of the book suggests we could use it in our worshiping communities, especially when we see ourselves as standing somewhere between God's judgment and salvation.



## NAHUM GOD'S CLOUT



Little is known of the prophet Nahum of Elkosh except that he must have ministered in Jerusalem sometime between the fall of Thebes (the capital of Upper Egypt) to the Assyrians in 663 BCE and the fall of Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) to the Babylonian armies under Nabopolassar in 612. Whether his oracles should be dated as early as Manasseh's supposed revolt against Assyria around 650, or later at the time of Nineveh's fall, is not clear.

Nahum was probably a cult prophet associated with the temple in Jerusalem. His poetic descriptions of the fall of Nineveh are a dramatic testimony to the nationalistic belief in Yahweh's power and determination to protect his people and destroy their enemies.

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### *Superscriptions (1:1)*

- A. *Acrostic Poem on Yahweh's Power (1:2-11 ?)*
- B. *Oracles of Encouragement for Judah and Doom for Assyria (1:12-2:2)*
- C. *Taunt Songs over Nineveh's Destruction*
  - 1. *Poetic description of the siege of Nineveh (2:3-12)*
  - 2. *Prophecy of Nineveh's destruction (2:13-3:4)*
  - 3. *Comparison of Nineveh with Thebes (3:5-12)*
  - 4. *Ironic boast over Fallen Nineveh (3:13-19)*

### REVENGE

Vengeance against one's enemies is a basic principle in the world of international relations.

Is this still a viable approach for modern countries today?

Or should our national policy promote strategies other than armed retaliation?

Are we as individuals ever justified in avenging ourselves if we are wronged?

Is there a difference between defending oneself and getting revenge?

### NATIONALISTIC ENTHUSIASM

This book has a double title, its alphabetical poem is incomplete, and some of the oracles of warning and encouragement are mixed together. These facts indicate that a later editor compiled the oracles of the otherwise unknown Nahum. Some have suggested that the later editor could have been one of the nationalistic prophets who were opposed by such voices as Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

In any event, the poem celebrating Yahweh's power could have been appropriately recited during worship at the temple. In fact, the entire book has a "musical" structure which centers on 2:10, a key verse summarizing the utter destruction and ruin Yahweh brings upon his enemies.

The prophet was concerned not so much with human vengeance as much as with divine justice. This was his way of interpreting the shift in international power in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and it has proven helpful in assessing the rise and fall of nations during the many centuries since then.

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## HABAKKUK WHY? OR WHY NOT?



Little is known about Habakkuk or the time and circumstances of his ministry. The reference to the Chaldeans suggests he prophesied in the southern Kingdom of Judah between 625 BCE, when the Babylonians revolted against Assyria, and 612, when the Assyrian capital of Nineveh was destroyed by the Medes and the Babylonians.

In that case, the oppressors, about whom the prophet complained and against whom the woes were directed, would have been the Assyrians. Others have suggested that they were wicked Jews within the kingdom, or the Egyptians around 609-697, or the Babylonians themselves, or even the Greeks under Alexander the Great after 330 BCE.

### CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Habakkuk complains that wicked people are not punished, that the criminal justice system does not work fairly.

Is this a valid complaint today?

How effectively can the police, the courts, and the penal systems promote social justice and fair play?

What must we do to further the cause?

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#### A. *The Prophet's Audition with Yahweh*

1. *1<sup>st</sup> Complaint: How can a just God allow the wicked to go unpunished? (1:2-4)*
2. *Yahweh's Answer: The Chaldeans will be God's instrument of punishment. (1:5-11) (1:12-21)*
3. *2<sup>nd</sup> Complaint: How can God allow a heathen nation to prosper? /*
4. *Yahweh's Answer: In the end only the righteous, not the treacherous, will live. (2:2-5)*

#### B. *Five Woe Sayings by the Oppressed People*

1. *Against those who plunder nations (2:6-8)*
2. *Against those who prosper through evil (2:9-11)*
3. *Against those who prosper through iniquity (2:12-14)*
4. *Against those who oppress their neighbors (2:15-17)*
5. *Against those who worship idols (2:18-19)*  
*— a liturgical interlude (2:20)*

#### C. *The Prophet's Psalm-like Prayer*

1. *A theophany of Yahweh, who destroys the enemy (3:2-15)*
  2. *The patience of the prophet and/or the people (3:16-19)*
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### THE PROBLEM OF INJUSTICE

Habakkuk wrestled with the problem of Yahweh's apparent injustice: How can an almighty and righteous God permit evil to prosper? The non-answer was a summons to patient endurance, coupled with the conviction that eventually God will rescue his people by destroying their oppressors.

The liturgical editing of this book indicates it was to be used in a worship setting. Its subsequent use in the Second Temple and synagogues continued to encourage God's people to be faithful and patient in spite of oppression. Such faith was strengthened by the remembrance of Yahweh's saving acts from Mt. Sinai to the conquest of Canaan.

Modern readers continue to be perplexed by injustice in our world and the random course of the universe, and so we need to recognize that there are no satisfying answers to such frustration.

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### ISSUES IN URBAN LIVING

Zephaniah graphically pictures the destruction of the chief cities of the nations that fail to live up to God's norms.

Over the centuries cities have often had the reputation—in contrast with the pastoral countryside—of being unsavory sources of wickedness.

Is such a depiction fair today?

What are some of the typical problems of people who live in urban areas?

What are some of the unique advantages?

How can the issues of modern cities best be addressed?

## ZEPHANIAH DOOM FOR US, DOOM FOR THEM

Zephaniah ben Cushi ministered to Jerusalem and Judah during the reign of King Josiah, chiefly during the decade before 621 BCE when attempts were begun to reform Judean religious practices in accordance with Deuteronomic principles.

It is possible that the descriptions of “the Day of Yahweh” were influenced by the raid of ruthless Scythian invaders who (according to Herodotus) swept across Assyria and Palestine between 632 and 625 BCE. Zephaniah's oracles were directed against the deterioration of the worship of Yahweh that accompanied the continuing influence of Assyria.

Under Josiah's ancestor Manasseh, astrological and magical practices associated with the Mesopotamian mother-goddess, or “Queen of Heaven,” had seriously corrupted Israelite religion. Zephaniah directed his appeal to “the humble” in the land in the hopes that they would lead the movement for renewal in the nation.

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#### *Superscription (1:1)*

- A. *Warnings about “The Day of Yahweh”*
  - 1. *Warnings of destruction (1:2-13)*
  - 2. *Description of “the Day of Yahweh” (1:14-18)*
  - 3. *Call for repentance (2:1-4)*
- B. *Oracles against the Nations*
  - 1. *against Philistia (2:5-7)*
  - 2. *against Moab and Ammon (2:8-11)*
  - 3. *against Ethiopia (2:12)*
  - 4. *against Assyria (2:13-15)*
- C. *Oracles of Judgment and Salvation*
  - 1. *Woe on Jerusalem (3:1-5)*
  - 2. *Yahweh's threat of judgment... (3:6-7)*
  - 3. *...call for repentance... (3:8)*
  - 4. *...and promise of restoration (3:9-13)*
  - 5. *Hymn of thanksgiving (3:14-17)*
  - 6. *Oracle of salvation (3:18-20)*

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### INTEGRITY IN WORSHIP

In reaction to his people's idolatry, Zephaniah emphasized the eschatological judgment which Yahweh would inflict upon them and the entire world. But he also understood that if salvation follows punishment, then the salvation must also be universal in scope.

By focusing on the demand for integrity in worship, Zephaniah's oracles can still challenge us as modern readers to assess the quality of our own commitments, religious or otherwise.



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## HAGGAI BUILDING PLANS



The prophet Haggai ministered in 520 BCE to the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, to their governor Zerubbabel, and to their high priest Joshua. Whether Haggai was an old man who had seen the first temple and whether he had arrived with the returnees or only later cannot be determined. Haggai's four oracles are enclosed within precisely dated narrative materials, which suggests that his words were written and collected by an anonymous disciple.

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- A. *First Oracle, in late summer*
1. *"The lack of prosperity is due to the people's reluctance to build the temple." (1:1-6, 7-11) (1:12-15)*
  2. *Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people began to rebuild the temple. /*
- B. *Second Oracle, two months later*
1. *"The new temple will be more splendid than the first." (2:1-9)*
- C. *Third Oracle, two months later*
1. *"The people had not prospered because their temple was 'unclean'...." (2:10-13)*
  2. *"...but now that the foundation is laid they will be blessed." (2:1-15)*
- D. *Fourth Oracle, the same day*
1. *"The foreign nations will destroy themselves, (2:20-23) and Zerubbabel will be Yahweh's chosen ruler."*
- 

### CHURCH BUILDINGS

Throughout the world billions of dollars have been spent building churches, synagogues, cathedrals and temples.

Is such an expense justified? Why should the people of God invest their resources in real estate?

Should we not rather spend our money in sharing the message of faith and in helping the poor and victims of injustice?

Do we need elaborate houses of worship? Or should we encourage simplicity?

### ENCOURAGEMENT TO BUILD

The obvious purpose of Haggai's oracles was to encourage those who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Apparently he was largely successful, for elsewhere he was remembered as being involved in its construction (Ezra 4:24-5:2, 6:13-15).

This rebuilding took place within a few years after the Babylonian empire was defeated by the Persians under Darius I. Haggai's oracles therefore reflected the hopes that in the general upheaval Judah would regain its independence under a Davidic ruler such as Zerubbabel (cf. Jer. 22:24-27) and that the temple in Jerusalem would be the focus of renewed worship and tribute.

The laying of the foundation was seen as a symbol of the people's repentance and rededication and therefore a guarantee of their ultimate prosperity. Haggai thus blended political actions with eschatological hopes.

As modern readers we can recognize how important it is for us to have a building in order to feel as though we are really worshiping. At the same time, we need to evaluate the legitimacy of pinning our future hopes on any building.

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## **ZECHARIAH**

### **VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

The book of Zechariah is difficult to understand not only because its strange visions and predictions cannot always be matched with specific historical events, but also because the two halves of the book, sometimes called Proto- and Deutero-Zechariah, are quite different in their origins and outlook

#### **ZECHARIAH'S PRO-PRIEST POSITION**

Zechariah ben Berechiah ministered in Jerusalem about 520-518 BCE and later. He was remembered as a priest and, with Haggai, as a prophet who encouraged the Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon to rebuild the temple. His visions and oracles (in chs. 1-8) supported the authority of Jerusalem's priestly leaders and suggested the ultimate success of the community depended upon their renewed and purified worship. Zechariah appropriated the language of the "second Exodus," that is, the return from exile in the recent past, and projected it into the future as a hope for eschatological salvation. This reshaping accounts for the shift from exalting Zerubbabel to focusing on Joshua and then on a future messiah.

#### **FUTURE APOCALYPTIC PREDICTIONS**

The second half of Zechariah consists of two collections of oracles which tend to be more apocalyptic in tone. In the first section (chs. 9-11) ambiguous historical references from the recent past have been reapplied to the indefinite future. The second section (chs. 12-14) reflects a loose progression from judgment to salvation to the new Jerusalem. Both collections reflect a viewpoint which was antagonistic to the official priestly circles and which emphasized the ethical demands of the pre-exilic prophets.

Although these oracles are anonymous and impossible to date precisely, they no doubt originated around 300 BCE during the Greek period, or even as late as 170 BCE in the Maccabean period. Later editors added them to the book of Zechariah because they continued and corrected his teachings about the future of God's worshipping people.

#### **AN OPTIMISTIC ATTITUDE**

Although two or more separate sources have been joined within the one book of Zechariah, its two halves are not entirely different. Several themes are common to both sections:

- special protection for Jerusalem,
- a return of paradise-like fertility,
- a renewal of the ancient covenants,
- judgment on the nations,
- their eventual conversion to worship Yahweh,
- the assembling of the exiles,
- a change in worship rites,
- an outpouring of God's spirit, and
- the triumph of a humble messiah.

Modern readers will note how Zechariah reinterprets old traditions within an optimistic orientation toward the future, but without abandoning a serious concern for ethics. This reorientation affects the way we do our worshipping and therefore the way we treat each other in society.

#### **AGRICULTURE**

Ancient prophets often envisioned a glorious future for their people in which the land would produce bountiful crops.

How has modern agriculture been able to produce surpluses of food?

Do national policies encourage or discourage farmers and ranchers?

What scientific methods enhance production?

How can we guarantee continued abundances of food?

And what, if any-thing, should we do to guarantee an equitable distribution of food throughout the world?

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*Zechariah's Call Oracle (1:1-6)*

*A. Nocturnal Visions about the Rebuilding of the Temple*

1. *A man on a red horse (1:7-17)* *divine protection*
2. *Four horns and four smiths (1:18-21)* *defense from the nations*
3. *A man with a measuring line (2:1-13)* *defense from the nations*
4. *Joshua before the angel (3:1-10)* *messianic figures*
5. *A lampstand and two olive trees (4:1-14)* *messianic figures*
6. *A flying scroll (5:1-4)* *purification from evil*
7. *A woman in a Basket (5:5-11)* *purification from evil*
8. *Four chariots (6:1-8)* *divine protection*

*B. Oracles about the Future of Jerusalem*

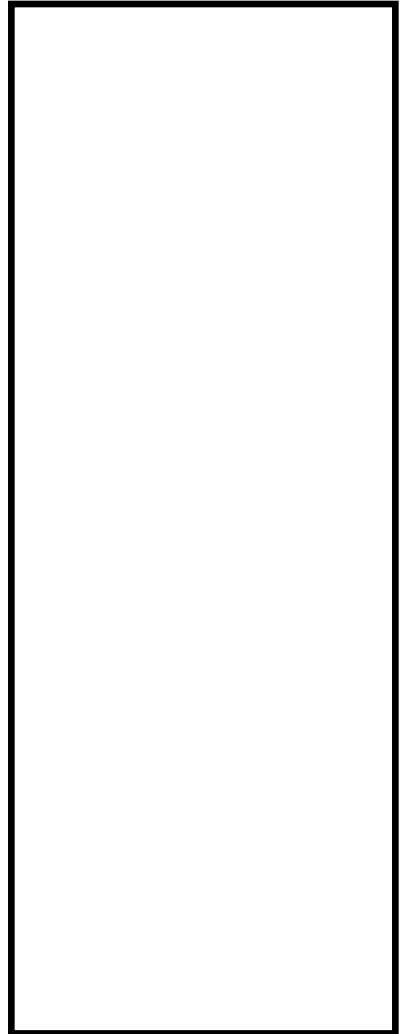
1. *The coronation of Joshua (and/or Zerubbabel?) (6:9-14,15)*
2. *The question of the annual fast (7:1-3,4-7)*
3. *The priority of kindness and mercy (7:8-14)*
4. *Ten sayings on the future peace of Jerusalem (8:1-17)*
5. *The end of fasting: God is with you (8:18-23)*

*C. Oracles about the Protection of Judah*

1. *Yahweh's judgment upon enemy nations (9:1-8)*
2. *Yahweh's rule over a restored Jerusalem (9:9-10:2)*
3. *The people's rescue from wicked shepherds (10:3-11:3)*
4. *The allegory of the bad and good shepherds (11:4-17)*

*D. Apocalyptic Oracles about the Future of Judah*

1. *The victory and purification of Judah (12:1-13:6)*
  2. *The scattering of the shepherd's sheep (13:7-9)*
  3. *Future restoration in "the Day of the Lord" (14:1-20)*
- 



## MALACHI THE FINAL QUIZ



Each of the six sections of Malachi begins with an accusation by Yahweh, continues with the people's questioning reply, and then concludes with the prophet's argument.

### APATHY

Laxity and apathy are two of the most discouraging forces any organization can face.

What are the signs of apathy in our own religious groups? In our national and social institutions?

What can we do to accent the positive and call people back to more enthusiastic participation?

The book of Malachi contains a series of oracles by an anonymous prophet, designated simply as "my messenger," who preached to the post-exilic Jewish community centered in Jerusalem sometime after the reestablishment of the temple in 515 BCE but before 445 and the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, perhaps during the reign of the Persian emperor Xerxes I (486-464).

Later editors added these oracles, together with two other collections of anonymous oracles (Zech 9-11, 12-14) to the collection of prophetic writings. Perhaps they also added the final verses (4:4-6) as a conclusion to the entire Book of the Twelve.

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#### *Superscription (1:1)*

- A. *First Oracle: An Affirmation of Yahweh's Love (1:2-5)*
- B. *Second Oracle: A Denunciation of the Priesthood*
  - 1. *for profaning the offerings (1:6-14)*
  - 2. *for failing to instruct the people (2:1-9)*
- C. *Third Oracle: A Denunciation of the Jewish Men*
  - 1. *for marrying foreign wives (2:10-12)*
  - 2. *for divorcing their Jewish wives (2:13-16)*
- D. *Fourth Oracle: An Announcement of Yahweh's Judgment*
  - 1. *upon the priests and Levites (2:17-3:4)*
  - 2. *upon the immoral people (3:5)*
- E. *Fifth Oracle: A Call for Payment of the Tithes (3:6-12)*
- F. *Sixth Oracle: A Promise for the Repentant*
  - 1. *the people's sin (3:13-15)*
  - 2. *the people's response (3:16 in narrative form)*
  - 3. *Yahweh's promise of restoration (3:17-4:3)*

*Closing Exhortation and Promise (4:4, 5-6)*

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### ANTIDOTE TO LAXITY

Malachi ministered at a time scarcely two generations after the second temple had been built but when many of the people had become lax in their worship. They had succumbed to the combined pressures of foreign domination, economic depression, careless worship and religious doubting. The prophet preached repentance and addressed the Zadokite or Aaronide priesthood, the general populace, and especially the doubters. Apparently by using the Deuteronomic law as his guide, his purpose was to call them back to proper worship and behavior. He combined nationalistic hopes for prosperity centered on the temple with older prophetic concerns for the marginal and oppressed members of society.

Modern readers can identify with the common experience of ennui and laxity which can overtake institutions and movements after their early enthusiasm has evaporated. We too, can sense the need for tackling the everyday, mundane questions which must be answered in order to enable us to settle in for the long haul.

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