SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

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Volume 6

Hosea - Malachi

by
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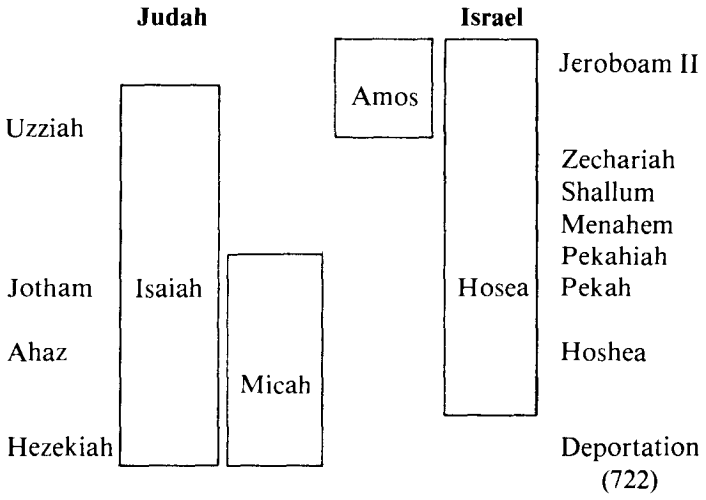
Hosea

1. A Prophetic Condemnation of the Counterreformation

Rebellions and regicides. The section of the Bible known as the "Minor Prophets" opens with a fair-sized book generally attributed to the prophet Hosea, who, like his younger contemporary Amos, went about his work in the *northern kingdom*. To understand the book of Hosea, we must know something about the period in which this prophet lived. Hosea tells us that he prophesied during the time of the following kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1).

Hosea witnessed the last flickerings of the northern kingdom under the great Jeroboam II but also lived to see a series of rebellions and regicides after the murder of Zechariah, the son of Jeroboam, who reigned for only six months. Shallum, his murderer, was crowned king but was murdered himself a month later. Menahem was king for ten years and paid tribute to Assyria. His son Pekahiah was murdered after a reign of two years. Pekah, who ruled for 20 years, was anti-Assyrian. Then came Hoshea. After

he ruled for nine years, Samaria was captured by Assyria and its inhabitants were deported.



A chip on the waters. The dynasty of Jehu, from which Jeroboam II had sprung, ceased to exist after the fourth generation. God's Word spoken through the mouths of the prophets had been fulfilled (II Kings 10:30; 15:12). Hadn't Amos prophesied: "I will rise against the *house* of Jeroboam with the sword"? (Amos 7:9).

The murder of Zechariah, the last king in Jehu's line, inaugurated a period of palace revolutions. Hence the prophet Hosea complained on the Lord's behalf:

> They made kings, but not through me.
> They set up princes, but without my knowledge (8:4).

There was nothing for Hosea to do but announce the impending destruction of the kingdom of the ten tribes, which he was to witness with his own eyes. "Samaria's

king," he announced ominously, "shall perish like a chip on the face of the waters" (10:7).

2. Prophet of the Lord's Covenant

Bethel. Hosea prophesied in a period of decline. His assignment was to announce the approach of judgment to people who had been given beautiful promises.

Punishment was due because the covenant with the Lord had been broken by everyone from the king to the lowliest of his subjects. In name, the northern kingdom was still faithful to Yahweh. At Bethel there was an official state sanctuary where Yahweh was worshipped in the form of a golden calf. Offshoots of this worship tradition were to be found in other parts of the country.

The history of the patriarchs and the first settlers in Canaan was not forgotten either. In fact, the people were proud of their descent from Jacob and Ephraim; they were proud that their nation bore the name *Israel.* Didn't they have a right to the gifts of the covenant with the Lord?

Ritual fornication. If the people had been asked whether they knew "the Bible," they would have answered with an emphatic *yes.* Yet their "knowledge" of the Bible did not involve a *true* knowledge of the Lord, for their worship of Yahweh was mixed with features borrowed from the service of the Baals and Astartes: it had degenerated into a kind of fertility religion. "Blood and the soil" had become their gods: farming was deified.

Attempts were made to stimulate the fruitfulness of the land through feasts that sought to honor the traditions of the patriarchs and Moses, feasts in which the name of Yahweh was used freely. These worship activities even in-

cluded ritual fornication (4:11-19). The Israelites sinned in order that "grace" (i.e. the grace of the god of rain) might abound.

They did not shrink from breaking the other commandments either. There were rebellions among the princes; there was social dislocation; there were even priests who formed gangs of robbers (6:9). Truly, there was no "knowledge" of the Lord.

God's moving love. In the face of all this wickedness, Hosea pointed to a great wonder, namely, that the Lord in His mercy was willing to take His people back again, despite their adultery and unfaithfulness. He had been their God since Egypt and would bring back His runaway wife.

Through his own marriage, Hosea was to show Israel something of God's moving love. The Lord would introduce a new period of salvation; He would lead His people into the wilderness again:

> I will heal their faithlessness;
> I will love them freely,
> for my anger has turned from them (14:4).

The nation called "Not My People" would again become "My People." While this prophecy was not realized in the subsequent history of the ten tribes, it is indeed fulfilled in the church of the new covenant (Rom. 9:25-6; I Pet. 2:10), which embraces both Jews and people from the heathen nations.

Hosea's sketch of God's incomprehensible mercy should speak to us today just as much as his prophecies of judgment do. Both are part of the Word of the covenant God who focuses His attention on us. Hosea's words are intended to "hew" and shape us (6:5) and teach us a true knowledge of the Lord (vs. 6).

You are now the people of God, who once were not his people (I Pet. 2:10 NEB).

3. Hosea's Marriage

A wanton woman. It was a strange assignment that God gave Hosea: the Lord commanded him to marry a wanton woman. This is not to say that the woman the Lord had in mind was a prostitute or a promiscuous woman; all the word *wanton* means here is that there were already some evil inclinations present within her. Hosea obeyed and married Gomer, who then had children.

Some Bible scholars interpret the story of Hosea's marriage as a symbol or allegory. Yet we have good reason to think in terms of a real marriage through which Hosea was supposed to communicate a message to his people. What was that message?

Hadn't Israel abandoned her husband, Yahweh, and wasn't she openly committing adultery? Well then, Hosea's marriage and family life would be a mirror to the nation. A servant is no better off than his master. Yahweh had an unfaithful "wife," and so Hosea would have to experience the same agony. "The land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD" (1:2).

Three children. The names the prophet was commanded to give to the children Gomer bore were related to his message for Israel. The first child was called *Jezreel*, for the Lord would avenge the blood guilt of the royal house. This was a reference to Jehu's bloodbath. Because Jehu had not served the Lord wholeheartedly, his elimination of Ahab's house amounted to nothing more than political murder. Therefore his dynasty would fall—contrary to all expectations.

The second child, a daughter, was named *Lo-ruhamah*,

which means *not pitied*. The third, a son, was named *Lo-ammi*, that is, *not my people*. These names speak for themselves. The Lord intended to withdraw His covenant blessing.

Yet, Hosea also proclaimed that there would be better days ahead. Right after the cutting announcement of judgment, we read tender promises about Judah and also about Israel. "Great shall be the day of Jezreel" (1:11). The brothers would then be called *Ammi* (i.e. my people) and the sisters *Ruhamah* (i.e. mercy).

A jealous husband. After this opening chapter we read a sharp indictment: "Denounce your mother, denounce her, for she is not my wife nor am I her husband" (2:2 JB). Gomer, the wife of Hosea, was apparently running after other men in hopes of becoming rich. Thus she had become an apt symbol of Israel, the "wife" of Yahweh, who ran after the local Baals (gods of agriculture) in hopes of assuring a great harvest.

Although Jehu had gotten rid of the Baal of Tyre, which had been imported by Jezebel, he left plenty of room for the worship of native Canaanite Baals, which were gods of rain and fertility. Sometimes such worship was combined with the worship of the golden calf at Bethel, where Yahweh was supposedly honored.

Yahweh was a jealous husband. He was angry that His wife expected flax and oil and grain from the Baals. Therefore He took her gifts away from her.

The door of hope. Even after all this provocation, we read of more promises, unbelievably tender promises that go back to the time of "first love" when Yahweh delivered Israel from Egypt and led her through the wilderness to Canaan.

> Therefore, behold, *I* will allure her,

and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.
And there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt
(2:14-15).

Hosea sees a new era dawning. Again the Lord will lead His people as a shepherd through the wilderness. The source of trouble (Achan) is removed from their midst, and the door of hope, the door to the future, is thrown wide open. Yahweh will again allow a development of the covenant along with its gifts—even "blood and the soil."

The Israelites heard the word *Ephphatha* (Mark 7:34), that is, be healed, be open! Walls of sin and judgment fall. Just as the curse of the law (Lev. 26; Deut. 28) goes into effect, the promises are fulfilled.

Life in this world. Hosea's talk of grain and oil should not puzzle us. Instead we should be thankful that God's mercy for "Not My People" and "Not Pitied" has so much to do with life in this world. After all, by nature we are "Not His People" (see Rom. 9:25-6; I Pet. 2:10). Yet, in grace the Gentiles are called to be God's people.

All the beautiful promises in Hosea are for us; we can lay claim to them. Hence we should not look to the Baals of our time to save our earth and our culture. Only in Christ can we be accepted as God's children, can the creation be redeemed, can the forces of blessing be released (2:21-3).

Symbolic isolation. How could such a change come about? How could the unfaithful bride begin to yearn for her lawful husband again? This, too, Hosea had to demonstrate in his own life.

He was commanded by the Lord to love a woman who had run after others, just as Israel had turned to other gods. Again Hosea obeyed. For the price of a slave (Ex. 21:32; Zech. 11:12; Matt. 27:9) he redeemed "her" from the slavery into which she had fallen and took her to himself.

The slave he purchased was probably Gomer, who may well have been forced into slavery through her immoral life. At first Hosea isolated his slave-wife: he avoided any contact with her and would not allow others any contact with her either. In this way he hoped to train her to be faithful.

This isolation symbolized the coming exile, in which the Israelites would be separated from the throne and the altar. Through this exile, Israel's yearning for the Lord and the old Davidic dynasty would be awakened (3:1-5). God's judgments are never without purpose; they are part of His divine pedagogy.

> *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (I Pet. 2:9).*

4. Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge

The work of the priests. Even today we often make the mistake of thinking that there is nothing more to the work of priests than offering sacrifices and so forth. That was never the intention. "They shall *teach* Jacob thy ordinances, and Israel thy law," Moses sang of Levi (Deut. 33:10;

see also Mal. 2:6ff). The priests were called to instruct the people and bring them to maturity; their job was to inscribe the law on the hearts of the people. All the services in the temple would be meaningless if the people *automatically* did anything asked of them.

The background to worship must be a *knowledge* of the will of the Lord. The covenant with Israel would only function well if the priests kept the special covenant with Levi.

In the Israel of Hosea's days, the ten commandments were being broken constantly (4:1ff). The reason? "My people are destroyed for *lack of knowledge*," lamented the prophet (4:6). "A people *without understanding* shall come to ruin" (vs. 14).

False worship and sacrifice. Those who held the office of priest had become officials of the state; they were civil servants, bureaucrats who "had it made." They "ate" the sin of the people (4:8). They rejected "knowledge" and did not take the demands of the covenant God into account. Instead of instructing the people in the torah, the law of the Lord, they encouraged them in their false worship and taught them to offer their sacrifices in the Canaanite fashion (4:11-19).

The result was that "knowledge," that is, life according to the covenant, was lost—and the people were well on the way to being lost as well. In their excessive piety they might go on seeking the Lord with their flocks and herds, but they would not find Him unless they offered their hearts to Him in obedience (5:6; 8:11-13; 10:1; see also Amos 5:21ff; Mic. 6:6-8; Is. 1:10ff).

> For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
> the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings
> (6:6; see also Matt. 9:13; 12:7).

Heading for destruction. Should it surprise us that the

Lord was angry about this lack of knowledge, this failure to maintain His law? Because of the false leadership of the priests, Ephraim, the kingdom of the ten tribes of Jacob, was headed for destruction.

The complaints and accusations rained down like hailstones in Hosea's impassioned flood of words: Israel is as stubborn as a heifer; Ephraim is joined to idols (4:16-17); Ephraim mixes with the peoples; he is a cake not turned, a foolish dove (7:8ff). Bethel, with its golden calf and all those formalistic priests, will soon find out what judgment is. What about the misguided people? Like priest, like people (4:9).

Yahweh dethroned. This also applies to the king and the princes. Instead of ruling as God decreed, the kings are playing games. Nothing is left of the theocratic kingship as instituted by God. The government is not a bulwark against lawlessness. On the contrary:

> By their wickedness they make the king glad,
> and the princes by their treachery (7:3).

Like the services at Bethel (which Hosea calls *Beth-aven*, i.e. house of vanity), the conduct of the kings represents a dethroning of Yahweh as Israel's King (8:4). Therefore the Lord wants nothing more to do with the stream of kings, each one cast aside by a usurper who succeeds him. The revolution was devouring its own children:

> All of them are hot as an oven,
> and they devour their rulers.
> All their kings have fallen;
> and none of them calls upon me (7:7).

Wounded love. Their politics of despair is put to shame. They look to Egypt for help, and then to Assyria (7:11;

8:9). In this regard Judah is no better. Like Amos, Hosea refuses to hold Judah up to Israel as a good example:

> When Ephraim saw his sickness,
> and Judah his wound,
> then Ephraim went to Assyria,
> and sent to the great king (5:13).

But Israel itself would fall prey to the great king of Assyria and would be carried away as the spoils of war (10:6). Assyria would be Israel's king (11:5). The people of Israel would return to the land of Egypt, the land on which they had fixed their hopes, as slaves (9:3; 11:5, 11). That's the result of ignoring Yahweh, who had been Israel's Great King ever since the days in Egypt.

In wounded love Yahweh would destroy His people like a lion, an eagle, a moth. All the festivities at Bethel would be brought to an untimely end (9:1ff). "Ephraim's glory shall fly away like a bird" (vs. 11).

Pride in Jacob. Hosea's words of accusation struck the leaders and the people like a series of hammer blows. Ephraim was proud: on their feast days the people of Israel laid claim to the blessings promised to Israel-Jacob.

In response to the pride in Jacob, Hosea points out that Israel is indeed related to Jacob: he shares Jacob's sins. Unfortunately, he does not follow Jacob's path of *repentance*. What was it that Jacob had done?

> He strove with the angel and prevailed,
> he wept and sought his favor.
> He met God at Bethel,
> and there God spoke with him—
> the LORD the God of hosts,
> the LORD is his name:
> "So you, by the help of your God, return,

hold fast to love and justice,
and wait continually for your God" (12:4-6).

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (I Pet. 2:10).

5. The Way of Death and the Way of Life

Light next to darkness. Here, as at the beginning of the book of Hosea, there is light next to darkness: again we encounter a voice calling for repentance and conversion. Between all the prophecies of judgment, promises of salvation can be heard.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the promises are intended to tone down the announcement of the judgment to come. The Lord never utters threats just to make people despair. Even when He speaks the language of judgment, He is appealing for conversion. He sketches the way of death but at the same time shows us the way of life. Turn to Me and *live*!

A song of penitence. Hosea puts a song of penitence in the mouths of the people, a song that reminds us of the song of Moses, which may well have been sung at the feasts in Bethel:

Come, let us return to the LORD;
for he has torn, that he may heal us;
he has stricken, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.

Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD;
his going forth is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth (6:1-3).

In this song we recognize elements and themes of the song of Moses:

See now that I, even I, am he,
and there is no god beside me;
I kill and I make alive;
I wound and I heal;
and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.*

The people did not take over the song of repentance prepared for them by Hosea, just as they later refused to accept a confession composed by Jeremiah (see Jer. 3:22-5). Yet, the text of this song remains relevant to the plight of the church in all ages. Wasn't Christ's resurrection literally "on the third day"?

In our Savior, Hosea's words find their complete fulfillment. Through Christ the days of recompense have come—hence the cries of despair addressed to the hills and mountains (compare 9:7 with Luke 21:22; and Hos. 10:8 with Luke 23:30-1 and Rev. 6:15-17). Yet, through His suffering and resurrection ("on the third day"), the *love* of the Father is demonstrated. This gives assurance of faith to a church tormented by doubt.

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*Deuteronomy 32:39. In various places in Hosea we find echoes of the song of Moses. "When they had fed to the full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up," says Hosea (13:6). In Moses' song we read that Jeshurun waxed fat, kicked, and forsook the God who made him (vs. 15). Hosea, as we saw, compares Israel to a stubborn heifer (4:16; see also 10:11; 11:4). On "forgetting," see 2:13; 8:14; 13:6; Deut. 32:18.

Repeated appeals for repentance. How glorious that Hosea carried on with his preaching despite all the opposition! Not only did he preach judgment to priests and rulers, he also spoke of grace for those who repent and return to Yahweh! In your own Bible, underline all the promises bound up with the repeated appeals for repentance. Remember that through Christ, all of this now applies to us.

> Break up your fallow ground
> for it is the time to seek the LORD,
> that he may come and rain salvation upon you
> (10:12; see also Jer. 4:3).

It is the will of the Lord that His church not be lost.

> Ephraim, how could I part with you?
> Israel, how could I give you up?
> How could I treat you like Admah,
> or deal with you like Zeboiim?
> My heart recoils from it,
> my whole being trembles at the thought.
> I will not give rein to my fierce anger,
> I will not destroy Ephraim again,
> for I am God, not man:
> I am the Holy One in your midst
> and have no wish to destroy (11:8-9 JB).

In the light of Christ's fulfillment, these words full of feeling come alive for the church in this age of despair. Where is our earth, our world, headed? Will there ever be another spring, a rebirth, a new beginning? Do the satanic powers of death and destruction have the last word?

> I will heal their faithlessness;
> I will love them freely,
> for my anger has turned from them.

I will be as the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom as the lily,
he shall strike root as the poplar (14:4-5).

Joel

1. The Approach of the Day of Yahweh

A locust plague. The first printed Dutch Bible (1477) includes an introduction to the twelve minor prophets in which we read that the book of Joel is simple at the beginning and obscure at the end. This is not a conclusion that everyone would agree with, for there are also many questions raised about the *beginning* of this small book of prophecy.

We read about a locust plague that strikes the land. But the locusts are described in such a way that some interpreters think in terms of human enemies and others in terms of demons. The reference to locusts in Revelation 9 could also be taken as an indication that Joel was dealing with some mysterious power.

Instead of getting lost in the speculation of the commentators, we should read this prophet for ourselves. However obscure his prophecy may seem at the beginning as well as the end, it represents divine revelation. Doesn't the opening of God's Word give us light?

Total destruction. Joel addresses himself to both the rulers and the inhabitants of the land (1:2). He also has something to say to the priests, who serve at the altar (1:13; 2:19).

Joel blows a trumpet to sound the alarm (2:1), for the land is threatened with total destruction, a destruction that will have drastic consequences for the services in the temple. For lack of material to sacrifice, it will be impossible to continue the services (1:13). "Worship" and "farming" will stagnate. A day of judgment, a day of Yahweh, is drawing near. Joel describes the destruction in compelling language:

> What the cutting locust left,
> the swarming locust has eaten.
> What the swarming locust left,
> the hopping locust has eaten,
> and what the hopping locust left,
> the destroying locust has eaten (1:4).

Listen to the bold, impressive language in which the invasion is announced:

> Let all that live in the land tremble,
> for the day of the LORD has come,
> surely a day of darkness and gloom is upon us,
> a day of cloud and dense fog;
> like a blackness spread over the mountains
> a mighty, countless host appears;
> their like has never been known,
> nor ever shall be in ages to come;
> their vanguard a devouring fire,
> their rearguard leaping flame;
> before them the land is a garden of Eden,
> behind them a wasted wilderness;
> nothing survives their march.
> On they come, like squadrons of horse,

like war-horses they charge;
bounding over the peaks they advance with the rattle
of chariots,
like flames of fire burning up the stubble,
like a countless host in battle array (2:1-5 NEB).

It is clear that *the Lord* is leading this advance (2:11). *He* is the one behind the judgment.

2. Repentance and Grace on the Day of Yahweh

An indispensable condition. The prophet does more than just sound the alarm to signal danger; his trumpet summons the people to *prayer* and *penitence* (2:15; see also vs. 1). Isn't the Lord merciful and gracious? Who knows? Perhaps He will still turn His anger aside and allow the services in the temple to continue.

The indispensable condition for mercy is Israel's wholehearted *repentance.* This applies to the entire covenant people, from large to small, without exception. All must beg the Lord for mercy (2:12-17).

Whether Joel is talking about "real" locusts in these first two chapters or symbolic ones, it is clear that the church (i.e. Jerusalem, the land, the inheritance) is in great danger. (In Revelation 9, judgment on God's covenant people is also depicted.) Apparently the people have put their trust in blood and the soil without taking the Lord into consideration in all their thoughts and deeds.

Repentance is now the only way out for those who seek to escape the misfortune. For today's church, which often manifests a Laodicean attitude of self-sufficiency, this passage from Joel contains a timely message.

The Holy Spirit and "nature." Yahweh *is* gracious. "Then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people" (2:18). The swarm of dangerous locusts went in another direction and wound up in the sea. The land heaved a sigh of relief, rain fell again, and Yahweh dwelt in the midst of His people.

It is in *this* context, which abounds with "natural" blessings, that we find the famous Messianic promise quoted by Peter at Pentecost: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" (2:28; see also Acts 2:16ff). We must never lose sight of the fact that the Bible does not draw a line between "nature" and "grace." It is also the *Holy Spirit* who awakens "nature" to life (Ps. 104:30; Gen. 1:2).

"Nature" is not some sort of independent organism; it is simply the creation, the arena in which God's church lives. Well then, it should not surprise us that when the land promised to the church is revived, *nature itself* is seized by the Spirit to be utilized entirely in His service.

Fully mobilized. Avoid thinking in limited terms when it comes to the fulfillment of prophecies. No doubt you have noticed that the locust plague is described in terms that go far beyond the events of those days. This also applies to the description of the revival that awaits us. What Joel was prophesying about came to pass more fully in the New Testament.

In the midst of a trembling world stands the church that no longer recognizes any distinction between the (spiritual) "clergy" and the (natural) "laity." That church is fully mobilized, ready and willing to serve. A saving name draws people to Jerusalem, where deliverance is to be found. Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, applies that saving name to Christ.

Sealed with baptism. Whenever we witness a baptism,

we should think of this prophecy of Joel. Just listen to Peter's interpretation of Joel: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the *name* of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the *gift of the Holy Spirit*. For the *promise* [i.e. of the gift of the Holy Spirit] is to you and to your children [think of the Spirit-bearing sons and daughters of Joel 2:28] and to all that are far off, *every one* whom the Lord our God *calls to him*" (Acts 2:38-9). The last sentence echoes the beautiful promise of Joel 2:32: "Among the survivors shall be those *whom the LORD calls.*" Make sure that you never forget these words of Joel when you witness a baptism.

The day of the Lord, the entire church anointed with the Spirit, the saving name of Jesus Christ, the significance of "Jerusalem"—the church may preach all of this in a sinking world and seal it with baptism, for all these themes belong together. Joel does indeed give us simple knowledge that anyone in the church should be able to make his own.

3. The Culmination of the Day of Yahweh

A day of reckoning. Do we find "obscurities" when we get to the end of the book of Joel? Not at all: what we find is a continuation of the promises. The deliverance of the church involves a day of reckoning for its enemies. Joel 3 ends with a repetition of what was already promised earlier: "The LORD will dwell in Zion" (vs. 21 NEB; see also 2:27).

Another storm among the nations is sketched. No longer can we ask whether locusts or people are meant. Israel's archenemies are mobilizing. They have forced the Lord's people to pay tribute; they have plundered the temple and sold the youth.

Israel's wicked neighbors now band together for a final day of reckoning, but this time they are in for a surprise. Their day of reckoning turns into a fiasco, for "the LORD roars from Zion" and offers refuge to His people. They will be safe on Mount Zion (2:32; 3:16-17).

A spiral. The progress in Joel's prophecies is like a spiral: at the end we find the same motifs as at the beginning, namely, the attack on Zion, the saving hand of the Lord, the blossoming of the nation, and the abiding presence of the Lord among His people. Thus the end is not obscure at all—at least not for the reader of the New Testament, for he knows about the sickle used in the harvest to cut down the grapes ripe for judgment (Rev. 14:14ff). He also knows about the coming total defeat of the enemy forces in the valley of Jehoshaphat (the name means *Yahweh judges*) or the valley of decision. He knows about Jerusalem, our mother city, which will descend from heaven. Even if we do not *see* God's victory today, we believe that He will ultimately be victorious when His day comes.

That day naturally brings about a reawakening of the creation. When the curtain of clouds is pulled aside at the time of the final struggle, we will see a new heaven and a new earth in which "nature" and "grace" are again united. We read that "a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the valley of Shittim" (3:18; see also Ezek. 47:1ff; Zech. 14:8; Rev. 22:1-2). (In the dry plain of the valley referred to grew shittim wood or acacia wood.)

"Earthly" description. We should not take offense at such "earthly" description. After all, the prophet wanted to make it as clear as possible that God was making *all* things new. Nor should we be offended that the passage describes not just "heaven" but also "hell."

Repeatedly it is said that the lands of the ancient enemies Edom and Egypt will be turned into barren wilderness. We must not pass over such words in silence or try to ignore them, for words of judgment are part of the preaching of the gospel.

When did the judgment mentioned by Joel take place? We don't even know exactly when he prophesied. Yet it is certain that subsequent history did include the judgment of Judah's enemies. All the same, we still await the definitive fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.

Amos

1. The Prophet from Tekoa

Sharing in the Lord's gifts. The situation in Israel at the time Amos prophesied is sketched by Herman Veldkamp as follows:

> Never had the sun shone so brightly on the promised land as in the time of Jeroboam II and Uzziah. Never did people sit so contentedly in the shade of fig trees and vines as when Uzziah reigned over Judah and Jeroboam, the son of Joash, reigned over Israel. It was as though the golden age of Solomon had returned. The deplorable civil disputes of an earlier era had ended, and peace was restored within the land. Syria, Israel's traditional enemy, had been completely conquered by Jeroboam . . . . It was a time of glittering prosperity, a great time to be alive. Business flourished, and people made a lot of money. Many were wealthy enough to maintain both a winter home and a summer home and could even afford the luxury of costly ivory to adorn the walls of their homes and decorate the couches on which they lay to eat their meals.

In the midst of all this prosperity, the cultic centers at Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba flourished—but not the worship of Yahweh. Veldkamp continues:

> The entire religion of those cultic centers rested on the heathen principle that sacrifices are made to win the favor of the gods. Thus the idea in the minds of these Israelites was to make the Lord indebted to them, to harness Yahweh to the wagons of their own desires by bringing Him great offerings. The idea was not to approach the Lord's beloved countenance but to share in His gifts. That's the kind of religion they considered worthwhile.*

Called away from the sheep. In the midst of this self-sufficiency and apparent prosperity there appeared the rough figure of Amos, a prophet from the southern kingdom of Judah, with his message of judgment. Originally he was a farmer in Tekoa, a town in the hill country of Judah. In 1:1 and 7:14 we read that he raised sheep and gathered mulberries.† Thus he was not a member of the prophet's guild.

**The Farmer from Tekoa: On the Book of Amos*, trans. T. Plantinga (Paideia Press, 1977), pp. 16-17, 157.

†Mulberry trees or sycamore trees grow in the wild near Jericho—Zacchaeus climbed such a tree to get a look at Jesus—and along the coast of the lowlands south of Jaffa. The Revised Standard Version makes of Amos a "dresser" of sycamore trees. Scholars who never venture out of the study have assumed that this meant that Amos had a *plantation* of such trees. It has even been argued that Amos was a "pricker" who worked seasonally pricking the peel or skin of the fruit to hasten the ripening process (see, for example, E. W. Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets*, Edinburgh, 1958, p. 19).

When we consider the fact that there were thousands of

Yahweh called him away from his sheep—just as He had earlier called David away from the flock. Amos was to prophesy against Israel. It was a matter of necessity—and not a matter of Amos's own preference. Amos obeyed and was faithful to his calling.

A great doer. Amos is perhaps the first prophet to give us an extensive superscription concerning the date and place of his work. From his words we can discern what the situation was in the northern kingdom of Israel. We are able to share mentally in the struggles of this great doer, who did not prophesy to earn a living and never beat around the bush.

That he borrowed images from nature and from life on the land is only to be expected. We hear the creaking of a heavily laden farmer's wagon (2:13) and the roaring of a lion (3:4). We read about a net to catch birds (3:5) and the ups and downs and dangers of a shepherd's life (3:12). Amos talks about the cattle of Bashan (4:1) and crop damage (vs. 9).

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berries on a single tree, each one not much bigger than a thumbnail, we quickly realize that the suggestion about Amos "pricking" fruit must be ruled out. There would not be much left after such pricking! As for setting up a plantation to grow such fruit, that, too, must be ruled out, for Amos—or anyone else, for that matter—would be much better off growing figs than the often worm-infested fruit that grows on the sycamore tree.

If we think our way into Amos's situation, we soon see what the text means. When Amos was watching over his flocks in the fields far from home, he looked for food in the wild, just like any other shepherd. Thus he must have had occasion to sample the fruit of the sycamore tree (which sometimes tasted yeasty). The word translated in the Revised Standard Version as *dresser* is related to the Arabic word for *fig*. In short, the farmer from Tekoa took "pot luck" out in the field, just as John the Baptist did.

"Church" and "culture." It is not entirely correct to make Amos a small farmer who raised complaints about the "culture" of the prosperous cities of the northern kingdom. Other prophets (e.g. Isaiah, who was not a farmer) also borrowed images from nature and opposed cultural degeneration (think of Is. 3:16ff). Moreover, Tekoa was not as isolated a farming village as we sometimes assume. Since the time of Rehoboam, a garrison had been stationed there (II Chron. 11:6). That there was once a "wise woman" living there whose help was sought by Joab shows that this border city on the edge of the mountainous steppes was the home of some capable, reflective people who knew how to put Scriptural wisdom into practice.

The prophecy of Amos is not a story of "nature" doing battle with "culture" or of a "little man" taking on the "bigshots." The opposition in this book of prophecy is between the *Word of God* and *apostasy* from Yahweh.

"Church" and "culture" are not opposed as such; we should avoid leaving anyone with the impression that the church is anti-cultural—although the church is indeed opposed to cultural *degeneration*, including the rottenness of many of the developments in our time. Always bear this point in mind when reading Amos's denunciations.

2. An Appeal to the Covenant

Lingering covenant awareness. The apostate church of the northern kingdom of Israel was the greatest cause of all deformation. The worship of the golden calf at Bethel was central to the apostasy. With awesome rhetorical power, Amos attacked this caricature of religion.

In the process we see Amos appealing to a lingering

awareness of the covenant with the Lord, an awareness that had never quite died out in the people of the northern kingdom. (Hosea, Amos's contemporary in the northern kingdom, did the same thing.) The people of Samaria and Bethel were not completely ignorant of the law and the history of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Complacency and distortion. We have every reason to suppose that the people of the northern kingdom used the same liturgy and "Bible" as the people in Judah and Jerusalem—at least in part. Yet the people of Israel in Amos's day were like the Jews in the days of Christ's ministry on earth: they walked around with a "veil" covering their faces, a veil that made them interpret Scripture wrongly and robbed them of the key to knowledge.

Amos could still appeal to a "people with the Bible," then. At the same time he had to fight an uphill battle against superficiality, complacency and distortion of Scripture, which together threatened to make Israel a "people without the Bible."

Ripe for judgment. For Amos, the covenant relationship came first: he was not speaking as a missionary to people unacquainted with Yahweh. No, he proceeded from the wonder of the covenant between God and man: "Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' " (3:1-2).

In its worship, the northern kingdom wanted to attach itself to the traditions of the patriarchs. Places that had played a role in Israel's history (e.g. Gilgal, Beersheba) were held in honor (5:5; 8:14). The people even looked forward to the day of the Lord (5:18). No doubt the golden age—in the path of evolution—would make way for a

diamond age. The people were waiting for the "coming of the Lord."

Amos announced that Yahweh would never bestow His covenant blessing on a people that trampled the covenant underfoot. "Joseph's remnant" need not wait for the fulfillment of the benediction of Jacob and Moses, for the prosperity under Jeroboam II was illusory. The nation was in fact ripe for judgment (8:1-3). The temple singers would have reason to lament.

The blessing of Jacob and Moses. In the first two chapters, Amos expresses his message in prophecies of judgment against Israel and the neighboring nations (Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Ammon, Moab, and Judah). The northern kingdom of the ten tribes gets special attention in chapters 3-6. In the final three chapters of the book, Amos reports some visions about judgment.

At the very end, this farmer who had become a prophet against his own will gives voice to a prophecy of *deliverance*. Tekoa, which is not far from the cave of Adullam where David took refuge from Saul, had been closely connected with the house of David.

The blessing of Jacob and Moses is fulfilled. This farmer-prophet proclaims that the fields and vines and trees of Israel will flourish again, as David's fallen house is restored. Thus the words of Amos lead up to *Jesus Christ!*

The LORD roars from Zion (1:2).

3. Prophecies against the Nations

For three transgressions. Amos begins his prophecies against the nations by saying something about the One

who sent him. The Lord roars from *Zion*; He makes Himself heard from Jerusalem.

Israel is immediately confronted with its sin of man-made religion at Bethel, its refusal to worship at the designated place, i.e. Zion. Yahweh was abandoned by the northern kingdom of Israel, for the northern kingdom refused to come to His house. The same Yahweh now speaks to His lost son in mighty language.

From the first two chapters of Amos, we see that the judgment on the various nations is always expressed within the framework of a certain formula: "Thus says the LORD: 'For three transgressions of . . . and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.' " Then comes a listing of the offenses: "Because they/he . . . ." The outcome is: "So I will send a fire upon . . . and it shall destroy the strongholds." This repetition is part of the method of Amos's prophecy. The repetition is like the sound of an alarm bell.

A progression. The Lord is the God of the entire world. Words of judgment are first directed against the nations that live around Israel—Aram (Syria), with its capital city of Damascus, the nation that desolated the Israelite province of Gilead; the Philistine league of cities; Tyre; Edom; and Ammon, which mercilessly carried off Israelites for the slave trade. The king of Moab is accused of burning the bones of the king of Edom, thereby acting contrary to all human sensitivities.

We should note that there is a certain progression in the order in which these nations are mentioned. Edom, Ammon and Moab shared a common ancestry with Israel. There were fraternal ties between these nations and Israel (1:9, 11), even though the ties were ignored in practical politics.

Judah's judgment. The Israelites may well have enjoyed hearing the prophet pronounce judgment on their enemies.

But the condemned nations included *related peoples.* The series of condemnations went on and struck not only the descendents of Esau (Edom) and Lot (Ammon and Moab) but even a nation in *Jacob's* line of descent.

Judah was guilty of many transgressions. The Lord would not revoke the judgment of which His prophet spoke. Amos explained why:

> because they have spurned the law of the LORD
> and have not observed his decrees,
> and have been led astray by the false gods
> that their fathers followed.
> Therefore will I send fire upon Judah,
> fire that shall consume the palaces of Jerusalem
> (2:4-5 NEB).

You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities (3:2).

4. A Message of Judgment for the Northern Kingdom

Howling atrocities. Now comes the climax Amos was leading up to. After the seven proclamations of judgment against other nations (including Judah, his own nation) follows a message of judgment intended for the northern kingdom of the ten tribes. Aren't there howling atrocities to be found in Israel? Isn't there a lot of opposition to prophecy there? Haven't the people been playing games with God's covenant gifts since the days of the exodus from Egypt and the entry into Canaan? (2:6-16).

Amos's words must have been as unexpected and un-

welcome as a bomb. The prophecies of judgment he had earlier preached against the surrounding nations were no doubt well received. But why such rough language in the sanctuary? Yet Amos had to speak; it was a matter of necessity rather than choice.

The trumpet blast. Israel is celebrating a feast at Bethel—the Passover Feast commemorating the exodus from Egypt, or perhaps the Feast of Tabernacles commemorating the entry into Canaan. The prophet seizes on this feast as his opportunity. It is *because* the Lord has made a covenant with Israel, he declares, that Israel can now expect to be punished. Let the throng of rejoicers realize this before it is too late.

The lion roars to announce that he has caught his prey. The blast of the trumpet alarms the populace. That's how it is with the word of the prophet of the covenant. He preaches judgment. Israel is indeed foolish if it ignores his words (3:1-8).

The God of exile. Foreign nations are invited to seat themselves on the hills around Samaria as in a theater to see how corrupt and ripe for judgment Israel is. The horns of Bethel's altar will be cut off. There will come an end to the luxury of decorating palaces with ivory. Precisely because God is the God of the covenant, exile is sure to come. The God of the *exodus* will be the God of the *exile* for His apostate people. All the manmade religion at Bethel and Gilgal will be of no avail (3:9—4:5).

The people refuse to repent, even though the Lord sends all sorts of plagues. He had hoped to bring His people to repentance through the plagues. Hadn't the law threatened them already? Didn't the plagues resemble what happened to Sodom and Egypt? (4:10-11). Couldn't the church draw the conclusion that she was equally godless and ripe for judgment? (see Rev. 11:8).

Kingly power. Five times Amos declared: " 'Yet you did not return to me,' says the LORD" (see also Rev. 9:20-1). Therefore the prophet was finally forced to announce the following judgment:

> Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel;
> because I will do this to you,
> prepare to meet your God, O Israel!
> For lo, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind,
> and declares to man what is his thought;
> who makes the morning darkness,
> and treads on the heights of the earth—
> the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name! (4:12-13).

The warning "Prepare to meet your God!" is not an invitation to a friendly, peaceful encounter with the Lord, as people often seem to think when they quote this text out of context. On the contrary, the Lord of hosts—note the use of the *royal* name here, which appears in all the prophetic writings after I Samuel—declares that He will demonstrate His kingly power *against* His people.

A lamentation. The people at Bethel still enjoyed singing the song of Moses at the Red Sea. The same power that saved the people once would now bring about their destruction. Thus we read a lamentation over the virgin Israel in Amos's book of prophecy! (5:2).

The perversion of justice (5:7ff) makes a mockery of the pilgrimages and sacrificial feasts (vs. 21ff). "Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! It is darkness, and not light" (vs. 18). "Woe to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria" (6:1). The complacency, the false sense of peace, will lead to death and exile.

The people at Bethel should not make the mistake of supposing that Amos was only comparing Israel and Judah so that he could argue for the moral and religious superiority of his own country. No, in Judah there was the

same false sense of peace, the same accursed mentality: "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion"! (6:1).

A call for repentance. The prophecy of Amos is not all darkness and woe. The ultimate purpose of his words, after all, is to call for conversion, repentance. This theme is heard repeatedly in his prophecy:

> *Seek me* and live;
> but do not seek Bethel,
> and do not enter into Gilgal
> or cross over to Beersheba.
> *Seek the* LORD and live,
> lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,
> and devour it, with none to quench it for Bethel
> (5:4-5, 6).

> *Seek good*, and not evil,
> that you may live;
> and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
> as you have said.
> *Hate evil*, and love good,
> and establish justice in the gate;
> it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
> will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph (5:14-15).

Bethel, the house of God, would become nothing, and Gilgal would go into exile. (Note the chiastic arrangement of the place names in 5:5: Bethel, Gilgal, Beersheba, Gilgal, Bethel.) As for the remnant, those who repent, there would still be a future for them.

"Seeking" the Lord means taking Him into account, walking the well-known path laid down in His Word; it means maintaining the style of His kingship in ecclesiastical matters. To seek the Lord is not to undertake an expedition to an unknown destination. To seek the Lord is to consult Him, to seek guidance from Him—at

Zion, where He chooses to dwell. Do not seek Bethel (see I Chron. 10:13-14).

5. Amos's Apocalypse

Three visions. Now come the visions of Amos, which more or less follow the seasons. The first presents the threat of a locust plague in the spring. The second is a summer drought that affects both the fields and the water supplies. In both cases, the intercession of the prophet leads the Lord to retract the judgment on "Jacob."

In the third vision the Lord appears alongside a wall with a plumb line in His hand. This time the approaching judgment is unconditional and irrevocable:

> Look, I am going to measure my people Israel by
> plumb line;
> no longer will I overlook their offenses.
> The high places of Isaac are going to be ruined,
> the sanctuaries of Israel destroyed,
> and, sword in hand, I will attack the House of Jeroboam
> (7:8-9 JB).

Amaziah's reaction. Naturally these down-to-earth words spoken by Amos at the national temple at Bethel led to a reaction from the "ecclesiastical" authorities. The high priest Amaziah tried to intimidate Amos by telling King Jeroboam that Amos was rebelling, thus applying the words about the king's *house* to the king *personally*. That's what always happens when sacred cows are attacked.

Amos did not let the state bishop chase him away from the national sanctuary back to Judah (which was not part

of the domain where the church was subordinated to the state). He balked at the idea that he was a reactionary disturber of the sacred serenity of the state. Boldly he declared that Amaziah, that representative of high society, would be punished together with his family.

The fourth vision. Amos went even further as he prophesied against Bethel (the worship center subordinated to the state) and against the nation that swore by its descent from Jacob and its possession of the land called Israel. His fourth vision was a still life, a basket of ripe fruit. But the ripeness was not a sign of health: the nation was ripe for *judgment*! The end was coming—an end that would mean not *consummation* but *consumption* (Albertus Magnus), not a diamond age or a higher realization of the prosperity and status that Israel enjoyed but a radical destruction. There would be darkness at high noon! (8:9).

Precisely because Israel was a nation descended from Jacob, the Lord swore by *Jacob's* glory that He would not forever overlook the oppression of the poor and the deceitful practices that had become so common (8:7). In their religious fervor, the people made pilgrimages to the "pioneer monuments," even to Beersheba, "Isaac's high place," which was at the very southern tip of Judah (see 5:5; 8:14). But all this patriotic fervor and "religious" activity would not save the fatherland.

Since the people did not seek the Lord or consult Him, they would be condemned to seeking without finding. People "looked" everywhere, but could not find what they were looking for. (Think of our world full of conferences and councils, some of them most religious, claiming to speak the last word that will save mankind.) Anyone who neglects the Word when it is near him in a time of prosperity will certainly not stumble across it in days of crisis (8:11-14).

The fifth vision. In the fifth vision the Lord gives the command to strike the pillar supporting the roof of the temple so that it collapses on the worshipers, just as the heathen temple of Dagon collapsed when Samson pulled away its central pillars. The temple in Amos's vision was probably the one at Jerusalem, not the one at Bethel.

Amos was declaring that the judgment was inescapable. People did not want to hear anything about judgment (9:10), for they claimed they were the "chosen" people, the people God had delivered from bondage in Egypt (vs. 7), the people of the covenant. This may have been a beautiful theme for a keynote address at one of the festivals, but Israel really had no reason to trust in "blood and the soil," in the benefits of the covenant. Yahweh, after all, was not just the God of a certain nation. He was concerned with other peoples: the dark Ethiopians, the uncircumcised Philistines and the hated Syrians are also exodus peoples (9:7).

The covenant should not lull anyone into a false sense of security. If Israel turns its back on Yahweh, it will surely be the object of covenant wrath—*as His people*. The Israelites were the people "which I brought up out of the land of Egypt," which is why "I will punish you for all your iniquities"! (3:1-2).

After that I shall return and rebuild the fallen House of David (Acts 15:16 JB).

6. Messianic Promises

A people drawn from all races. The impending doom of the kingdom of the ten tribes is not the last word for

Amos. On "that day" the kingdom of *David* will be re-established. Messianic notes are sounded.

James, the brother of Jesus, would later use the conclusion of Amos at a gathering in Jerusalem to defend the position that when the gospel is preached to the pagan Gentiles, they should not be required to become part of the Jewish people (Acts 15:14ff). Quoting Amos's statement that David's fallen house would be rebuilt (9:11), James went on to argue (again quoting Amos) that the intention on God's part is that "the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name" (Acts 15:17).

James was using Scripture properly here, for the end of the book of Amos again takes up the continuing theme of the book, namely, that Israel would be judged *along with* the other nations. Anyone who knows the path to take but fails to take it will be punished severely. But on "that day" *all the nations of the earth* will be blessed in Israel. Christ chooses for Himself a people drawn from *all* races.

Total re-creation. The Lord's blessing is felt in all of life. Amos makes this clear by means of images borrowed from farming. The grain harvest and threshing, which would normally be finished in April or May, will be so abundant that the harvesters will still be busy in September and October, when the plowman would normally begin preparing the soil for the next crop. Thus the harvesters will still be busy when the time comes to sow the seed again. God's grace redeems the entire creation.

The prophet sees something of the redeemed condition of the church, the new Paradise, the New Jerusalem, when he prophesies: "They shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them" (9:15). Amos's book is full of judgment resulting from covenant breaking. Yet he ends with a proclamation of total re-creation through David's great Son.

Obadiah

Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did, on the day Jerusalem fell (Ps. 137:7 NIV).

1. Edom and Israel

Israel's "brother." Obadiah's short book of prophecy deals with Edom. To understand it properly, we must review the history of this nation, which is a "brother" to Israel by virtue of its descent from Esau.

Jacob and Esau were twin brothers. (They were not identical twins, but they did share the womb.) Before their birth the Lord made it known that the greater (i.e. the older, Esau) would serve the lesser (i.e. the younger). Jacob used cunning to take away his brother's birthright and gain for himself the blessing normally reserved for the first-born. When the deceived Isaac finally blessed Esau, he acknowledged that Jacob would dominate his brother. Yet he went on to tell Esau: "When you break loose you shall break his yoke from your neck" (Gen. 27:40).

After these events Jacob fled to Laban. When he returned years later, he was afraid of what would happen when

he met his brother, but it turned out that the two were reconciled. Edom, the nation descended from Esau, went its own way.

Hostility to Israel. Long before there was a king in Israel, Edom was already ruled by kings (Gen. 36:31). When the Israelites left Egypt, the Edomites would not allow them to pass through their land, despite the appeal the Israelites made to their common descent (Num. 20:14ff). Moreover, the law required the Israelites to take a conciliatory attitude toward Edom, for Edom was a *brother* (Deut. 23:7). Edom's refusal to let Israel pass through was probably not an isolated event; it illustrates Edom's hostile attitude toward Israel.

Saul made war on the Edomites, who apparently joined an alliance of nations against Israel (I Sam. 14:47). We also find David at war with Edom (II Sam. 8:13-14; see also Ps. 60). It is apparent from I Kings 11:15-16 that David did not take the struggle against the Edomites lightly.

Proud and undisciplined. Edom inhabited a mountainous area well suited to guerilla warfare. The Edomites apparently inherited the rough nature of their founding father, for they were proud and undisciplined. No wonder that at the beginning of Solomon's reign, a rebellion broke out in Edom (I Kings 11:14), which had been subject to David up till then.

The rebellion must have been unsuccessful, for after the division between the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, the Edomites remained subject to Judah. The ruler of Edom was forced to help King Jehoshaphat of Judah in battle (II Kings 3; I Kings 22:47-8).

Under Jehoram of Judah, the Edomites broke free of Judah's domination and were ruled by a king of their own (II Kings 8:20), who represented a dangerous military threat. Amaziah and Uzziah again managed to subject

Edom, but in the time of Ahaz, Edom defeated Judah and deported some of the people of Judah as slaves (II Chron. 28:17). From that time on, this nation dwelling in the desolate hill country was free of the dominance of its brother Judah.

Although Edom was later subjected by the mighty Babylonian empire just as Judah was (see Jer. 27), Edom played an ugly role in the destruction of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar. This is apparent from Psalm 137, Lamentations 4:21, and Ezekiel 25:12. Obadiah also brings it up.

It was as though all of Esau's bottled-up hatred was released when Jerusalem's hour of peril came. With malicious glee Esau watched his brother Jacob go under. He even helped the Babylonians by robbing the Jewish refugees (vs. 11ff). Now the lesser would finally serve the greater!

The law of election. When pondering this history, do not forget about the law of election: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Rom. 9:13; Mal. 1:2-3). This law finds its fulfillment here. Even though the judgment of Jerusalem was really the outcome of the sins of the church, Esau is not allowed to open his big mouth to express his glee when things go wrong for Jacob on the day of his misfortune.

The Lord has chosen His church, and He hates the pride of haughty Edom. Like the eagles who build their nests in inaccessible places in Edom's hills, this proud mountain nation believes itself to be free—free from all judgment and able to defy any storm (vs. 2ff). Yet, because of the "violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off for ever" (vs. 10). Neither heroes nor wise men—and Edom was renowned for its wise men—will be able to help then. God's judgment is comprehensive (vs. 15-16).

2. Messianic Prophecy—Not Nationalism

Inheritance recovered. In the midst of the raging flood of judgment stands Zion—not the destroyed city of Jerusalem, of course, but the future one, the *new* one. The mount of the temple is a refuge for Jacob; yes, it takes possession of Esau's inheritance. Israel can again claim all the parts of the lost inheritance in the north and the south.*

The exiles come back. Redeemers and judges will rule over Edom from Zion. Edom's house will burn until there is nothing left but a field of stubble (vs. 21, 18). The greater will serve the lesser.

The real issue. It has sometimes been argued that Obadiah is to be viewed as an example of strongly nationalistic prophecy. He speaks the language of "blood and the soil" and dreams about settling some long-standing accounts.

We should not be too quick to accept such conclusions. Read the final words of Obadiah's prophecy: "The *kingdom* shall be the LORD'S." That's the real issue for this prophet. The Lord must reveal Himself as King. Esau has become an enemy of *the Lord.*

Do you remember how the song sung by Moses at the Red Sea ended? "The LORD will reign for ever and ever" (Ex. 15:18). That's exactly what Obadiah was saying.

The kingship of Yahweh. We will sing the song of Moses and the Lamb "in heaven." Is it a nationalistic song, a song about our own power, about the courage of our own

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*Zarephath (vs. 20) was located in Phoenicia between Tyre and Sidon (see I Kings 17:9; Luke 4:26). Sepharad is usually identified with Sardis, in Asia Minor (Rev. 1:11; 3:1).

heroes? Of course not! How could a song about a lamb speak of anything but grace?

The last line in Obadiah's small book of prophecy shows us that the primary issue in the struggle between Edom and Israel is the kingship of Yahweh. With this his prophecy reaches Messianic heights. The book of Revelation combines the final lines from the song of Moses with the main theme of the prophecy of Obadiah: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever" (11:15).

Enemies born in the church's womb. In the days of the Maccabees, Edom was conquered by the Jews. The Edomites were then incorporated into the Jewish nation. We must view this fusion of two nations as a fulfillment of Obadiah's prophecy. Yet, there is more to the fulfillment of this prophecy.

The kingship of the Lord is realized in the gathering of the church of all ages and in the judgment of all the enemies of Zion. We know that many of the most bitter enemies of the church were born, like Edom, in her womb. But the church will receive justice in the face of these wolves that arise from her own ranks.

Anger reaching its culmination. There is one more point to note here: Obadiah makes use of earlier prophecies (compare vs. 3 with Is. 14:13ff; vs. 4 with Amos 9:2; and vs. 10 with Amos 1:11). Especially striking is the similarity with Jeremiah 49:7-22, which is also a prophecy directed against Edom.

Read the related passages in Isaiah, Amos and Jeremiah carefully as you study the book of Obadiah. You will then see that Obadiah does not simply repeat what his predecessors said. He does go back to prophecies about Edom that stem from Amos and Jeremiah, but he works them out further and applies them explicitly to Edom's

behavior at the time of Jerusalem's capture and destruction. That's what makes his language so powerful and effective. God's anger reaches its culmination as Scripture is fulfilled.

That we find Obadiah quoting other prophets and working with their themes is no indication of intellectual and spiritual poverty on his part. It's not that Obadiah can't stand on his own two feet. Bear in mind that every prophet stands on the shoulders of his predecessors. Just as the Old Testament is referred to and quoted repeatedly in the New Testament, so there are close relations between the various books that together make up the Old Testament.

Should this surprise us? Remember that the song sung from the Red Sea to the Sea of Glass is always the same—even though it is sung in "new" versions. What is written in the Bible will really come to pass one day: "The kingdom shall be the LORD'S."

Jonah

1. The Sign of Jonah

The example of Nineveh. Many people with little knowledge of the Bible do know the story of "Jonah and the whale." Yet this does not mean that they understand the *message* of the small book that bears this prophet's name.

Although the book of Jonah is made up of some stories and a psalm and does not contain prophecies as the other "minor prophets" do, its overall intent is certainly prophetic. What a proclamation of God's might and grace! The Israelites who refuse to repent are put to shame by the example of Nineveh.

Jonah probably lived in the days when Jeroboam II ruled the northern kingdom. In II Kings 14:25 we read of an expansion of Israel's territory under this king, an expansion of which Jonah had prophesied. Thus it is likely that Jonah operated in the northern kingdom, slightly before the time of Amos and Hosea, from whose prophecies we get an impression of the conditions in Israel at the time.

Critique of Israel. The people were at ease in Samaria and looked forward confidently to the day of the Lord. They claimed to know the Lord (Hos. 8:2), but all the while injustice flourished and the people worshiped local Baals and the golden calf at Bethel.

They looked down contemptuously on the heathen world and no doubt heartily applauded all the prophecies of judgment against foreign nations. They even thought they would get off scot-free when the day of reckoning came; they did not seem to fear judgment at all. Ephraim delighted in his wealth and maintained that there was nothing sinful about how he had acquired it (see Hos. 12:8; Rev. 3:17).

The story of Jonah and his mission to Nineveh must be seen as a severe critique of Israel's false sense of security and pride. Israel's basic sin is unveiled—the refusal to live by grace.

An exceptional mission. The book of Jonah is regarded by some as a missionary story because Jonah was sent to the *heathen* city of Nineveh to preach. There are even interpreters who regard this book as nothing more than an allegory. Jonah represents Israel and is sent to the pagans with a message, but he refuses to preach to them. The punishment for this refusal is exile, which in Jonah's story is the period in the belly of the great fish. After Israel is allowed to return from exile, that is, after Jonah is expelled from the fish, the gospel is reluctantly preached to the pagans. It then becomes apparent that God wishes to save the heathen world.

I see no reason why the book of Jonah need be reduced to a merely symbolic or imaginative treatment of God's intentions, for much is lost that way. There are no indications in the book itself that it is *not* intended as an actual historical account.

Even though the book of Jonah clearly speaks of

preaching to the pagans, its purpose is not to make Israel conscious of any calling to preach the gospel to all nations. The sending of Jonah to Nineveh is most exceptional, for the wall dividing Israel from the heathens had not yet been removed.

A proclamation of grace. What is this book really about, then? First of all, it impresses on us once more the gravity of the situation, of the judgment to come. Jonah is sent to Nineveh to preach *judgment*. The prophecy is threatening in tone.

We are also shown that the Lord, who is no respecter of persons, forgives guilt once people repent. To put it in Jonah's words, which he borrowed from the Lord Himself: "I knew that you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, relenting from evil," that is, the evil of the approaching judgment (4:2 JB; see also Ex. 34:6; Ps. 86:5; Joel 2:13).

There is a mighty proclamation of grace in the book of Jonah, a grace that calls us to abandon our false security and *repent*. Christ pointed this out very clearly. To Israel's leaders, i.e. the scribes and Pharisees, he said: "On judgment day the men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation and condemn it, because when Jonah preached they repented; and there is something greater than Jonah here" (Matt. 12:41 JB).

The God of grace. It is not necessary to take up the question whether the conversion of Nineveh was genuine, for this only leads us away from the message directed to *Israel*. Nineveh was to be a *sign* given by the Lord to a stubborn covenant people who hardened their hearts and refused to repent. Turn to the Lord, and live!

The way the Lord went about this was contrary to the wishes of His servant Jonah. Although other prophets had

uttered curses meant for Assyria and Nineveh, no prophet had ever gone to a heathen stronghold to preach.

Preaching is not the same as pronouncing a curse that is sure to be realized. Preaching to people involves talking about judgment, but the judgment is always *conditional* in character. Even if the preacher does not explicitly say, "Repent, for God is gracious," he does presuppose that his hearers know that God is willing to forgive.

Thanks to forgiving grace, Israel itself could live in the strength of the proclamation at Sinai (Ex. 34:6; see also Jon. 4:2). But now Jonah is called to preach to Nineveh. He comes in the name of a God full of *grace*, a God who changes His mind about the punishment He has in store once the sinner repents.

Learning the hard way. Jonah's mission in the Assyrian capital involved the possibility of the heathen city's repentance, which would mean that God might not carry out the judgment. But this possibility did not fit in with Jonah's way of thinking. Like John the Baptist, he saw the ax at the root of the tree—Assyria's tree. Grace for Assyria did not fit in with his theology of revenge.

Yet a prophet must put his own will at the disposal of the One who is Lord over the entire earth. Jonah was to find this out the hard way. He booked passage on a ship headed for an entirely different part of the world—Tarshish (probably Tarsus, in Asia Minor).

Since the sailors on the ship must have been Phoenicians, whose language was very close to Israel's, there is no basis for arguing that Jonah's story is a legend since there are no language barriers in fairy tales. Surely sailors who stopped regularly at Joppa, in Israel, would have been able to communicate with the Israelites.

Fleeing from God. Jonah was fleeing from God. Because of a great storm at sea, he had to admit this to the

other men on the ship. On his own advice he was thrown into the sea. The sea then became still as God revealed Himself there, too, as the God of the entire world, the God who demands the respect of Phoenician sailors.

The Lord likewise manifested Himself as a God who knows how to preserve His prophets, even in deep waters. A sea monster—perhaps a sperm whale—swallowed Jonah and later spewed him out on dry land. Then the deserter finally carried out his assignment: the Lord called him again, and he went to Nineveh.

A psalm of thanksgiving. Jonah 2 gives us a psalm of thanksgiving composed by the prophet while he was in the belly of the great fish. In this psalm, which reminds us of various of the psalms (compare vs. 3-4 with Ps. 42:3, 8), Jonah compared himself to someone who had been buried and then pulled up out of the grave (vs. 6). From the "belly of Sheol" he cried out to the Lord (vs. 2), who heard him in the temple and saved him through the fish.

Christ pointed to this story when He spoke of the sign of Jonah. The prophet went to Nineveh as someone who had been resurrected through the power of the Lord. Christ would likewise proclaim His gospel to the Jews as someone who had risen from the dead.

The Word of the crucified and risen Christ is the only wonder, the only sign He would give (Matt. 12:38ff). "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:22-4). Jonah was swallowed up by the fish and preserved as a guilty one, whereas Christ, the sinless one, died and arose again. There is indeed something greater than Jonah here.

2. Something Greater Than Jonah

A great disappointment. Jonah's preaching brought about a reversal in Nineveh. When the people repented of their sins, God repented of the evil He had in mind for the city: "He did not do it" (3:10).

This was a great disappointment for Jonah. How could the God who planned to punish Israel before long show godless Assyria so much grace? Jonah made himself a shelter in the hills east of Nineveh and sat there sulking. The 40 days after which Nineveh was to be overthrown had not yet passed. Perhaps God would carry out the judgment after all.

A miraculous tree. While Jonah waited, a miraculous tree shot up to give him shade. This great plant was probably a fast-growing castor oil plant of the genus *ricinus*. Jonah enjoyed the shade provided by its digitate leaves. But a worm destroyed the plant, and Jonah, whose spirits had been on the rise, became faint, depressed and angry, asking God to let him die.

God used this plant to teach Jonah a lesson. If Jonah wanted the miraculous tree spared, was it so strange that the Lord wanted to spare the great city of Nineveh, where so many people and animals lived? Would the Lord needlessly destroy His own creation?

Worldwide grace. This prophetic story is full of comfort for Israel. God is a God of grace. If Israel continues to glory in itself and sinks below the level of Nineveh, the Lord will indeed raise His hand against His own creation. But a desolate earth is never the final purpose of His deeds. The Lord of the entire world delights in an earth that develops.

When we look at this story from a New Testament stand-

point, we conclude that faith in the "sign of Jonah," the sign of which Christ spoke, can be the means by which the world, together with its people and animals, is saved. On the basis of God's promises, we await a new heaven and a new earth. What the book of Jonah teaches us is that God's grace is worldwide!

Micah

1. Hurling Accusations at the Covenant People

A prophet from the lowlands. Micah was a Morasthite, a man from the lowland town of Moresheth-gath (1:14). Thus he was not a city-dweller like his contemporary Isaiah; he was more like the farmer Amos. He prophesied during the time of the Judean kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, in the days when Assyria was a rising world power under such rulers as Sargon and Sennacherib.

We read nothing about the calling of this prophet from the lowlands, the area bordering on the land of the Philistines. But we are told how he felt about his office and the program he was to carry out:

> But as for *me*, I am filled with power,
> with the Spirit of the LORD,
> and with justice and might,
> to declare to Jacob his transgression
> and to Israel his sin (3:8).

By saying "as for *me*," Micah was contrasting himself with other leaders, namely, the false prophets.

By now we know what sort of people he means—those who are always talking about God's covenant and promises. The theme of their preaching is: "Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us" (3:11).

Such a slogan is all too simple. "In God we trust," we read on American coins. False prophets have always been successful, also in financial respects, for they see to it that they are well paid for their reassuring words.

Standing alone. Like other true prophets, Micah knew what it meant to stand alone and bear a cross. The message of his enemies was: "Do not preach. One should not preach of such things" (2:6). They complained that there was no end to all the accusations.

Micah would not let himself be driven from the field of battle. He knew perfectly well that anyone who gets his prophetic inspiration from wine and strong drink will be hailed as *the* prophet (2:11). That's simply the way things go. The one who tells the people what they want to hear is acclaimed as the "people's prophet."

Concentrations of apostacy. Micah's calling was to go directly contrary to popular opinion and preference. His job was to tell Jacob about his *transgressions* and denounce Israel because of his *sins.* He had to warn the people that Yahweh was approaching in judgment. Like Hosea and Amos, he hurled accusations at the covenant people. Listen to this, all you nations!

Behold, the Lord descends to the earth from His heavenly temple to deal with Jacob's transgressions and the sins of the house of Israel—especially the chief concentrations of apostasy in Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom (1:5ff), and Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. An enemy power will march on Jerusalem (1:9ff). (Micah even uses the names of places in his clever plays on words.)

Disaster is *sure* to strike because of the sins of the Lord's people, for their unrighteousness is great.

Blood and injustice. Like Amos, Micah lashes away at the oppression and corruption and exploitation. Even the poor widows are driven out of their houses. Judges love bribes. Priests expect payment for giving instruction. The prophets are ready to cry "Peace!" if it will get them something to eat.

Do you suppose that the Lord will let this poor stewardship go unpunished? The inheritance will pass into the hands of foreigners (2:4), and Jerusalem, which is built on blood and injustice, will become a plowed field or a heap of ruins (3:10, 12).

Repentance unto life. That threat about Jerusalem, which was uttered in the days of Hezekiah, did not go unnoticed. In the days of Jeremiah, people still remembered clearly what had happened. The *first* time a prophet ever spoke about the coming destruction of Jerusalem must have been a painful occasion. But the pain was not a sorrow unto death but a repentance unto *life*. Hezekiah and his people humbled themselves before the Lord, and the Lord repented of the evil He had in mind for Jerusalem (Jer. 26:17-19). Micah's prophecy of doom had led to good results in Hezekiah's case, at least!

This episode teaches us something about prophecy. A prophet is not a fortune-teller predicting the future, a seer who foresees events that will happen whether we like it or not. In other words, prophecy is *conditional*; it is a proclamation of the Word. And that Word is the Word of the *covenant*, which contains both promise and demand—and therefore also a threat.

When such a threat is put into concrete language, its purpose is to get people to *repent*. Think of Jonah's prophecy about Nineveh's destruction: the Lord "did not

do it" (Jon. 3:10). Micah is likewise speaking of Jerusalem's destruction in conditional terms so that the people will humble themselves and repent. Isn't the Lord a God of grace?

2. The Good Shepherd and Messianic King

Sheep scattered on a mountain. It should not surprise us that Micah also speaks of salvation, of Messianic deliverance. This already begins in the beautiful comparisons of 2:12-13.

Since Solomon's death, there had been a number of deportations of Israelites. The Israelites were like sheep scattered on a mountain, sheep without a shepherd. To these sheep the Lord addressed some glorious words, words that beautifully describe the growth and preservation of the church:

> I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob,
> I will gather the remnant of Israel;
> I will set them together
> like sheep in a fold,
> like a flock in its pasture,
> a noisy multitude of men (2:12).

Isn't it comforting for the church to know that God continues to gather His own? All this culminates in the great multitude of Revelation 7, a multitude led by the Lamb into green pastures. Yes, Micah already speaks of someone who "opens the breach," a "king" who goes before his sheep.

Here we have the image of a ram with a bell on its neck leading the flock of sheep. The Lamb will bring them to

the spring of life. The Messiah brings the scattered sheep to *Zion.*

Coming glory. Micah does not speak only of Zion's destruction but also of its coming glory. Zion becomes the destination of many pilgrims—not just Israelites by blood but even pagans, that is, people from many nations (4:1ff; see also Is. 2:2ff). These pagans, too, receive instruction in the temple on the mount of the Lord. Yahweh will be King there (4:7), and the "remnant," which is weak in itself, will again become strong.

This is not to deny that enemy armies will mobilize against Judah. There will even be a period of exile in Babylon. Yet, in the final analysis the might of the enemy will not prevail, for in the distance we catch a glimpse of a Ruler, a King from Judah, a Good Shepherd:

> But you, Bethlehem in Ephrathah,
> small as you are to be among Judah's clans,
> out of you shall come forth a governor for Israel,
> one whose roots are far back in the past, in days
> gone by (5:2 NEB).

Some interpreters have deduced all sorts of doctrinal truths from this text, e.g. the divinity of Christ, who had roots "far back in the past," who is "from everlasting," as the King James Version translates it. We must be careful not to jump to any conclusions, for when the Hebrews used such words as *everlasting* and *eternal*, they sometimes meant nothing more than a very long period of time.

New Testament fulfillment. The text says that this "governor" stems from the ancient line of David. To interpret the text in this way is by no means to impoverish it. Didn't the prophecy come true in the One who was born of Mary in Bethlehem?

How well the Sanhedrin was acquainted with this prophecy of Micah is apparent from what happened when the wise men from the East came to Jerusalem to inquire about the birth of the "king of the Jews" (Matt. 2). Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Micah 5.

Broken by a Messianic power. We must not forget that this prophecy was also understandable to its original hearers: Micah was talking about the Assyrians and the land of Nimrod, that is, about enemies in his own time. He was saying that these mighty powers from the east would be broken by a Messianic power.

> Then among the many peoples,
> the remnant of Jacob will be
> like a dew from Yahweh,
> like raindrops on the grass,
> putting no hope in men,
> expecting nothing from mankind (5:7 JB).

Messianic peace. The image of the conquest of enemies makes way for a proclamation of Messianic peace (5:9ff; see also 4:3; Is. 11:6-10). Horses and chariots, which in the Old Testament are always symbols of heathen military might on which Israel was not to depend, will be destroyed. The heathen religious influence will also disappear, together with the sacred poles and the soothsayers. God's peace does not leave any area of life unaffected.

The church of today can seize on this as a firm promise. Christ, the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd, our Deliverer, makes all things new.

3. The Lawsuit Continues: Israel in the Dock

The Lord's "righteous deeds." Micah 6 opens with: "Hear what the LORD says." Thus, like 1:2 and 3:1, it represents the beginning of a separate section in Micah's account of the Lord's lawsuit against His people. We enter the *courtroom* and listen to the advocate plead his case.

The mountains and hills are witnesses, and the Lord is the accuser. Yet the people also had a complaint about their God: they were weary of His demands. The people of the Lord were sick and tired of the covenant!

Did they have any reason to be tired of the covenant? Hadn't the Lord done everything for His people since the time of the exodus from Egypt? How, then, could they complain? "O my people, remember," warned the prophet (6:5). Remember the Lord's acts of righteousness. The issue here is the Lord's "righteous deeds" (Judges 5:11; Jer. 51:10; Rev. 19:8), His saving acts. How could there be any criticism on that score?

Thousands of rams. In verses 6 and 7, we get the answer of the people. In the fashion of the pagans, they propose to restore the covenant relationship by means of all sorts of offerings:

> With what shall I come before the LORD,
> and bow myself before God on high?
> Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
> with calves a year old?
> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
> with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
> Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
> the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

Israel had often sought to win the favor of its covenant God through such outward deeds.

The law of the covenant. Like the other prophets, Micah rejects all this activity and fuss as useless (see Is. 1:10-20; Amos 5:21-4; Jer. 7:1-15, 21-8; Ps. 40:7-9). *Obedience* is better than sacrifices. Offerings are all right as an expression of faithfulness, but when the covenant is neglected, offerings are a laughable pretence.

Israel had to learn its ABCs all over. Therefore Micah stated the fundamental law of the covenant once more—in beautiful language valid for people of all times:

> He has showed you, O man, what is good;
> and what does the LORD require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8).

On the inside of a hatch leading to the living quarters of his vessel, a Dutch barge captain inscribed the words: "No lesson is as fine or great, as Micah 6, verse 8." That captain apparently understood the covenant's basic law or constitution (see Deut. 10:12, which is virtually identical in content). This law is likewise the law of all true reformation. What does the Lord require of you but . . . ?

4. The Strange Acquittal

A song of faith. In the final chapter, Micah once more lays bare Israel's sins—crooked commerce, the worship of Baal in the style of Ahab, the perversion of justice. The "godly man" is no more to be found in the land. Won't Yahweh punish Israel for this?

Micah sees judgment coming. Yet judgment is not the last word. The prophet also sings a song of faith:

But as for me, I will look to the LORD,
I will wait for the God of my salvation;
my God will hear me (7:7).

Steadfast love. Micah knows that Israel's God is a forgiving God. His own name, after all, means "Who is like Yahweh?" Thus his prophecy comes to a fitting conclusion:

Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger for ever
because he delights in steadfast love (vs. 18).

"Steadfast love" is one of those characteristic Old Testament phrases that we try to explain by offering all sorts of synonyms. What its meaning really boils down to is *covenant faithfulness*. The church must love God and be faithful to the Lord; it must show its steadfast love.

But isn't that just where we fall short? Indeed we do, but this glorious gospel tells us that *God* is faithful, that *His* love is steadfast. He abides by His promises and casts all our sins into the depths of the sea. We can hardly believe this good news when we hear it! He stands by His oaths and manifests His steadfast love to Abraham and his spiritual seed.

Sins cast into the sea. The conclusion of Micah's prophecy (7:7-20) lifts us to New Testament heights. Listen to the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist:

to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath which he swore to our father Abraham . . .
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins (Luke 1:72-3, 77).

As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrath, remember that *Christ* pleads our cause in the lawsuit (7:9).

When you hear an old-fashioned elder praying about all our sins being cast behind God's back into the sea of eternal oblivion, don't puzzle over his strange language but think of the conclusion of Micah's prophecy. What the elder is referring to is a rich promise: "Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (vs. 19).

Indeed, the prophet's name says it all. Who is like Yahweh?

Nahum

1. Squaring Accounts with the Church's Enemies

Incredible devastation. In 1842 the French government sent Paul Emile Botta to Mosul on the Tigris (in Mesopotamia) to examine the archeological excavations in that area and see whether they might not contain the hidden ruins of the ancient city of Nineveh. As a result of his work at Mosul and in the surrounding area, scholars could finally be sure of the location of this once proud city.

The fact that this was a matter of uncertainty for so long indicates that Nineveh must have been subjected to incredible devastation at some point. Historians could not even locate the site where the city had stood.

In Nahum's prophecies, the destruction of Nineveh was foretold. We do not know much about this prophet. We do know that he came from a town called Elkosh, but not where Elkosh was located. We also know that he prophesied *before* the fall of Nineveh, Assyria's capital (612 B.C.). Since Nahum mentions the fall of the Egyptian city of No-amon or Thebes (3:8), which was destroyed by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in 663 B.C., we know that his prophecy must fall somewhere between 663 and 612.

Jeering at Jerusalem's God. It is striking that Nahum says nothing whatever about the sins of his own people. He speaks only of the fall of a *political enemy*, namely, Assyria, with its capital city of Nineveh. There is no mention of the deformation that certainly existed in Judah in his time. This has led interpreters to argue that Nahum was a false prophet, a patriot who told the people just what they wanted to hear and dreamed nationalistic dreams. If that were true, his book of prophecy would not belong in the Bible.

Yet the church was right taking this book into the canon, for Nahum was talking not just about the fall of a political power but about the fall of an *enemy* of the church, an enemy who, through Sennacherib, once jeered at the God of Jerusalem. Thus Nahum's message was not just meant for his own day but also for ours.

A vassal state. Nahum's prophecy was particularly relevant to his own time. After all, think of all the people in Judah who had been mesmerized by the power of the Assyrians. And we should not lose sight of the fact that Judah was a vassal state of Assyria for a long time. Not until the time of King Josiah did this submission to Assyria come to an end.

Being a vassal has *religious* consequences as well as political ones. The vassal was expected to pay tribute not just in monetary terms but also by acknowledging the gods of the great conqueror. How many faithful believers were there who dared to show their true colors at such a time? If you consider the magic influence emanating from a world power—think of today's superpowers—you can see what Judah's predicament was. There was an Assyrian wind blowing in the land of Yahweh.

Restored glory. When Nahum prophesied about the fall of the Assyrian colossus, he must have strengthened

Josiah's efforts at reformation and given comfort to the godly in Israel. His name, like Noah's is related to a word that means *rest* or *comfort*.

In the midst of his prophecies of judgment stands a promise of salvation. We hear the sounds of the gospel: Judah can celebrate festivals, Jacob's glory is restored, and the old vine in the vineyard grows again (1:15—2:2). Yes, Nahum addressed some timely words to the church of his day.

"Wiped off the map." His words are the language that *we* need to hear. Nineveh was succeeded by another state that glorified itself, namely, Babylon. To this day, history has been a succession of empire after empire, each with its own unique ideology. But just as Nineveh was "wiped off the map," the Lord will one day settle accounts with all human powers.

The Messianic Kingdom in which Israel's glory will be restored is on the way. The stone that Daniel saw will smash all the empires and fill the earth. All enemies will be subjected to Christ. Only when all resistance is broken can the new Kingdom of God be fully established (I Cor. 15:25; Heb. 2:8; Rev. 19:11-16).

2. Yahweh, the Great Avenger

God's mighty majesty. Nahum begins his prophecy as follows:

> The LORD is a jealous God and avenging,
> the LORD is avenging and wrathful;
> the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries
> and keeps wrath for his enemies.

The LORD is slow to anger and of great might,
and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.

Nahum goes on to sketch the coming of the Lord in words that remind us of songs dealing with other appearances of God (Ex. 15; Deut. 33; Judges 5; Ps. 18; Hab. 3). God's mighty majesty dries up the sea and causes hills to melt. His power of judgment cannot be resisted.

Nahum sees his God judging Nineveh; it is not without reason that his written prophecies have been characterized as a book of *judgment*. In beautiful, imaginative language, he sketches the inescapable danger.

Unforgettable intervention. This prophet does not present a *political* survey of the situation. Nor does he simply foretell what is going to happen, declaring that the "Supreme Being" will strike proud Nineveh. No, he refers explicitly to *Yahweh*, the God of the covenant. That's why he quotes the law (Ex. 20:5; 34:14).

Yahweh is a jealous God. He is willing to use Assyria to humble His people (1:12), but now that Assyria claims to be self-sufficient and makes vile plots against the Lord (vs. 9, 11), it will have to be obliterated.

The Lord takes up the cause of His people. He knows those who take refuge in Him (1:7). It might appear that He puts up with everything because He is long-suffering (vs. 3), but at some point He will intervene in an unforgettable way and make His presence felt. He will remove the Assyrian yoke from the neck of His people. Judah can celebrate her festivals, for she will no longer be a battleground or staging area for foreign troops.

Here we see something of the Messianic day of salvation and the restoration of Israel's glory! (2:2). Just think how comforting these words must have been to the godly in Israel, the ones awaiting comfort for Israel. "The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble" (1:7).

Elaborate defenses. Nineveh was an enormous city of some 664 hectares. On one side was the Tigris River. In fact, the entire city was protected by rivers and moats as well as an outer wall and an inner wall with fifteen gates. But all these defenses were not enough to hold back the army of the Medes and Babylonians when Nineveh fell:

> The picked troops are called out;
> the columns clash,
> they hurl themselves against the rampart,
> the mantelet is already in place.
> The gates that give on the river are opened,
> in the palace [which was on a branch of the Tigris] all
> is panic.
> The Lady [the queen] is carried off, taken into exile,
> her handmaids raise the dirge, with sighs
> like the moaning of doves,
> and beat their breasts.
> Nineveh is like a pool
> whose waters are draining away.
> "Stop! Stop!"
> But no one turns back.
> "Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold!"
> There are endless treasures,
> tons of valuables.
> Raid and ravage and ruin! (2:5-9 JB).

The alliteration in the last line gives us a distinct impression of all the clamor and confusion surrounding the fall of the city. In Hebrew this line reads: "Bukah u-mebukah u-mebulaqah."

> The crack of the whip!
> The rumble of wheels!
> Galloping horse,
> jolting chariot,
> charging cavalry,
> flash of swords,

gleam of spears . . .
a mass of wounded,
hosts of dead,
countless corpses;
they stumble over the dead (3:2-3 JB).

A harlot's fate. Excavated art works show that the Assyrian rulers enjoyed improvised lion hunts, but now their own royal lion's den is being destroyed. The king falls in battle. "Where is the lion's den, the cave of the lion's whelps?" (2:11 JB). The end has come for the state that delighted in preying on others.

The end has also come for the immoral religion of Ishtar, which Assyria imposed on other nations. The prophet calls this religion *harlotry*—an image that we also find in Revelation 17. Nineveh suffers a harlot's fate (3:4ff).

There is no "comfort," no consolation, for Assyria. Just as Assyria burned No-amon (the Egyptian city of Thebes) with all its towers, so it will be destroyed itself. No nation, feeling bound by a treaty it was forced to sign, will come to Nineveh's defense. Instead the nations will take delight in Nineveh's destruction.

The reality of hell. Assyria is irrational, unable to figure out what to do next, beyond saving. Its people and officials may be as numerous as locusts, but that won't make any difference, for they act like locusts:

Make yourselves many as the locusts,
make yourselves many as the hoppers,
a swarm which spreads out and then flies away.
You have spies as numerous as the stars in the sky;
your secret agents are like locusts,
your commanders like the hoppers
which lie dormant in the walls on a cold day;

but when the sun rises, they scurry off,
and no one knows where they have gone (3:15-17 NEB).

The old glory of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal is no help; no new day is dawning. The reality of hell becomes visible.

Yahweh is a jealous God, an avenger. Today's church should take a long, hard look at Nineveh, for she may well suffer even greater judgment (Matt. 12:41; Rev. 17:2, 16). Blessed are those who take refuge in Yahweh (1:7).

Habakkuk

The wicked surround the righteous (1:4).

1. The Object of God's Righteous Judgment

Jeremiah's contemporary. There's not much more to be said about the question when Habakkuk did his work as prophet than what we read in an annotation to an early Dutch translation of the Bible: "We cannot be sure just when Habakkuk lived and prophesied. Various scholars believe that he prophesied during the time of Josiah's descendants or in the time of Manasseh, since the sins he condemns are the sins of which Manasseh and the people of his time were guilty. It is clear from 1:6 that he lived before the time when Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar."

In this verse the coming of the Chaldeans (i.e. the Babylonians) is predicted. Like an all-devouring beast of prey, Babylon will carry out God's judgment. Thus Habakkuk prophesied before the deportation from Judah. Jeremiah, who was probably somewhat younger than Habakkuk, must have been his contemporary.

The godless majority. We turn now to the content of Habakkuk's "burden," his message from God. There are various viewpoints concerning this question. If you examine the headings supplied for the book of Habakkuk by the editors of various editions of the Bible in circulation today, you are left with the impression that the contrast between *Judah* and *Babylon* (the Chaldeans) is what dominates his prophecy. Judah is then the righteous one (1:4; 2:4) and Babylon the faithless one about whom we hear cries of woe; the antithesis is between "the world" and "the church."

If we bear in mind that Habakkuk prophesied approximately in the days of Jeremiah, however, we have reason to doubt any such interpretation. After all, Habakkuk lived in days of *deformation:*

> How long, O LORD, have I cried to thee, unanswered?
> I cry "Violence!", but thou dost not save.
> Why dost thou let me see such misery,
> why countenance wrongdoing? (1:2-3 NEB).

That's how the prophet begins. In this respect he reminds us a great deal of Jeremiah, who knew what it was to lament (see Jer. 20:8).

What was Jeremiah complaining about? About the abandonment of the covenant, the apostasy of the people of the Lord. He saw *covenant wrath* approaching, and that's what he prophesied about—after clearly exposing and denouncing the sins of his people. Read Jeremiah 2, 3, 5, 7, and 11 once more with this in mind. The antithesis Jeremiah talked about is an opposition *within* the ranks of the church.

Habakkuk was doing the same thing. The people of Judah enjoyed a false sense of security. In their nationalistic pride, they equated "the righteous" with the members of the covenant people. The faithless ones would

:hen be the pagans. The church, with its blessings, would stand over against "the world," which was cursed.

Habakkuk looks straight at the church and speaks to the godless majority, which he distinguished from the pious minority. The law loses its power because of all the sins committed by private citizens and the government, sins sketched in Habakkuk 2. The Lord will not shrink from judging His church, as the psalm in chapter 3 indicates.

The judgment of the church. If Habakkuk was speaking of Babylon's judgment, we would expect him to be pleased, but he *trembles* instead (3:16). The God of the exodus is coming to judge His own people (see also Jer. 21:1-10). Habakkuk prophesies that God has decided to let the Jews fall into the hands of the Chaldeans because of their many, many sins. "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (2:20).

Judgment always starts with the *house of God.* Try reading Habakkuk's small book of prophecy from this point of view. Then it will become much more meaningful to you. Klaas Schilder comments: "On the one hand there are *God's righteous ones*, living out of *faith*, and on the other hand there are those who 'withdraw,' those who are doomed to die *because* God takes no pleasure in them."*

Naturally this does not mean that a world power deifying its own might will not feel God's righteous judgment. All faithlessness will be judged. Yet the

Heidelbergsche Catechismus, Vol. II (Goes, 1949), p. 415. The Commentary on Habakkuk found at Qumran in 1947 likewise applies the antithesis to the division *within* the Jewish people. See also Hebrews 10:38-9, the introduction to the well-known eleventh chapter, where Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted in a context where the opposition is not one of church versus world but one of church members who remain faithful versus church members who desert and flee the field of battle.

judgment that "the world" deserves should not lead us to overlook the fact that Habakkuk makes the judgment of *the church* central.

> *My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him (Heb. 10:38).*

2. Righteousness and Unrighteousness

The waiting church. "How long?" Habakkuk asks, voicing the complaint of the waiting church that lives in the tension between God's promises and the cruel realities of the present (Ps. 13:2-3; 74:10; Zech. 1:12; Rev. 6:10). The prophet is aware that the people are forsaking the covenant in spite of repeated reformations (Hezekiah, Josiah). The rediscovered law has no grip on them. The "godly" are oppressed.

In the face of this apostasy, the prophet points to some political developments of global significance. A new power is pressing forward with irresistible might. Under the dynamism of the Chaldean empire, the current Assyrian hegemony, however amazing it might seem, will collapse. The demonic power of the Chaldeans, who brag and flaunt their glory just as imperialistic states so often do—think of Hitler's Third Reich—will conquer the Near East.

Yahweh's role in this turn of events must not be overlooked. Yahweh is the Holy One, and it is He who unleashes this horrible power against His people. He is the Rock of which Moses sang (Deut. 32:30, 18), the one who sells His people into the hands of their enemies when they abandon Him. But He is also the God who has mercy on His servants (Deut. 32:36). Therefore Habakkuk, full of faith, declares: "We shall *not* die" (1:12).

Unbridled brutalization. After this message from God comes a series of complaints. Again the issue is the oppression of the righteous by godless people who respect nothing, the unbridled brutalization of the community of the saints, the glory that fishers of men (in the evil sense) take in their scandalous plundering and ill-gotten gains (1:13-17).

The faithless ones in Judah remind the prophet of heathen kings who are immortalized in a pose with a fishnet, a pose that symbolizes their insatiable appetite for plunder and conquest. Didn't Christ speak of Pharisees who eat the houses of the widows? Could that sort of thing be permitted to continue? Would the godless always be allowed to empty their nets and murder people without showing any mercy?

A prophetic billboard. There is an answer to these complaints, just as the complaints in 1:2-4 are answered in verses 5-11.

The prophet climbs a watchtower to hear what the Lord will say. He does not climb in vain. The Lord commands him to write down what he is told on large tablets, so that every passer-by will be able to read it. His written account of God's Word must serve as a piece of "outdoor advertising," a "billboard." Before long the message of the billboard will be realized: "Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith" (2:4). Habakkuk published this word from the Lord just as he was told to do. Those within the covenant circle were then forced to *choose*.

The righteous man. It was not by chance that this text from Habakkuk became the leitmotif of Paul's letter to the Romans and also played a leading role in the Reformation, for it is really a short summary of the gospel (Rom. 1:16-

17). The righteous shall live by faith, by their firm trust in the Lord.

When you read the term *righteous* in the Bible, you must be careful not to equate it with *perfect*. The righteous man is the one who abides by God's law. (Think of the contrast with the wicked man described in 1:4.) The righteous man lives by forgiveness, trusting in the words of his covenant God in all of life's storms. The righteous man knows what it means to live by grace alone. He knows there is no room for boasting about our own works (see 1:15ff).

Despite all the apostasy around us—we sometimes wonder what the world will look like if Christ still has not returned by the time we reach our three score and ten—Habakkuk's message contains an element of comfort for the church. The believer can live in the assurance that he has a firm anchor. It is no coincidence that the Hebrew word for *faith* is related to the word *amen*. We, then, who are justified by faith, have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Cries of "woe." The rest of chapter 2 gives us a number of "woe" statements. In the Revised Standard Version we find such statements in 2:5-20—five of them. Some translations even add a sixth "woe" statement in 2:5. The important thing, however, is not how many "woe" statements there are but to whom these statements are addressed.

These words are not about an entire nation but about *individuals* who eat others (2:5), individuals who become rich through goods taken in pledge (vs. 6) and other ill-gotten gains (vs. 9). These words are about a government that carries out its will over the bodies of the dead (vs. 12), about immorality that leads to drunkenness and public dishonor of others even more shameful than what Ham did to his father (vs. 15), about exploitation, robbery, and idolatry.

Building by unrighteousness. We should read Jeremiah 22:13ff as an illustration of what Habakkuk was talking about. That passage deals with King Jehoiakim of Judah, who built his house by unrighteousness, making people work for nothing, paneling his house with cedar and painting it with vermilion, making unjust profits, and spilling innocent blood.

This example shows us just how timely Habakkuk's laments were and how much they applied to the situation in Judah. Not Babylon but a *Jerusalem become like Babylon* was the object of his cutting denunciations. And if the prophet did not speak out about these matters, the stone would "cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond"! (2:11; see also Luke 19:40).

In the path of thy judgments, O LORD, we wait for thee (Is. 26:8).

3. Habakkuk's Psalm

The God of Sinai and the exodus. The last chapter of Habakkuk is a psalm. From notations in the margins of ancient copies, we see that this psalm was used in worship services in the temple. Hence we should not shrink from using this robust song in our worship services either. In fact, the church would benefit from singing this psalm and other Biblical psalms that appear outside the book of Psalms.

In this prayer Habakkuk makes beautiful use of the contents of other Old Testament songs. The coming of the Lord is sketched in majestic terms that draw on Deuteronomy 33:2. The God who is coming is the God of Sinai, the God of the exodus from Egypt. Therefore the

psalm also reminds us of Exodus 15, where Moses celebrates the passage through the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan on the way into Canaan (3:8, 14-15). Again this God is depicted approaching as a frightening and majestic figure.

Two key assurances. The Lord will come to judge the house of the godless (3:13), but at the same time He goes forth to deliver His Anointed and His people. He is the God of Deuteronomy 32, who destroys those who despise His salvation but has mercy on His servants.

We can well understand why Habakkuk trembles. He sees Babylon stripping the lands bare with its scorched-earth tactics. The entire harvest is lost, and there are no more flocks in the fields. God's covenant wrath is great (Deut. 28:49-51).

Yet the prophet continues to *sing*, for God's covenant faithfulness is great. At the end of his book of prophecy, two key assurances are repeated, namely, that we shall not die (1:12), and that the righteous shall live by his faith (2:4).

Above all the chaos, we hear a proud song of jubilation. What the irreverent Voltaire is alleged to have said about Habakkuk is all too true: "He is capable of anything"—through faith. In words reminiscent of Deuteronomy 32:13, Habakkuk ends his book of prophecy by declaring:

> GOD, the Lord, is *my strength*;
> he makes my feet like hinds' feet,
> he makes me tread upon my high places.

Zephaniah

Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light (Amos 5:18 NIV).

1. The Day of the Lord's Fierce Anger (1:1—2:3)

Pioneers in syncretism. The time is the reign of Josiah, and the theme is the day of the Lord. Is there any connection between the two?

Josiah is remembered especially for the two attempts at reformation made during his time (II Chron. 34:3ff). His predecessors Manasseh and Amon had allowed the land to be overrun by idolatry, such as the service of Baal and Molech (whose name means *king*), the worship of the stars, and adherence to all sorts of foreign fashions. We know about the situation from Jeremiah, who began to prophesy at about that time.

The elite naturally played a great role in importing idolatrous customs. The "court" and the priests were pioneers in the area of syncretism (the *mixing* of the service of Yahweh with idolatry). Customs like jumping over the threshhold of a house because a spirit was believed to live there (1:9) were typical of the degeneration in Judah.

"Seeking" the Lord. The people no longer "sought" the Lord. The prophets did not speak of the necessity of "seeking" the LORD because He kept Himself hidden. On the contrary, He could easily be found. But the people failed to seek Him *where He could be found*; they did not seek an audience with Him. (That's what "seeking" really means in this context, as we see from I Kings 10:24, where we read that "the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom.")

Zephaniah had to drill it into the people that the Lord must be *sought* (2:3; see also 1:6; Amos 5:4, 6, 14). The day of Yahweh was approaching. Who would then be able to stand?

It is possible that Zephaniah's preaching prepared the way for Josiah's reformation. And even if he first appeared on the scene *after* Josiah's temple reformation, there remains a connection between the times and the theme of his preaching. From the book of Jeremiah, we learned that the repentance of the people was often only superficial. The people did not change in their hearts, which is why storms of judgment again rumbled on the horizon.

Corruption at the court. A certain Hezekiah is listed as one of the forefathers of Zephaniah. Perhaps the king bearing this name is meant. If so, Zephaniah's work as prophet is all the more courageous, for he attacks corruption *at the court* and thus includes the king and the princes in his condemnations. We can well imagine what effect such words must have had.

The accusation that the prophet defends his own segment of society could not be used against Zephaniah, then. This prophet must have had just as hard a time of it as Jeremiah, who, as the son of a priest, had to attack the men serving in the sanctuary.

Colorful language. Zephaniah was not the only prophet to talk about the day of the Lord. What distinguishes him from the others is that he does so in such colorful language. The Lord will "sweep away" everything He finds on the face of the earth—fish and birds, the wicked and the godless (1:2-3). The Lord stretches out His hand even against idolatrous Judah and Jerusalem. He will *slaughter* them and use them for a sacrifice (1:7). Yahweh promises to punish those who dispense with Him in their thinking, those who call the verdict of the judge into question.

> The great day of the LORD is near,
> near and hastening fast.
> A day of wrath is that day,
> a day of distress and anguish,
> a day of ruin and devastation,
> a day of darkness and gloom,
> a day of clouds and thick darkness,
> a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
> against the fortified cities
> and against the lofty battlements (1:14, 15-16).

Zephaniah's words about "that day" inspired Thomas of Celano, a Franciscan monk, to write "Dies Irae," a well-known song, about 1230:

> Day of wrath! that day dismaying;
> As the seers of old were saying,*
> All the world in ashes laying.

*In the original Latin text, these "seers of old" are identified as David and the sibyls. "Dies Irae" thus presents us with a *combined* testimony involving both the Psalms (David) and the legendary oracle of the non-Hebrew world. This shows us again that the Middle Ages did not look down on non-Biblical proofs. There are also sibyls in the painting "The Lamb of God" by the Van Eyck brothers of Ghent.

An appeal for repentance. With one eye fixed on the coming day of judgment, Zephaniah calls for repentance:

> Come together and hold assembly,
> O shameless nation,
> before you are driven away
> like the drifting chaff,
> before there comes upon you
> the fierce anger of the LORD,
> before there comes upon you
> the day of the wrath of the LORD (2:1-2).

Zephaniah calls for self-examination leading to the *death* of the old nature and the *awakening* of the new. The godless must forsake their wicked ways and seek the Lord while He is still to be found.

An unrelenting God? Some students of the Bible have argued that Zephaniah preaches an unrelenting God: the judgment is an avalanche that cannot be stopped. But any such view is ruled out by the prophet's own words: "*Perhaps* you may be hidden on the day of the wrath of the LORD" (2:3; see also Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9). This "perhaps" indicates that there may be hope for those who repent.

When the prophets announced that Israel was to be judged, they usually put their proclamations in *conditional* form. If the people repented, God might "repent" of the wrath He had in mind. Our covenant God is not an immovable God of necessity; He is a merciful God who applies His unchanging covenant promises by turning in favor to those who humble themselves.

2. Prophecies against the Neighboring Nations (2:4-15)

Judged by God's hand. Zephaniah, like the other prophets, has some words for the neighboring nations. And, like some of the others, he inserts them in the middle of his prophecies.

Surely the Lord will not overlook the sins of the nations that have tormented the church! The Philistines, those immigrants from Crete, have badgered Israel long enough. Their cities will be destroyed and fall prey to Judah. Ammon and Moab, who have repeatedly reviled God's people, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah, the area their forefather Lot once fled. The great nations of Ethiopia (which may be a reference to Egypt) and Assyria will also be judged by God's hand.

A desolate pile of ruins. Assyria's capital, Nineveh, will become a desolate pile of ruins to be reclaimed by nature:

> Herds shall lie down in the midst of her,
> all the beasts of the field;
> the vulture and the hedgehog
> shall lodge in her capitals;
> the owl shall hoot in the window,
> the raven croak on the threshhold;
> for her cedar work will be laid bare (2:14).

If you know anything about the excavations that were necessary to recover something of what was once Nineveh, you can see how fully this prophecy was borne out. Some colossal catastrophe must have struck that enormous city—as part of God's plan.

3. Promises and Bowls of Wrath (3:1-20)

Threatening languages. After this intermezzo come more prophecies against Jerusalem. At the outset we hear threatening language. In a few bold strokes, Zephaniah sketches the apostasy of the office-bearers who were supposed to mediate between Yahweh and His people. The rulers and judges are characterized as "roaring lions," as "wolves" devouring their prey at night. The prophets are "wanton, faithless men," and the priests profane what is sacred and do violence to the law.

Through Josiah's reformation, the torah (the law) became central. The people were afraid of the threats expressed in it. But the office-bearers of the covenant appear to make the return to Scripture useless because of their conduct. They may well declare that the Lord is in the midst of His people, but they will discover that the God of justice has *judgment* in mind for Judah. Just as the book of Revelation speaks of the pouring out of the bowls of wrath (see Rev. 16:1ff), so Zephaniah speaks of the Lord pouring out His burning anger on a nation that wants nothing to do with discipline and restraint (3:7-8).

A festal gathering in Zion. Yet there is salvation in sight on the horizon. "Wait for me," declares the Lord (3:8). In verse 9 He goes on: "I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD." This is pure Pentecost prophecy.

Israel, too, will repent—even if it is reduced to a remnant, a "people humble and lowly" (vs. 12). But in that remnant, "all Israel" is preserved. Injustice disappears and there is no longer any tongue uttering lies.

Now we hear sounds of jubilation. "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion"! The church is removed from judgment; the King is in the midst of her. He has not come

o judge her: the Lord is in her midst as "a warrior who gives victory" (vs. 17). Even those who are mourning far away from the festal gathering in Zion (see Heb. 12:23; Ps. 137; 42:5) return. Zephaniah's prophecy concludes with a picture of the gathering of the church.

The New Testament church, which awaits the great day of the Lord, also longs for the realization of these promises. Even though she has already come to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the festal gathering of the first-born whose names are recorded in heaven, she awaits still more—the gathering of the remnant from all races and nations. Maranatha!

Haggai

1. Delay in the Rebuilding of the Temple

Exact dates. Haggai, together with his colleague Zechariah, began his work as a prophet in the days after the exile, when the temple rebuilding was delayed. Thus we can well understand that the main theme of his preaching would be the rebuilding of the temple.

We know the exact dates of his prophecies. The first message (1:1-13) dates from the second year of the reign of King Darius, on the first day of the seventh month. The second message (2:2-9) was delivered that same year on the twenty-first day of the month. Both the third message (2:11-19) and the fourth (2:20-3) were delivered that year on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month.

Opposition from the Samaritans. To get a good grasp of the background of Haggai's prophecies, read the opening chapters of the book of Ezra once more. What opposition from the Samaritans the repatriated exiles had to contend with! The rebuilding program begun during the time of King Cyrus ground to a halt.

From Ezra 5:1 we learn that it was through the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah that the work was resumed in the second year of the reign of King Darius. Haggai 2:1 provides an even more exact date: the rebuilding resumed on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month—which was *less than a month* after Haggai preached his first sermon as prophet!

Searching the archives. Further study of the book of Ezra reveals the dangers still present on the side of the Persian powers beyond the Euphrates. The authorities had to search the archives. They found an edict of Cyrus in which support for the temple rebuilding was promised. King Darius reaffirmed this earlier edict and gave the temple rebuilding his own support—which must have been a tremendous relief to the Jews!

We should also note—and this is important for understanding the background of the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah—that the work of rebuilding did *not* stop while the archives were being searched (Ezra 5:5). The Jewish elders went right on building, encouraged by the words of the two prophets (Ezra 6:14).

Thus the preaching of Haggai was of great significance. After the work of rebuilding had been delayed some fifteen years, there was suddenly a revival. A sermon delivered by a prophet was the lever that got things going again.

Thou wilt arise and have mercy on Zion; for the time is come to pity her. Her very stones are dear to thy servants, and even her dust moves them with pity (Ps. 102:13-14 NEB).

2. The Perspective of Coming Glory

Too early. How did Haggai get started as a prophet? First he turned to representatives of the "church" and the "state" respectively—Zerubbabel, a descendant of David whom the Persian government had appointed governor of Judah, and Joshua (Jeshua), the high priest. In speaking to these two, he was speaking to the whole nation. The prophet began to sketch the misery: "This people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD" (1:2).

I suspect that such an argument will not sound all that foreign or unusual to you. How often don't we hear that the time is "not yet ripe," that it's "too early to make a move"? Although the situation is described, it is left just as it is.

No reformation ever got started with a declaration that the time is finally "ripe." Those who are lazy can always find an excuse to delay.

Mitigating circumstances. Yet we must bear in mind that there were certain mitigating circumstances that played a role in Israel's delay. After all, earlier prophets (Micah, Isaiah, Ezekiel) had promised a glorious future. The Jews had heard talk of the house of the Lord on a high mount as the midpoint of a world that feared Yahweh; they had been told of a miracle of God for a miserable, downcast people. But what had come of this glorious Messianic future? The day of salvation did not seem to be dawning; in fact, it was

still night. Judah was only a speck of dust in the scale of world politics.

Can you see why people would conclude that the time had not yet come? The people saw no mighty signs of the times.

Think of the Jews during the time of Christ's ministry on earth. They also had a Messianic vision of the future, a most impressive conception of what the future would bring. The powers of heaven and earth would be moved. When Jesus, an ordinary rabbi, appeared on the scene, the people didn't believe that the time (*kairos*), the Messianic hour, had come (Luke 4:21; Matt. 16:1-4). Their expectations about the future were not applied to the present.

That was also the outlook of the people in Haggai's day. They waited patiently for God to perform a miracle and thought of Yahweh's power as something remote and distant.

An impoverished outlook. Haggai exposed the poverty of this outlook. The people themselves lived in fine homes, but the temple remained unfinished. The people made excuses by speaking of the critical situation, of poor harvests, of setbacks of all sorts. The time was not yet ripe, they argued.

They forgot that the reason for their misfortune was Yahweh's displeasure and punishment because of their laxness with regard to the rebuilding of the temple. The Lord was very near them—not far away, as they supposed—and that's why there were poor harvests and so many other disappointments (1:6, 9ff; 2:17-19).

The Immanuel promise. Haggai used this revealing sermon to show that because the Lord was making His judgments plain to His discouraged people, it was "time" to start rebuilding the temple. The fear of God's countenance should not paralyze us but *activate* us. Zerubbabel

and Joshua and the people listened to what Haggai said, and the rebuilding resumed. Then the prophet could voice the Immanuel promise: "I am with you, says the LORD" (1:13). In 2:4 we also read: "I am with you."

But what about that great future that was promised so often? Was it still coming? The present didn't amount to much compared to the earlier glory of the temple (vs. 3). The truth cannot be disguised. We must face up to it.

It is true, of course, that the present did not compare favorably with the visions presented by the prophets. But the eye of faith could still see the light of a Messianic future. The God of the exodus had not changed. In time He would make heaven and earth tremble and fill the new temple with His glory.

Firm guarantees. Just as *we* live in less than ideal circumstances but have the Spirit and the gospel as an assurance of Christ's glorious future, so the people of Haggai's day had to learn to look at the shortcoming of the present in the light of the coming glory. We may never cut the bond between the present and the future by concerning ourselves exclusively with the "here and now" or by neglecting our present task through an excessive preoccupation with the future awaiting us.

The promises about the future should stimulate the church to get busy with its task today. The prophecies themselves as well as our worship are guarantees of the future realization of all the Messianic promises.

3. A Spiritual Temple of Living Stones

Lifeless liturgy. Rebuilding the temple was a fine thing to do, but the temple exists for the sake of the liturgy.

What good is a new temple if there is no *inner willingness* to serve the Lord with a whole heart? A new temple is no justification for arbitrary sacrifice rituals and an unholy way of life. Without a living worship, the temple remains a dead structure of stone.

Apparently the priests put up with a sloppy, lifeless liturgy. Their main concern was to have the offerings brought on time and the customary fees paid. But Haggai let the priests talk themselves into a corner as he debated with them. "Holy" flesh has no power to make ordinary bread holy, but something unclean defiles what is clean. Well then, the lesson also applies to human life: the unholy life defiles holy offerings. The Lord takes no pleasure in a religion of mere ritual and routine (2:11ff).

A royal priesthood. We should not forget the judgments that struck the people before the rebuilding of the temple was resumed. Those judgments were intended to make the people repent. They were to repent not simply by returning to the task of rebuilding the temple but by letting themselves be used as living stones in a Spiritual temple, by becoming a royal priesthood.

Let Judah draw a lesson from God's judgments. He demands *complete* service of us—but also promises to bless us from now on.

4. God's Kingdom and Church

A future for David's house. How else could blessing come than through the Messiah? Jeremiah had once spoken some harsh words of judgment about King Jehoiachin (Jer. 22:24). The Lord would cast him aside even if he were the *signet ring* on His finger.

The signet ring or seal symbolizes the power of the one who wears it. Both Joseph and Mordecai became keepers of the royal seal when they were elevated; they became representatives of the king himself.

In a certain sense, the rulers of the house of David were called to represent and exercise the royal power of Yahweh. In that regard they were to bear His image and likeness. But the exile clearly put an end to this "office." Now, after the exile, Zerubbabel is told that the Lord plans to make a *signet ring* of him (2:23).

The house of David has a future again! Zerubbabel may represent the Lord and manifest something of the office of Messiah. The Lord is living up to His promises (see Ps. 89).

Messianic prospects. Yes, the Lord will make heaven and earth tremble, as the nations of the world are overthrown. But at the same time God will make His Kingdom rise above the collapsing world powers. The center of His Kingdom will be His church, that Lilliputian state around Jerusalem, a state that isn't even independent.

What are those feeble Jews up to anyway? Aren't they all destined to die? What's the meaning of that little temple in the midst of the great Persian empire?

Faith responds that it has caught sight of Messianic prospects. This applies to Zerubbabel as well as today's church. In the New Testament we have another promise: "He has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Heb. 12:26 NIV). In the light of Christ's coming, we see how important the temple is.

Zechariah

1. A Priestly Prophet

A guarantee of Yahweh's presence. Zechariah, whose name means *Yahweh remembers*, was a prophet descended from a family of priests (Neh. 12:4, 16; Ezra 5:1; 6:14). He was active as prophet after the exile.

Both the time in which he lived and his origin make it understandable why his first visionary prophecies focused on *the temple*. From the words of his contemporary Haggai, we have already seen that the issue was not the rebuilding of a historical monument. No, the temple was a guarantee of Yahweh's presence among His people, a guarantee and sign of a great Messianic future.

For the Jews in Christ's day, the temple became a fetish, a mascot, a security blanket, an almost magic guarantee that Jerusalem would never be overthrown. That's why the Lord did not leave one stone upon another in that building, which had been used for essentially idolatrous purposes.

But that was not how Zechariah saw the temple. In his thinking we find no doctrine of a covenant that works

automatically. No, he preached about both covenant promises and covenant demands, linking them closely. In the later prophecies we hear rumbles of the judgment in store for Jerusalem because of its violation of the temple laws.

Strikingly "modern." We begin, of course, with the visions with which the book of Zechariah opens. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, these visions will not speak directly to all twentieth century readers, even though they have tremendous suggestive power.

All the same, the visions of Zechariah are strikingly "modern" and fit right in with our world of abstract art. They are also suitable reading for children. With just a bit of explanation, children seated around the table after supper will find these visions stimulating and worth thinking about.

We must get away from the persistent notion that the Bible is only for a certain select circle. On the contrary, it speaks directly to those whose thinking is on the level usually characterized as "primitive." Is there an artist somewhere who will paint or draw what Zechariah saw in his night visions?

2. The Night Visions

An impressive appeal. The prophecies begin with an impressive appeal for conversion. Hosea and Jeremiah, two earlier prophets, had spoken the same kind of language. John the Baptist also spoke in such terms when he heralded the coming of Christ, who in turn followed John's lead in this regard (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

Zechariah points to Israel's response to the appeals for repentance made by earlier prophets. The church in his day could see itself reflected in this sorry story. Didn't the words of the prophets come true? God's Word abides forever. That's why people were more inclined to listen when another prophet came along to speak to them.

First vision. Horsemen who are sent out come back to a glen of green myrtle trees. They report to the angel of the Lord, Yahweh's adjutant, telling him that the shaking of heaven and earth of which Haggai prophesied has not yet begun. The whole land is completely at rest. The throne of the heathen kings is not shaken, and there is no sign of the Messiah taking over the throne.

This vision would be disappointing if it did not include a plea on Jerusalem's behalf by the angel of the Lord. That plea was the Lord's way of answering Zechariah with comforting words. "I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion; my house shall be built in it" (1:16).

God is busy working for His people—although we see nothing of it. Thus there is no reason for His people to complain that the time is not yet ripe (Hag. 1:2). Instead they should get busy with the restoration of the Lord's temple!

Second vision. Is the power of the world empires unbroken? Zechariah sees four horns, but behind the great horns are smiths standing ready to smash the world powers and cut them down to size. In this way Zechariah is shown that the powers that scattered the Israelites are not stronger than God's plan—a plan that speaks of the election of Jerusalem and a Messianic kingdom.

Third vision. The rebuilding of the temple can proceed, then, and so can the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Moreover, we must not underestimate God's plans. A young man full

of enthusiasm who proposes to measure the restored Jerusalem is told that the city will be a "city without walls, so numerous shall be the men and cattle within it" (2:4 NEB). The Lord Himself will be a wall of fire around the city.

Appended to this vision is an admonition directed toward the Jews still living in Babylon (2:6-13). The Lord has established Himself in Judah, the "holy land." He dwells in the midst of His people. Therefore it's time for the "daughter of Zion" to forsake the "daughter of Babylon."

Fourth vision. It's not likely that the high priest Joshua was beyond reproach. When things go wrong in the life of the church, people are often quick to point out that the conduct of the leaders is not always exemplary. Are we supposed to work with *him*? Why doesn't he straighten out his life first? Then we'll accept his leadership! In all probability the high priest Joshua, one of the leaders in the rebuilding of the temple, was also the object of such talk.

Zechariah now sees Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord clothed in filthy garments in which he could not possibly carry out his official functions. Satan stands ready to accuse him before the highest tribunal. But what happens? The angel of the Lord speaks up for Joshua, silences satan, and clothes Joshua in clean garments. His iniquity is removed, and he is justified and upheld in his office as priest.

In the book of Revelation we also find the image of the clean garment. The entire church receives forgiveness from Christ. The believers are restored to their office and are now allowed to form a royal priesthood (I Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 6:11; 7:13-14; 19:8).

Joshua is expressly promised that he may continue to serve in his office; indeed, he is given a place among the angels (3:7). Thus his service is related to the heavenly

iturgy. At the same time, his service will be a sign of the coming of the *Branch*, the Messiah who does away with all our guilt and brings back Paradise (3:8-10).

Fifth vision. On its coat of arms, the modern state of Israel has a lampstand with seven lamps. This lampstand is flanked on each side by an olive tree. The symbolism, of course, goes back to the fourth of Zechariah's night visions.

But this vision is not quite as simple as one might suppose from looking at the lampstand and olive branches on the coat of arms of the state of Israel. The picture in Zechariah's vision is more elaborate: the lamps are supplied with oil by way of a golden pipe system connected to a tank kept filled by the two olive branches. Thus the lamps in Zechariah's vision burn permanently.

Here oil is the symbol of the Spirit. Hence the explanation: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" (4:6). But the Spirit works by way of office-bearers, the anointed ones who "stand by" the Lord (vs. 14). Here we are to think first of all of Zerubbabel, the "prince" of the house of David, and also of the priest Joshua. Through their cooperation and leadership, the lamp will continue to burn; that is to say, the temple will be rebuilt.

God makes use of human office-bearers. Therefore we should not disdain "the day of small things" (4:10), that is, the minor events and victories through which God realizes His plan. The two office-bearers stand by "the Lord of the whole earth" (vs. 14; see also Rev. 11:4).

Sixth vision. A scroll flies through the air. It is identified as the "curse" that goes out over all who sin against the first and second commandments. If the church undertakes a reformation and the office-bearers discharge their duties responsibly, there will be no more manipulation of the law of God.

Seventh vision. The office, the priesthood, and discipline will not bring us complete holiness. This vision makes it clear that *the Lord Himself* brings about the purification. This purification does not affect the sinner only: the power of sin itself is removed.

A woman personifying wickedness seeks to escape imprisonment in an ephah (a large barrel of about 36 liters in volume). An angel pushes her back into the barrel and secures the lid. Two women with wings then deport the woman personifying evil to the land of Shinar, in Babylonia, where she may settle. Thus the "church" and the "world" are separated. "I will put enmity!" Jerusalem will be free of the power of sin, as opposed to Babylon, which will be the center of sin's power.

Eighth vision. In the final vision we see chariots being sent out again in all four directions. Some interpreters identify the various colors of the horses of the first vision, the ones returning from their patrols, as the colors of the *evening* sky. The colors of the horses in the eighth vision, the ones pulling the chariots, have been thought to be connected with the colors of dawn or *sunrise.*

In any event, we see immediately how much this vision differs from the first vision, when the patrols returned disappointed. In this vision they go out in triumph, even to Babylonia, the "north country," where the woman personifying evil (whom we encountered in the seventh vision) dwells. There, too, the Spirit is brought.

The sphere of action of the God who has chosen Jerusalem knows no limits or bounds. He will truly make heaven and earth shake. Israel must fix its hopes on Him—and work while it is yet day.

3. Obedience Is Better Than Sacrifices

A crown for the high priest. Three pilgrims returning from exile bring a contribution of silver and gold for the rebuilding of the temple. Zechariah is commanded by the Lord to melt down their precious gifts and have them made into a crown for the high priest Joshua. The crown speaks of the One who is coming, the Branch (see 3:8).

Joshua's priesthood is a guarantee that the Messiah, the one who will be both King and Priest, will come one day. The building of the temple points to the advent of the one who will bring the offices as established under the old covenant to completion. "And there shall be a priest by his throne, and peaceful understanding shall be between them both" (6:13). Those who are far off will be made *active members* of His Kingdom and church.

Joyous feast days. The next two chapters tell us what Zechariah said to a deputation that approached him. The city of Bethel, whose golden calf had long competed with Jerusalem as a worship center, sent some representatives to the temple authorities in Jerusalem to ask whether the fast days held because of the destruction of the city had to be continued. Wasn't it time to sing a song of rebuilding instead?

Zechariah answered that fasting is not the primary thing in the covenant. The first thing the Lord demands is that His law be upheld. Because the fathers did not listen to the appeal for repentance, the land was turned into a desolate wilderness. Therefore the Israelites had to practice truthfulness and covenant faithfulness toward each other and toward the Lord (8:16-17, 19). Then the Lord would dwell in the midst of His people (vs. 1-15).

This solves the problem of the days of mourning for Jerusalem's destruction: they become joyous feast days (vs.

19). Yes, Jerusalem will be a blessing to the nations (vs. 13, 20ff; see also Gen. 12:3). "Fear not, but let your hands be strong!" (8:13).

4. The King-Shepherd and the Day of the Lord

The burning issue. Chapters 9-14 clearly stem from a later period in covenant history. The building of the temple is no longer central, for the rebuilt temple, the "house of the LORD," has long occupied its unique place in the life of the people (9:8; 11:13; 14:21).

There are definite differences between the first period dealt with in the book of Zechariah and the second. Yet *Jerusalem*, the Kingdom of the Lord, is still the central burning issue.

In this later section, too, the figure of the Messiah is visible. Is it any wonder that the New Testament repeatedly refers to the book of Zechariah? In Christ, the great Shepherd caring for His sheep, this book receives its definitive fulfillment.

An old-style king of peace. We all remember the story of Jesus' joyful entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He rode on a donkey. As Matthew records this story, he refers to Zechariah :

> Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion!
> Shout with gladness, daughter of Jerusalem!
> See now, your king comes to you;
> he is victorious, he is triumphant,
> humble and riding on a donkey.
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey (9:9 JB; see also Matt. 21:5).

What Zechariah sketches is a king of peace in the old style. The horses and chariots of war disappear from Jerusalem's streets as the King reigns "from sea to sea."

Yet the "peace" brought by this King does not come without a struggle or catastrophe. The cities around Jerusalem are punished (9:1-8). Israel itself will be mighty in battle (9:10—11:3).

Two staffs. Zechariah then uses an image that comes up time and again in the rest of his prophecy and also occurs repeatedly in the New Testament, namely, that of the flock and the shepherds. False shepherds have been in control of the church (10:1-2). Yahweh will therefore take over the role of shepherd Himself; He will "care for" His flock (vs. 3).

Zechariah is commanded in the name of the Lord to lead this flock, which has been exploited by other shepherds, to pasture (11:4ff). He does this by using two staffs—one named *Grace* and the other *Union*.

Are the sheep thankful for this? Not in the least: the daughter of Zion refuses to rejoice (see 9:9). Zechariah's lot is no different from that of his predecessors, from Moses on. The sheep turn away from him. Therefore he breaks his two shepherd's staffs and refuses to be their shepherd any longer.

When he asks for his wages as a good shepherd, they give him 30 pieces of silver, which is the price of a slave—or better, the compensation that must be paid for *killing* someone else's slave (Ex. 21:32). The disgusted prophet reports: "I took the thirty pieces of silver—that noble sum at which I was valued and rejected by them!—and threw them into the house of the LORD" (11:13 NEB).

The price of a murdered slave. At this point we can't help thinking of the events surrounding Judas's betrayal of

Christ. When Christ was delivered to the authorities to be crucified, weren't the covenant people again literally assessing the value of the Good Shepherd at the price of a murdered slave? Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets . . . !

Anyone who rejects the *Good* Shepherd hands himself over to *evil* and *foolish* shepherds (11:15-17). Because the sheep "detested" their appointed shepherd, he declared: "I will not be your shepherd. What is to die, let it die" (11:8-9). Whoever rejects grace is handed over to judgment.

The Good Shepherd judged. The last three chapters of the book of Zechariah are full of judgment. There is judgment on the Good Shepherd: "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd" (13:7). There is also judgment aimed at the sheep, i.e. Israel: "I will turn my hand against the little ones. In the whole land, two thirds shall be cut off and perish" (13:7-8). Finally, the nations that attack Israel are subjected to judgment (12:1-9; 14:12ff).

This threefold judgment is *gospel.* The first judgment, directed against the Shepherd, explains the others. The light of the New Testament makes it clear what this puzzling talk of judging the Good Shepherd means. Jesus Christ is the Shepherd who is judged (Matt. 26:31). He preserves a "remnant" for Himself.

A universal throng. The judgment of Jerusalem has a purifying effect, as people begin to recognize their guilt. "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him" (12:10). The false shepherds and false prophets will no longer be listened to. And when all the nations gather around Jerusalem, the city will not fall (12:6; 14:1ff).

Jerusalem becomes a center of worship for all the nations that are left in Messianic times. The great Feast of Tabernacles will be celebrated by a universal throng, and the holiness of the Lord will permeate all of life in a priestly way.

It's no wonder that we hear such sounds repeatedly in the book of Revelation—sounds that remind us of the last chapter of the book of Zechariah. The prophet has seen the great future that rises above all the catastrophes and judgments.

A cosmic evening. In our time of cosmic upheaval, we must cling to what is revealed to us in this prophetic book. What lies ahead of us is *not* the destruction of the world or the annihilation of the universe. "At evening time there shall be light" (14:7; see also Rev. 21:23; 22:5).

With our love of proverbs and sayings, we have appropriated this text for our collection of benedictions to address to the aged (along with Luke 24:29: ". . . for it is toward evening"). Yet, what this text actually speaks of is not a peaceful evening coming at the end of an individual human life but a cosmic evening, the time just before all things are restored and made new. "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem," we read in the very next verse (see also Rev. 22:1, 17).

Cosmic upheaval and radioactive contamination is *not* the last word. Only those who refuse to recognize God's kingship will fall prey to catastrophes (14:17-19). "And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one" (vs. 9). All of this will come about because of the punished Shepherd Jesus Christ, whose life was assigned the same value as a slave's life.

Malachi

1. Yahweh's Messenger Argues with Israel

Reformation needed. The prophecies recorded in the concluding book of the Old Testament stem from the time after the exile and the rebuilding of the temple—and probably also after the reformation under Ezra. It is apparent from these prophecies that reformation was again the need of the hour.

Both in the "church" and in the life of the family, degeneration had set in. In religious and social respects, the life of the redeemed church was not in harmony with the rules of gratitude.

A series of debates. In this situation we encounter the prophet Malachi, whose name means *my messenger* or *messenger of Yahweh.* He comes to his people with a concrete message which he communicates by disputing and arguing with the "Israel" that had returned from exile. He holds a series of debates on specific topics.

Repeatedly we see Malachi quoting something said by the people and then taking up the point made. This hap-

pens six times. These debates give the book a structure and make it easy for the reader to survey it. The breaks between the debates are clearly marked.

The book closes with a pair of statements in which both Moses and Elijah are named. This ending concludes the books of the prophets.

2. The First Debate (1:2-5)

An insignificant province. The situation was not so rosy in "Israel." Yes, Malachi addressed himself to "Israel" (1:1). How little there was left of her former glory! Fragments of a few tribes (mainly Judah and Levi) had returned from exile—no more.

Although the temple had been rebuilt, there had been no revival of the glory of earlier years. The home of the Jews was nothing more than an insignificant province in the great Persian empire. There was no prospect of a restoration of the Davidic kingship.

Deep doubts about God's love. In this situation the prophet Malachi appears with a declaration from the Lord: "I have loved you!" Is it any wonder that his hearers respond by asking, "How hast thou loved us?" (1:2). After all, where was there any concrete evidence of God's love? If God was faithful, wouldn't this be apparent in Israel's life?

The people harbored deep doubts about the love of God. This was one of the reasons for their laxness in serving God. Why should they do everything correctly and properly if they could not even be sure that the Lord would abide by His promises?

Sure and unshaken. The prophet explores this uncertainty on the part of the Jews. If "Israel" is again to serve the Lord, it must know that the covenant is sure and unshaken. "Jacob" should not get an inferiority complex just because Edom (the territory of Esau) has great plans for reconstruction.

God has shown in history that He has chosen "Jacob" as His people and made a covenant with Jacob in the process. That was sovereign grace on His part. Jacob could claim no rights as the first-born. Neither was his conduct such that he could be regarded as deserving. Yet, the Lord displayed unfathomable love toward His people, whereas He rejected Esau's people: "I have hated Esau" (1:3).

In the future the Lord will bring both His hatred and His love into play. The destruction of Edom should be regarded as *proof* that the Lord does not change but will let His wrath be felt by the nation that was always hostile toward the church. "Great is the LORD, beyond the border of Israel!" (vs. 5).

3. The Second Debate (1:6—2:9)

"Emergency measures." This time Malachi addresses the priests in particular. The priests had adapted themselves to the times. They reasoned that a farmer who was struggling hard to make ends meet could hardly be expected to pay the full price when it came to offering sacrifices. If they made it too hard for the farmers, they, as priests, would receive nothing.

Wouldn't it be better to simply make the best of a bad situation? Didn't the priests have a calling to allow certain compromises "given the difficult circumstances"? Couldn't they look the other way when someone presented

an imperfect animal that did not meet the requirements for a sacrifice? Weren't they *forced* to take certain "emergency measures"?

Unwanted leftovers. The prophet makes it clear that Yahweh wishes to be served as father and master. "If I am a father, where is the honor due to me? If I am a master, where is the fear due to me?" (1:6 NEB). The priests respond by saying: "How have we despised thy name? How have we defiled thee?" (1:6, 7 NEB). The priests argue that the Lord's table is polluted and complain that their work is tiresome (vs. 12-13).

The fact that crippled or blind animals were permitted as sacrifices shows how seriously the priests took the table of the Lord and the sacrifices to which He is entitled. Would they dare present such gifts to the Persian governor? (1:8). Strictly speaking, even the best is not good enough for God, who does not care to live off "refuse." Do the priests think they can meet their obligations to the Great King by offering Him leftovers that no one else wants? Cursed be the deceiver who does not keep his vows!

A special covenant with Levi. The priests had to understand that in addition to the Lord's covenant with Israel, there was a special covenant with Levi. The tribe of Levi was cursed by Jacob but blessed by Moses (Deut. 32:8-11). Yet that blessing accentuated Levi's task, namely, teaching the Lord's ordinances to Jacob and His law to Israel. Malachi points back to the blessing of Levi by Moses: "My covenant with him [Levi] was a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him, that he might fear; and he feared me, he stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips" (2:5-6).

All God's promises are conditional. Therefore the prophet also points out that the *blessing* can become a *curse* if Levi pokes fun at the seriousness of God's words.

By allowing compromises, Levi makes the "little ones" stumble.

The service of the Lord always requires exactitude and precision. Levi must understand that he works in a law-dominated situation. If he continues to accommodate himself to circumstances and people, it will be said: "You have *corrupted* the covenant of Levi" (2:8).

4. The Third Debate (2:10-16)

The daughters of a foreign god. It is clear from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that the church threatened to sink back into heathendom because of the mixed marriages. Jewish women were sent away, and the men chose to marry "foreign" women instead. These women are described as the daughters of a foreign god! (2:11).

Should it surprise us that the Lord refused to accept offerings while this sort of thing was going on? After all, He knew about the unholy motives behind the many marriage break-ups. He also knew that all this trouble was the result of forsaking the covenant.

However one might choose to translate 2:15, it is clear that God looks to marriage to provide for Himself a new generation, holy seed, *Godly offspring*. A compromise marriage does not build up the church but undermines it. The very fact that we are all made by *one* God should drive us to hold on to the *one* style of the covenant, also in seeking a marriage partner.

A favorite quotation. "Have we not all one father?" (2:10). This text is found on the walls of Freemason's lodges and is frequently quoted in synagogues. It is a favorite of those who argue for the "brotherhood of men"

and the "fatherhood of God." Aren't we all children of the same Father?

This kind of argument *reverses* the meaning of the text. When we examine the text in its context (disregarding the question whether the "father" referred to is Abraham or the Lord), we see that it is not intended to promote a general mingling at all. On the contrary, it *opposes* any such mingling. It is not intended to further the blurring of the boundaries; it is meant to *maintain* the striking difference between the faithful church and the church that follows the path of conformity to the world. "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, *profaning the covenant* of our fathers?"

5. The Fourth Debate (2:17—3:5)

Wearying talk. The next complaint to which Malachi turns is: "Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD . . . . Where is the God of justice?" (2:17). That was the kind of talk with which the people "wearied" the Lord.

I'm sure you recognize the argument: every morning the sun rises again, and all the injustices remain. You know how things go in a time of reconstruction. All sorts of upstarts suddenly appear on the scene. Those who take the trouble to do things properly are rudely pushed aside. People can't help asking why the Lord puts up with it. It seems that the path of the wicked is strewn with roses.

Trumpet blasts. Malachi announces that the Lord will surely punish the corruption and oppression. "Behold, I send my messenger [Malachi] to prepare the way before

me" (3:1). Through His prophets, His messengers, the Lord announces judgment. He did so through earlier emissaries, and now through Malachi. He would also do so through John the Baptist, in whom this text was fulfilled (Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 1:76; 7:27). He continues to do so today through the preaching that goes into the world via His messengers, the "angels of the churches."

Each proclamation of the Word is a blast of the trumpet preparing the way for *judgment*. "Behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts" (3:1). The Angel of the covenant is approaching in judgment. The Lord is coming to His temple.

Priests and "laymen" will then be purified. Wasn't Christ's purification of the temple a sign that He was the Angel of the covenant? Sorcerers, those who swear falsely, and all those who do not know what it is to fear the Lord will stand accused. This will happen very suddenly. Be on guard!

6. The Fifth Debate (3:6-12)

Blessing withheld. When the people were chastised by Malachi for their sins and told to return to the Lord, they asked: "How shall we return? How are we robbing thee?" (3:7, 8). In other words, what have we done wrong?

Now, in the ordinary families there was no actual idolatry. Yet, the sin for which Haggai had already castigated the Jews was still common, namely, the sin of keeping a portion of the tithes back. Therefore the Lord also held His blessing back.

The people were not to assume that because they were living in hard times, they could contribute less toward the maintenance of the worship services. In faith they were to

obey and do what was expected of them. Then the great Creator would open His storehouses and keep the agricultural plagues away. "All nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight" (3:12).

7. The Sixth Debate (3:13—4:3)

Audacious words. The Jews still did not give in to Malachi's arguments. Boldly they declared: "It is vain to serve God. What is the good of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? Henceforth we deem the arrogant blessed; evildoers not only prosper but when they put God to the test they escape" (3:14-15).

The usefulness of the reformation under Ezra (and perhaps also Nehemiah) is denied here. The outlook behind these audacious words is: "Eat, drink, and be merry!"

Fortunately, not all the Jews thought that way. Some of them did fear the Lord and take Him into account. Malachi brings them into the picture. We read: "A record was written before him of those who feared him and kept his name in mind" (3:16 NEB).

A delight rather than a burden. The Lord promises to spare all the faithful ones. One day the difference between the faithful and the unfaithful will come out into the open --despite all the mocking of the day of the Lord (see II Pet. 3:4).

> For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for

> you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall (4:1-2; see also Luke 1:78-9).

Malachi, God's ambassador, speaks words of comfort addressed to believers of all ages. Those to whom the service of the Lord is a delight rather than a burden (see 1:13) are promised that all enemies and opponents will be "ashes under the soles of your feet" (4:3; see also Rom. 16:20).

8. Concluding Words (4:4-6)

Moses and Elijah. When Christ was on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared. In the description of the "two witnesses" in Revelation 11, we find various features that remind us of these two prophets. John the Baptist embodied the spirit and power of Elijah. He was the Elijah who was to come. And as for Christ, He was counted worthy of much more glory than Moses (Heb. 3:3).

We also find Moses and Elijah paired at the end of the book of Malachi, which is the last of the books of the prophets. Moses makes us think of the torah, the law of the Lord. And Elijah is the one who announced that God would judge and punish all who transgress His law.

God's abiding Word. The church of Malachi's days had a future to wait for. Thrones would be shaken, one usurper would succeed another—but God's Word would abide forever.

Each new generation finds God's electing love revealed in His Word: "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). The message is clear: we are to live *by Scripture alone*!

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