

Amos and Hosea

Key Points

The books of Amos and Hosea are centered around prominent eighth century BCE prophets of the Northern Kingdom. Amos and Hosea were not associated with prophetic guilds, and often challenged the religious and political establishment of their time. While they addressed concrete historical situations of their own time, the oracles of these prophets were eventually collected and preserved for future generations by later editors. As a result, it is important to keep in mind the tension between the original contexts of Amos and Hosea and the context of later editors who gave these books their final canonical form. Both of these books were edited in Judah after 722 BCE, and thus include distinctive Judean perspectives and references to later historical developments.

The book of Amos can be divided into three parts. The first two chapters consist of oracles of judgment against the nations Judah and Israel. While these oracles might harken back to a covenant tradition that predates the monarchic period, it is more likely that Amos's preaching helped give shape to later perspectives, especially those found in Deuteronomy. The collection of short oracles in the middle section (chapters 3–6) address topics such as election (Amos 3:2), the link between actions and their consequences (Amos 3:3-8), social injustice (Amos 4:1-3; 6:4-7), and the condemnation of the cult at Bethel (Amos 5:1-27). Five visions are reported in the final section (chapters 7–9), each of which warns of a coming judgment (for example, Amos 8:1-2). A key issue in Amos involves whether the prophet wanted to abolish or merely reform the cult. In theory, Amos does not rule out the possibility that sacrifices and offerings play a role in the worship of God. Yet, his critique of how the cult was actually being practiced is unequivocal: it was offensive to God and had to be rejected.

The book of Hosea is perhaps best known for its first three chapters. Here, marriage is used as a guiding metaphor to talk about the unfaithfulness of Israel in its covenantal relationship with YHWH.

As a form of symbolic action, Hosea's marriage and re-marriage to Gomer points toward God's judgment against idolatry, but also the possibility of restoration. From an ethical perspective, the content of these chapters is arresting. It must be kept in mind that the perspectives it offers on husbands and wives are rooted in cultural norms that are quite foreign to our own.

The remaining material in Hosea (chapters 4–14) focuses on the issue of covenant faithfulness, a theme which is also central to the book of Deuteronomy. Like Amos, Hosea is critical of the cult (chapter 6) and priesthood (chapter 4). He also rails against the political scheming that dominated the Northern Kingdom in its final decades. The fundamental problem was that these kings were looking to political coalitions, not steadfast devotion to God, in order to stave off the ominous Assyrian threat.

Key Terms

The Day of the LORD This expression typically refers to one of two things: a day of judgment, in which God vindicates Israel by defeating its adversaries in battle; or a cultic celebration, perhaps the Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkoth). Both references were thought to be joyful occasions for Israel. However, Amos 5:18-27 reinterprets this concept, warning that the Day of the LORD will be marked by darkness and gloom because God will judge Israel for its injustice.

Covenant lawsuit A covenant lawsuit (Heb.: *ribh*) is a legal disputation in which God brings charges against Israel for violating the covenant. Examples can be found in the oracles against Judah and Israel in Amos 2:4-8 or the accusations concerning swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery in Hosea 4:2. The oracle in Hosea 2 is also a covenant lawsuit, though it calls to mind a divorce proceeding rather than a treaty violation.

Marriage metaphor The first three chapters of Hosea are framed by God's commands to the prophet to marry a promiscuous woman (Gomer) as a metaphor for Israel's unfaithfulness

in its relationship with Yahweh. It underscores the conditional nature of the covenant. The marriage metaphor in Hosea reflects common cultural assumptions about the roles of husband and wife. This literary imagery calls for careful interpretation and should not be used to justify violence toward women.

Oracle An oracle is a general term for prophetic communication. It can also be understood as a specific type of prophetic genre in which a message is delivered to some person, group, situation, or event that is based on God's revelation concerning the realm of human affairs. While some oracles of salvation exist, they often have negative connotations. Oracles of judgment against the nations and against Israel or Judah are both evident in the book of Amos.

Nabi' *Nabi'* is the most frequent term used for prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Though its etymology is uncertain, it likely refers to an intermediary who is called or authorized to speak on behalf of God. A similar term is found in extrabiblical sources in reference to prophetic figures. The plural of this term, *nabi'im*, is used to indicate the second of three divisions of the Hebrew Bible,

consisting of the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets.

Key Personalities

Amaziah

Amaziah was the priest at the northern sanctuary of Bethel during the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746 BCE). This priest features prominently in the book of Amos, where he openly opposes the prophet's prediction of divine judgment against Israel. Eager to prove his loyalty to the throne, Amaziah warns Jeroboam II that Amos had been prophesying that the king would die by the sword and that Israel would go into exile (Amos 7:11). Amaziah accuses Amos of sedition, telling the "seer" to flee to the land of Judah and to never again prophesy against the king's sanctuary. Amos's response is one of the most well-known passages in the book (Amos 7:14-17). Amos emphasizes that, as a spokesman for YHWH, he is not beholden to the king or priest and is free to openly confront the injustices of Israel. Amos's message is abrasive. Among other things, the prophet claims that Amaziah's wife will become a prostitute and that the priest would die in an unclean land. This prophecy likely functioned as a curse intended to bring about what was predicted. While the text does not reveal what happened to Amaziah or his family, it is unlikely that this prophecy was fulfilled in Amaziah's lifetime. However, the final editors of the book of Amos probably saw the Assyrian exile as the eventual fulfillment of Amos's preaching.

Amos

The prophet Amos hailed from Tekoa, a small village just south of Jerusalem. However, he primarily prophesied in the vicinity of the royal sanctuary

of Bethel, which is located near the southern edge of the Northern Kingdom. This geographical setting may suggest that Amos had little regard for the boundary between Israel and Judah or that he was a Davidic loyalist particularly troubled by Jeroboam's rival sanctuaries. The book of Amos emphasizes that he was neither a professional prophet nor a member of a prophetic guild. Since Amos criticized social injustice including the mistreatment of the poor, it has been suggested that the prophet had a very modest background. Indeed, Amos is variously described as a "shepherd" (Amos 1:1), a "herdsman" (Amos 7:14), and "a dresser of sycamore trees" (Amos 7:14). Yet, these terms more likely denote an owner of a large flock or orchard, not a hired worker. In either case, Amos is called by YHWH away from his agricultural profession to prophesy against the people of Israel. His confrontational manner is not designed to gently win over those he condemns. In this sense, Amos's prophetic style is more in the model of Elijah than Nathan. The superscription to the book of Amos places his ministry during the reigns of Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah of Judah, "two years before the earthquake." This latter event cannot be precisely dated, though the specificity of this timing may suggest that Amos's prophetic career was quite short.

Hosea

A near contemporary of Amos, Hosea was one of the major eighth century BCE prophets in the Hebrew Bible. He is said to have prophesied during the reigns of Jeroboam II in Israel and Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in Judah. Since the prophet does not directly reference the fall of Samaria, it is likely that Hosea died sometime before 722 BCE. Like Amos, Hosea's prophetic ministry is situated in the Northern Kingdom. The name Hosea, which was

a fairly common in the eighth and seventh centuries and is attested on numerous Israelite seals, is probably a shortened form of a word meaning “YHWH has delivered.” Little is known about the prophet’s life outside of the introduction to the book of Hosea. In those chapters, it is reported that Hosea, the son of Beeri (Hosea 1:1), is called by God to marry a promiscuous woman named Gomer. Their three children—Jezreel (“God will sow”), Lo-ruhamah (“not pitied”), and Lo-ammi (“not my people”)—bear symbolic names that reflect God’s judgment on

Israel. At the beginning of chapter three, Hosea is called once again to marry an adulterous woman. This may refer to a second marriage or, more likely, to Hosea’s remarriage to Gomer. In either case, it is uncertain whether actual biographical data about the prophet can be gleaned from the extended metaphor in Hosea 1–3. On the whole, Hosea seems to be well-versed in wisdom and covenant traditions as is especially evident in his concern for Israel’s lack of knowledge and foolish choices. His critics characterize him as a “fool” and a “mad” person (Hosea 9:7).

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. The oracles against the nations in Amos are often said to reflect a universal view of human “rights.” When you consider contemporary views on human rights, do you see points of connection with the book of Amos? Where do modern views on human rights part ways with Amos? Where do they continue on in the tradition of Amos? Do they share common assumptions?
2. Amos clearly has harsh words for the wealthy in Israel. Do his criticisms continue to ring true today? If one were to take up Amos’s critique in the modern day, what qualifications would one need to make?
3. The marriage metaphor in Hosea is one of the book’s most distinctive features. And yet, for contemporary audiences, it poses a number of problems, not the least of which is the patriarchal (male-dominated) context of the book. In your view, is the “husband” in the metaphor abusive, at least by today’s standards? If so, what are the implications for how one thinks about the God of Hosea?

Primary Text

Amos 5:1-27

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ Verses 1-3 are framed as a lament or funeral speech for Israel, intended to express impending judgment.
- ▶ The “house of Joseph” in verse 6 refers to the Northern Kingdom.
- ▶ In verse 7, injustice is compared to wormwood, whose dried leaves are known to be bitter.
- ▶ In verse 8, the astral bodies attest to God’s power; a similar theme is found in Psalm 8:3.

- ▶ Note that the city gate is the traditional site of legal proceedings, thus it is especially egregious that this is the very place where truth is abhorred, the poor are pushed aside, and bribes are taken (verses 10-11).
- ▶ The plea for repentance in verses 14-15 echoes that which is found in verses 4-7.
- ▶ The festivals in verse 21 likely are three pilgrimage feasts (see Exod. 23:14-18; 34:18, 22-23; Deut. 16:16).
- ▶ The “ever-flowing stream” in verse 24 refers to a riverbed with an abundant water source, in contrast to a wadi which is only occasionally filled with run-off water in the rainy season.
- ▶ Amos 5:25 was either written before or does not seem to be familiar with the priestly laws of Leviticus, which envision an established sacrificial system in the wilderness.

¹ Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel:

² Fallen, no more to rise,
is maiden Israel;
forsaken on her land,
with no one to raise her up.

³ For thus says the Lord GOD:
The city that marched out a thousand
shall have a hundred left,
and that which marched out a hundred
shall have ten left.

⁴ For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:
Seek me and live;

⁵ but do not seek Bethel,
and do not enter into Gilgal
or cross over to Beer-sheba;
for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,
and Bethel shall come to nothing.

⁶ Seek the LORD and live,
or he will break out against the house of
Joseph like fire,
and it will devour Bethel, with no one to
quench it.

⁷ Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,

and bring righteousness to the ground!

⁸ The one who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning,
and darkens the day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out on the surface of the
earth,

the LORD is his name,

⁹ who makes destruction flash out against the
strong,
so that destruction comes upon the
fortress.

¹⁰ They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the
truth.

¹¹ Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

¹² For I know how many are your
transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,

and push aside the needy in the gate.

¹³ Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such
a time;
for it is an evil time.

¹⁴ Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be
with you,
just as you have said.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of
hosts, the Lord:
In all the squares there shall be wailing;
and in all the streets they shall say, "Alas!
alas!"

They shall call the farmers to mourning,
and those skilled in lamentation, to
wailing;

¹⁷ in all the vineyards there shall be wailing,
for I will pass through the midst of you,
says the LORD.

¹⁸ Alas for you who desire the day of the
LORD!
Why do you want the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, not light;
¹⁹ as if someone fled from a lion,

and was met by a bear;
or went into the house and rested a hand
against the wall,
and was bitten by a snake.

²⁰ Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not
light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn
assemblies.

²² Even though you offer me your burnt offer-
ings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted
animals
I will not look upon.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your
harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing
stream.

²⁵ Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings
the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

²⁶ You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kai-
wan your star-god, your images, which you made
for yourselves; ²⁷ therefore I will take you into exile
beyond Damascus, says the LORD, whose name is
the God of hosts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to Amos 5, what were the Israelites “seeking” instead of the LORD?
2. In what ways does the prophet seem to reinterpret traditional understandings of the expression “the Day of the LORD?” Why is it a day that the Israelites should *not* desire?
3. Where in this passage do you find language that draws on imagery from the natural world or agriculture? Why do you think this imagery is appealing to Amos?
4. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted Amos 5:24 in his famous “I have a Dream Speech.” Understood in the context of Amos 5, how might this verse help inform contemporary ethical and social concerns?

The Judean Edition of Amos: Amos 9:5-6, 11-15

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ Verses 5-6 represent the third of three short doxologies giving praise to God (see also Amos 4:13; 5:8-9).
- ▶ In biblical cosmology, there is a celestial barrier, or vault, separating the earth from the waters below (see Gen. 1:6-8).
- ▶ The phrase “that day” in verse 11 is likely an abbreviated expression that refers to “the Day of the LORD.”
- ▶ Note that the “booth of David” refers to the Davidic dynasty. Booth might indicate a more temporary or fragile structure than a house, thus reflecting the vulnerability of David’s line.
- ▶ Edom (verse 12), which is located in the desert region southeast of Judah, was a traditional enemy of the Southern Kingdom but not necessarily the Northern Kingdom.

⁵ The Lord, GOD of hosts,
 he who touches the earth and it melts,
 and all who live in it mourn,
 and all of it rises like the Nile,
 and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt;
⁶ who builds his upper chambers in the
 heavens,
 and founds his vault upon the earth;
 who calls for the waters of the sea,
 and pours them out upon the surface of
 the earth—
 the LORD is his name.

¹¹ On that day I will raise up

the booth of David that is fallen,
 and repair its breaches,
 and raise up its ruins,
 and rebuild it as in the days of old;
¹² in order that they may possess the remnant
 of Edom
 and all the nations who are called by my
 name,
 says the Lord who does this.

¹³ The time is surely coming, says the Lord,
 when the one who plows shall overtake the
 one who reaps,

and the treader of grapes the one who
sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
¹⁴ I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and
inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their
fruit.

¹⁵ I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What indications are there that these verses were added to the book of Amos sometime during or after the Babylonian exile?
2. How does the reference to “that day” in verse 11 contrast with the characterization of “the Day of the LORD” in Amos 5:18?
3. What sort of literary imagery does Amos 9 use to envision future restoration?

Hosea 1–3

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ The kings mentioned in Hosea 1:1 reigned mainly during the second half of the eighth century.
- ▶ Jezreel, meaning “God will sow” (Hosea 1:4), is the place where Jehu initiates his bloody overthrow of the Omride dynasty. King Jeroboam II, mentioned in Hosea 1:1, is the last king of the Jehu dynasty.
- ▶ Note the distinctly Judean perspective voiced in Hosea 1:6-7.
- ▶ Note that the language in Hosea 1:9 God seems to reject the covenant, in which he promises the Israelites: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exod. 6:7; Deut. 29:13).
- ▶ Note that Hosea’s offspring are now called “children of the living God” (Hosea 1:10) instead of “children of whoredom” (Hosea 1:2).
- ▶ Hosea 2:2-23 introduces a prophetic speech that indicts Israel for being the unfaithful spouse in the overarching marriage metaphor.
- ▶ Hosea 2:16 contains a wordplay between two Hebrew words for “husband”: Israel is to call YHWH *’ish* instead of *ba’al* since the latter term is also used as the personal name of the Canaanite deity Baal.
- ▶ Though Gomer is not mentioned by name in chapter 3, the context seems to imply a restoration of Hosea’s previous marriage.
- ▶ The reference to David in Hosea 3:5 likely reflects a later, Judean addition.

¹ The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri, in the days of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel.

² When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord." ³ So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

⁴ And the LORD said to him, "Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel." ⁵ On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel."

⁶ She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the LORD said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them." ⁷ But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen."

⁸ When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. ⁹ Then the LORD said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God."

¹⁰ Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God." ¹¹ The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall take possession of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

² ¹ Say to your brother, Ammi, and to your sister, Ruhamah.

² Plead with your mother, plead—
for she is not my wife,
and I am not her husband—
that she put away her whoring from her face,
and her adultery from between her breasts,
³ or I will strip her naked
and expose her as in the day she was born,
and make her like a wilderness,
and turn her into a parched land,
and kill her with thirst.

⁴ Upon her children also I will have no pity,
because they are children of whoredom.

⁵ For their mother has played the whore;
she who conceived them has acted
shamefully.

For she said, "I will go after my lovers;
they give me my bread and my water,
my wool and my flax, my oil and my
drink."

⁶ Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns;
and I will build a wall against her,
so that she cannot find her paths.

⁷ She shall pursue her lovers,
but not overtake them;
and she shall seek them,
but shall not find them.

Then she shall say, "I will go
and return to my first husband,
for it was better with me than than now."

⁸ She did not know
that it was I who gave her
the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and who lavished upon her silver
and gold that they used for Baal.

⁹ Therefore I will take back
my grain in its time,
and my wine in its season;
and I will take away my wool and my flax,

which were to cover her nakedness.

¹⁰ Now I will uncover her shame
in the sight of her lovers,
and no one shall rescue her out of my
hand.

¹¹ I will put an end to all her mirth,
her festivals, her new moons, her sabbaths,
and all her appointed festivals.

¹² I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees,
of which she said,
“These are my pay,
which my lovers have given me.”

I will make them a forest,
and the wild animals shall devour them.

¹³ I will punish her for the festival days of the
Baals,
when she offered incense to them
and decked herself with her ring and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
and forgot me, says the LORD.

¹⁴ Therefore, I will now allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.

¹⁵ From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of
hope.

There she shall respond as in the days of her
youth,
as at the time when she came out of the
land of Egypt.

¹⁶ On that day, says the LORD, you will call me,
“My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My
Baal.” ¹⁷ For I will remove the names of the Baals
from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by
name no more. ¹⁸ I will make for you a covenant on

that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air,
and the creeping things of the ground; and I will
abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land;
and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹ And I will
take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my
wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love,
and in mercy. ²⁰ I will take you for my wife in faith-
fulness; and you shall know the LORD.

²¹ On that day I will answer, says the LORD,
I will answer the heavens
and they shall answer the earth;

²² and the earth shall answer the grain, the
wine, and the oil,
and they shall answer Jezreel;

²³ and I will sow him for myself in the
land.

And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah,
and I will say to Lo-ammi, “You are my
people”;
and he shall say, “You are my God.”

3 ¹ The LORD said to me again, “Go, love a
woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as
the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn
to other gods and love raisin cakes.” ² So I bought
her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of bar-
ley and a measure of wine. ³ And I said to her, “You
must remain as mine for many days; you shall not
play the whore, you shall not have intercourse with a
man, nor I with you.” ⁴ For the Israelites shall remain
many days without king or prince, without sacrifice
or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. ⁵ Afterward the
Israelites shall return and seek the LORD their God,
and David their king; they shall come in awe to the
LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What role does naming and re-naming play in this text?
2. In what ways is the punishment of stripping (Hosea 2:3) an apt metaphor for the Assyrian exile?
3. In what sense is the worship of Baal a form of “adultery” against YHWH?
4. Where do you see a tension between judgment and restoration in these three chapters?
5. What are some of the potential problems and advantages of using the marriage metaphor as a symbolic vehicle for divine communication?

Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, and Zephaniah

Key Points

Events surrounding the ominous advance and eventual demise of the Assyrian empire prompted a flurry of prophetic activity in ancient Judah. Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, and Zephaniah all reflect diverse theological perspectives on the Assyrian crisis, but they also share many common features. These books provide little biographical data about the prophets themselves and reflect—especially in the case of Isaiah—a complex history of composition. In each case, oracles originally spoken by the prophets are supplemented by editors in the exilic and postexilic periods. The reason for the arrangement of oracles in these books is sometimes difficult to discern, though chronology and common themes can be a factor. While the focus of this chapter is primarily on the original context of these four prophets, attention should also be paid to the final shape and canonical context of these books.

The diverse oracles associated with the prophet Isaiah (chapters 1–39) represent some of the most well-known and oft-debated material in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet interprets the threat of a foreign military invasion as an instrument of divine punishment for the people's idolatry, pride, and disregard for justice. Most notably, Isaiah urges King Ahaz (Isa. 7–8) and King Hezekiah (Isa. 36–38) to trust in YHWH alone, not political alliances, for protection from Assyria. In acts of self-reliance, both rulers fail to heed Isaiah's advice. Thus, it is hardly surprising that many of Isaiah's oracles emphasize that the proud will be brought down (for example, Isa. 14:12–20) and that the "wisdom" of political intrigue will lead to futility (Isa. 29–31). Yet all is not lost. Isaiah holds out hope that God will preserve a remnant of his people and will one day restore an ideal Davidic king to the throne.

Micah, a rural prophet, is less interested than Isaiah in the fate of the Davidic dynasty or the implications of political coalitions. Rather, Micah's preaching offers a biting critique of injustice and inequality. This concern is perhaps best understood as a reaction to Hezekiah's effort to centralize power and wealth

in Jerusalem near the close of the eighth century BCE. While effective at asserting Judah's independence from Assyria, Hezekiah's reforms elevated a small minority of people (the "one-percent") at the expense of peasant farmers. In this regard, Micah rarely distinguishes between the sins of Judah and Israel, preferring instead to highlight the pervasiveness of idolatry and the problems of the cult. The core of Micah's message—and perhaps the message of *all* eighth-century prophets—is succinctly expressed in Micah 6:6-8.

Preaching well after their eighth-century counterparts, Nahum and Zephaniah offer a theological response to the fall of Assyria and its capital, Nineveh. While these events were brought on by military incursions by the Babylonians and Medes, Nahum claims that it is none other than YHWH who breaks the yoke of Assyrian oppression (Hah. 1). The "good tidings" of Assyria's demise are cause for celebration, but not complacency. As Zephaniah reminds us, the Day of the LORD will still be one of judgment if the Judeans do not turn away from unbridled apostasy (Zeph. 1 and 3), most vividly embodied in the reign of King Manasseh.

Key Terms

Syro-Ephraimite war In the mid-730s BCE, Syria (Aram) and Ephraim (Israel) attempted to pressure Judah into joining its coalition against the expanding Assyrian empire. This war forms the historical backdrop of Isaiah's prophecy to King Ahaz of Judah in Isaiah 7-8 (see also 2 Kings 15-16). The prophet lobbies the Judean king not to join this coalition, assuring him that the Syro-Ephraimite campaign would surely fail and Jerusalem would be protected. However, Ahaz does not heed Isaiah's advice and instead appeals to Assyria for help.

Almah This Hebrew term, which appears in Isaiah's message to King Ahaz (Isa. 7:14), refers generally to a young woman, not necessarily a virgin. However, the Greek translation of Isaiah uses the word *parthenos*, which specifically indicates a virgin. This Greek translation was used by New Testament authors and later Christian interpreters to support the virgin birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:23).

In the immediate context of Isaiah 7, the prophet was not predicting a miraculous birth in the distant future. Rather, the birth of a child in the time of crisis was supposed to be a sign of assurance to Ahaz that his dynasty would continue.

Remnant This term generally refers to the portion of a community, typically Israel or Judah, that is left after a catastrophe. It occurs frequently in First Isaiah (fifteen times), Micah (four times), and Zephaniah (four times). It occasionally has a negative connotation, emphasizing that *only* a small remnant will be allowed to survive divine punishment (Zeph. 1:4). Yet more often, the connotation is positive: despite the catastrophe, God graciously preserves a remnant out of which a renewed community will spring (Isa. 1:25-26; 28:5-6). The remnant consists of people who are humble and faithful (for example, Zeph. 2:3; 3:12-13) and is chosen to receive future blessings (as in Mic. 4:6-7; 5:7-8).

Song of the vineyard Modeled on a song for a wedding day, Isaiah 5:1-7 presents an extended

allegory in which a bride is likened to a fertile vineyard. When the vineyard yields sour grapes, its owner decides to remove its protective wall and to allow it to go to ruin. Isaiah uses the song as an indictment against Israel and Judah for failing to do justice. However, in Isaiah 26:2-6 a new vineyard allegory is used to picture restoration. YHWH renews care for his vineyard, causing Judah to take root and Israel to blossom.

The end of Assyria Under stress from revolts in Egypt and Babylonia, Assyria's powerful empire began to weaken in the second half of the seventh century BCE. Nineveh, its capital city, fell to an alliance of Medes and Babylonians in 612 BCE. The decline of Assyria allowed a resurgence of Judean independence, as is likely evident in the reforms of Josiah. Assyria's fall is celebrated in both the oracles of Nahum and Zephaniah.

Key Personalities

Ahaz

Ahaz, the son of Jotham and the father of Hezekiah, was king of Judah during the Syro-Ephraimite war. Various aspects of his reign (c. 742–727 BCE) are discussed in 2 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 28, and Isaiah 7, as well as several Assyrian annals and inscriptions. These accounts offer different perspectives on Ahaz's life and are extremely difficult to harmonize together. Yet, in general, the Hebrew Bible presents Ahaz in an extremely negative light. He did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD, making illicit offerings on the high places and perhaps even reviving the cult of child sacrifice associated with Molech (2 Kgs. 16:2-4). When Syria and Israel unite to attack Judah, he appeals to King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria for assistance. Ahaz's actions

effectively reduced Judah to the status of an Assyrian vassal-state. Ahaz must pay tribute to Tiglath-pileser, including treasures from the temple. Ahaz also seems to have introduced foreign deities or cult objects into the Jerusalem temple as a result of his contact with Damascus. Ahaz's primary sin was failing to trust in the LORD rather than in political alliances. According to Isaiah 8, Ahaz's refusal to accept God's protection will result in the LORD bringing the destructive—though not yet fatal—floodwaters of Assyria against Judah.

Isaiah

Isaiah, a name which means "the LORD saves," was an eighth-century BCE prophet from the Southern Kingdom. As is the case with other prophets, it is not always easy to glean biographical data about Isaiah from the diverse oracles found in the book that bears his name. However, some clues are found in chapters 6^o8 and 36–39. Though not necessarily his first prophetic experience, the visionary account in chapter 6 describes Isaiah's commission to his role as a prophet. Isaiah sees the LORD seated upon his throne with the hem of his robe filling the temple. Six-winged seraphs or "fiery ones" are in attendance above the LORD of hosts, praising his holiness. Isaiah confesses to being "a man of unclean lips" but is purified when a live coal is placed upon his mouth. Isaiah's visionary experience shares much in common with that of Ezekiel and Micaiah ben Imlah, though it is in contrast to the auditory call of other prophets such as Moses, Amos, and Jeremiah. Outside of this visionary account, Isaiah is perhaps most well known for his encounter with King Ahaz (chapters 7–8) and King Hezekiah (chapters 36–39). In the latter case, it is noteworthy that Isaiah takes on the role of a type of "holy man" by acting as a healer for Hezekiah. While the eighth-century prophet Isaiah

is the dominant personality in this book, interpreters as early as the Middle Ages recognized that much of the material in chapters 40–66 presuppose the Babylonian exile and its aftermath. As a result, in modern biblical scholarship it is customary to assume a complex composition history behind the

book of Isaiah. In this view, much—but not all—of chapters 1–39 are attributed to the eighth-century prophet Isaiah ben Amoz. The remaining material is thought to be the work of anonymous sixth-century prophets, referred to as “Second Isaiah” (chapters 40–55) and “Third Isaiah” (chapters 56–66).

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Compare and contrast King Ahaz and King Hezekiah. What do their respective reactions to Isaiah’s oracles and urgings say about the editors’ assessment of their reigns?
2. Isaiah was an important book for the early Christians. Many texts from Isaiah, for instance, were viewed as prophecies of Christ’s coming (see, for example, the reference to the “young woman” who will give birth to a child in Isa. 7:14). How do you respond to these later reappropriations of Isaiah?
3. Many scholars argue that the book of Isaiah does not come from a single person, and not even a single century. The book spans several hundred years, and has been expanded and edited throughout. Is the evidence for this argument compelling? If so, what impact should this knowledge have on one’s reading of the book? Should one read the book any differently in light of its complex compositional history?
4. Many prophetic books, including Isaiah and Zephaniah, contain oracles of doom and gloom alongside (often later) oracles of salvation and restoration. What can explain these dramatic shifts in content? And what might they say about Israel’s view of its God?

Primary Text

Isaiah 6:1–7:17

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ Isaiah’s vantage point for this vision might reflect that of a royal advisor who stood by the king at the entrance of the temple, able to glimpse into its interior (see 2 Kgs. 11:14; 23:3).
- ▶ Isaiah’s vision of the seraphs (“fiery ones”) might call to mind the appearance of a lamp’s flame in the midst of the incense smoke that would have filled the temple during worship (Isa. 6:4).
- ▶ Ancient Mesopotamian priests also went through mouth purification rituals so that they could speak on behalf of the gods.
- ▶ Isaiah 6:7 does not specify a particular sin or violation. Rather, Isaiah presupposes that all humans are impure in comparison to the holiness of God.
- ▶ The “us” in Isaiah 6:8 refers to the divine council of heavenly beings (see also Gen. 1:26).

- ▶ Note that the New Testament draws on Isaiah 6:9-10 in reference to why Jesus speaks in parables (Matt. 13:13-15; Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:9-10).
- ▶ Note that Ephraim is another name for Israel. Aram is a nation located in southern Syria. Together they make up the Syro-Ephraimite alliance.
- ▶ The symbolic name Shear-jashub means “a remnant shall return.” It is meant to assure Ahaz that the LORD would defend Jerusalem against any attack.
- ▶ Note that the immediate goal of the attack at Jerusalem was to replace Ahaz with someone named “son of Tabeel” (verse 6), who presumably supported the aims of the Syro-Ephraimite alliance.
- ▶ Isaiah 7:9 features a word play between two forms of a Hebrew verb that can mean either “stand firm (in faith)” or “stand.”

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” ⁹ And he said, “Go and say to this people:

‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’

¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.”

¹¹ Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:

“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;

¹² until the LORD sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of
the land.

¹³ Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled.”

The Holy seed is its stump.

7 ¹ In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem, but could not mount an attack against it. ² When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

³ Then the LORD said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, ⁴ and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. ⁵ Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying, ⁶ Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it; ⁷ therefore thus says the Lord GOD:

It shall not stand,
and it shall not come to pass.

⁸ For the head of Aram is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.

(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.)

⁹ The head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is the son of
Remaliah.

If you do not stand firm in faith,
you shall not stand at all.

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. ¹⁷ The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why you think the visionary account in chapter 6 immediately precedes Isaiah's encounter with King Ahaz in chapter 7?
2. According to Isaiah 6:9-10, what specific task is Isaiah commissioned to do? Why might this be surprising?
3. The image of a stump appears in both Isaiah 6:13 and 7:5. How does it function in each case? Is it a sign of punishment, hope, or both?
4. What message is being communicated through the sign about the "young woman" in Isaiah 7:14-17?

Micah 6

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ Verses 1-8 function as a legal disputation in which the prophet, as a type of attorney, presents God's case against the community.
- ▶ As in some ancient Near Eastern treaties, elements of the natural world are invoked as witnesses.
- ▶ Note that in verse 4, Micah draws on elements of the exodus story.
- ▶ Note that verse 7 presents a rhetorical question where the implied answer is "no."
- ▶ Verse 8 is a succinct statement of a key element in the preaching of eighth century prophets.
- ▶ Verses 9-16 function as the judicial sentence that follows naturally from indictment presented in verses 1-8. Alternatively, it could be a separate oracle.
- ▶ The city referred to in verse 9 is Jerusalem. Here and elsewhere, Micah makes little distinction between the sin of Judah and Israel.
- ▶ The curses mentioned in verses 14-15 share much in common with covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28:30-31, 38-40.

¹ Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the
mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the
LORD,

and you enduring foundations of the
earth;

for the LORD has a controversy with his
people,
and he will contend with Israel.

³ "O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of
slavery;

and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.

⁵ O my people, remember now what King

Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the
LORD."

⁶ "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?

⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of
rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my
soul?"

⁸ He has told you, O mortal, 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?

⁹ The voice of the LORD cries to the city
 (it is sound wisdom to fear your name):
 Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city!
¹⁰ Can I forget the treasures of wickedness
 in the house of the wicked,
 and the scant measure that is accursed?
¹¹ Can I tolerate wicked scales
 and a bag of dishonest weights?
¹² Your wealthy are full of violence;
 your inhabitants speak lies,
 with tongues of deceit in their mouths.
¹³ Therefore I have begun to strike you down,
 making you desolate because of your sins.
¹⁴ You shall eat, but not be satisfied,

and there shall be a gnawing hunger
 within you;
 you shall put away, but not save,
 and what you save, I will hand over to the
 sword.
¹⁵ You shall sow, but not reap;
 you shall tread olives, but not anoint your-
 selves with oil;
 you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.
¹⁶ For you have kept the statutes of Omri
 and all the works of the house of Ahab,
 and you have followed their counsels.
 Therefore I will make you a desolation, and
 your inhabitants an object of hissing;
 so you shall bear the scorn of my people.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first eight verses contain numerous shifts in speakers. Where do you see these shifts and who is speaking in each case?
2. How does reference to the exodus story (verse 4) function to strengthen God's case against Israel?
3. How would you summarize the central message of verses 6-8? In what other prophetic books have you encountered a similar perspective?
4. What is the nature of the curses in verse 14-15?

Nahum 1

CLOSE READING TIPS:

- ▶ "Jealous" (1:2) is a familiar characteristic of God in the Hebrew Bible (for example, Exod. 34:6; Jon. 4:2). It can be used in a positive sense (to zealously work for someone's benefit) or a negative sense (to bear a grudge or resent).
- ▶ Throughout the Hebrew Bible, "vengeance" does not imply illegitimate or unrestrained revenge but rather God's willingness to uphold lawfulness and justice.
- ▶ Verses 3b-5 draw on a common stock of imagery about the divine warrior. It emphasizes God's cosmic power.
- ▶ In verses 9-15, the identity of the addressees is sometimes ambiguous. The "you" (feminine singular in Hebrew) in verses 9-13 and 15 likely refers to Judah while the "you" (masculine singular in Hebrew) in verse 14 likely refers to the king of Assyria.

- ▶ Note that in the verse 12 “they” is Assyria. “His yoke” in verse 13 is the political and military oppression of Assyria.
- ▶ References to one who brings “good tidings” and “peace” can also be found in 2 Samuel 18:27, 31 and Isaiah 40:9; 41:27.

¹ An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.

² A jealous and avenging God is the LORD,
the LORD is avenging and wrathful;
the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries
and rages against his enemies.

³ The LORD is slow to anger but great in power,
and the LORD will by no means clear the
guilty.

His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.

⁴ He rebukes the sea and makes it dry,
and he dries up all the rivers;
Bashan and Carmel wither,
and the bloom of Lebanon fades.

⁵ The mountains quake before him,
and the hills melt;
the earth heaves before him,
the world and all who live in it.

⁶ Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
and by him the rocks are broken in pieces.

⁷ The LORD is good,
a stronghold in a day of trouble;
he protects those who take refuge in him,
⁸ even in a rushing flood.
He will make a full end of his adversaries,
and will pursue his enemies into darkness.

⁹ Why do you plot against the LORD?
He will make an end;

no adversary will rise up twice.

¹⁰ Like thorns they are entangled,
like drunkards they are drunk;
they are consumed like dry straw.

¹¹ From you one has gone out
who plots evil against the Lord,
one who counsels wickedness.

¹² Thus says the LORD,
“Though they are at full strength and many,
they will be cut off and pass away.
Though I have afflicted you,
I will afflict you no more.

¹³ And now I will break off his yoke from you
and snap the bonds that bind you.”

¹⁴ The LORD has commanded concerning you:
“Your name shall be perpetuated no
longer;
from the house of your gods I will cut off
the carved image and the cast image.
I will make your grave, for you are worthless.”

¹⁵ Look! On the mountains the feet of one
who brings good tidings,
who proclaims peace!
Celebrate your festivals, O Judah,
fulfill your vows,
for never again shall the wicked invade you;
they are utterly cut off.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the emphasis on God's jealousy and vengeance relate to the specific issue of the fall of Nineveh?
2. Why might it be comforting for Judean readers to see YHWH described as a powerful warrior capable of controlling natural forces?
3. What is the nature of the each of the threats against the king of Assyria in verse 14?
4. What good tidings are being delivered in verse 15? Why would this news enable the people of Judah to celebrate festivals and fulfill vows?

Zephaniah 1:2–2:3

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ Note that “from the face of the earth” begins and ends verses 2-3. This is called an “inclusio.”
- ▶ Judgment is announced against all of creation in verses 2-3. Focus narrows on Judah and Jerusalem in the subsequent verses.
- ▶ Many of the religious offenses referenced in verses 4-6 call to mind the account of Manasseh's idolatry in 2 Kings 21. This might provide a plausible historical backdrop for Zephaniah's prophecy.
- ▶ The “Fish Gate,” “Second Quarter,” and “Mortar wall” likely refer to wealthy areas within Jerusalem where traders work.
- ▶ Note that the final verse of chapter 1 returns to the cosmic scope of verses 2-3.
- ▶ Zephaniah 2:1-3 hold out the promise that destruction will be averted if the people repent.

² I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth, says the LORD.

³ I will sweep away humans and animals;
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.

I will make the wicked stumble.
I will cut off humanity
from the face of the earth, says the LORD.

⁴ I will stretch out my hand against Judah,
and against all the inhabitants of
Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place every remnant
of Baal

and the name of the idolatrous priests;
⁵ those who bow down on the roofs

to the host of the heavens;
those who bow down and swear to the LORD,
but also swear by Milcom;
⁶ those who have turned back from following
the LORD,
who have not sought the LORD or inquired of
him.

⁷ Be silent before the Lord GOD!
For the day of the LORD is at hand;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,
he has consecrated his guests.

⁸ And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice
I will punish the officials and the king's sons
and all who dress themselves in foreign
attire.

⁹ On that day I will punish
 all who leap over the threshold,
 who fill their master's house
 with violence and fraud.

¹⁰ On that day, says the LORD,
 a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,
 a wail from the Second Quarter,
 a loud crash from the hills.

¹¹ The inhabitants of the Mortar wail,
 for all the traders have perished;
 all who weigh out silver are cut off.

¹² At that time I will search Jerusalem with
 lamps,
 and I will punish the people
 who rest complacently on their dregs,
 those who say in their hearts,
 "The LORD will not do good,
 nor will he do harm."
¹³ Their wealth shall be plundered,
 and their houses laid waste.
 Though they build houses,
 they shall not inhabit them;
 though they plant vineyards,
 they shall not drink wine from them.

¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near,
 near and hastening fast;
 the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter,
 the warrior cries aloud there.

¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath,
 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,
¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
 against the fortified cities
 and against the lofty battlements.

¹⁷ I will bring such distress upon people
 that they shall walk like the blind;
 because they have sinned against the
 LORD,
 their blood shall be poured out like dust,
 and their flesh like dung.

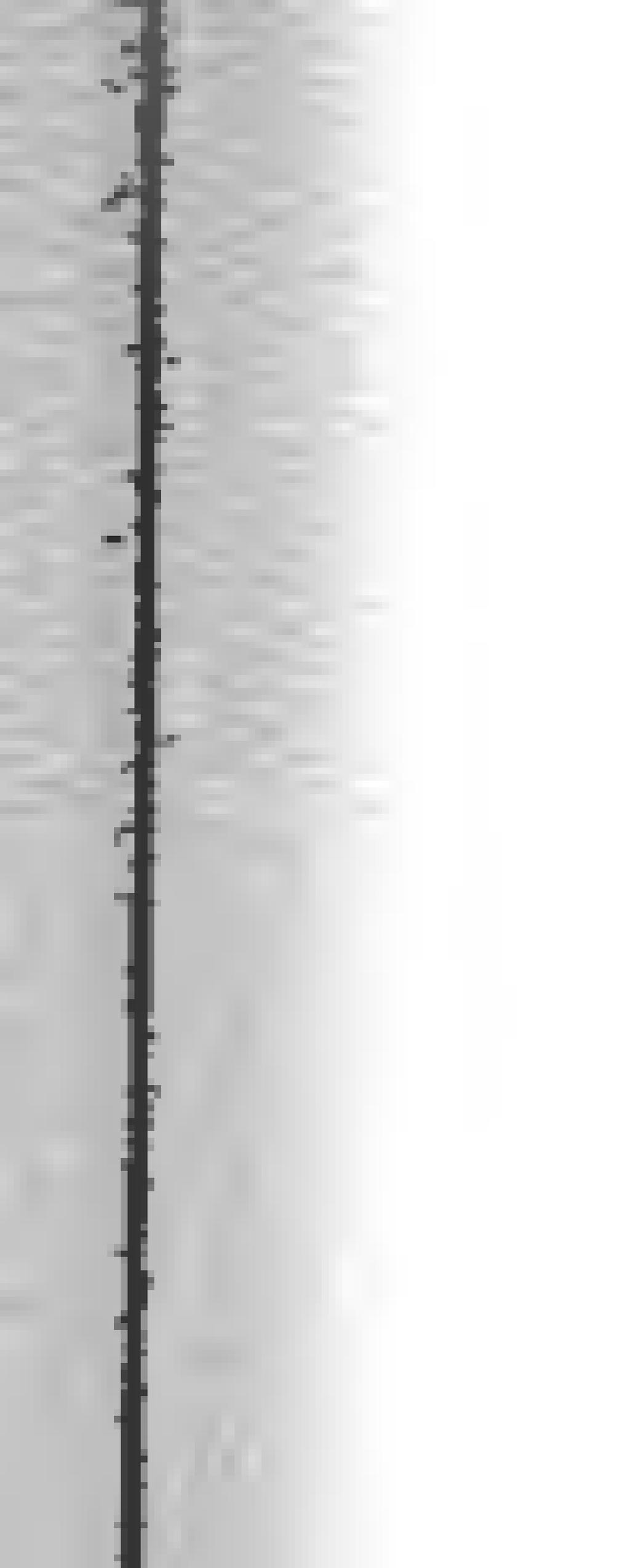
¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold
 will be able to save them
 on the day of the LORD's wrath;
 in the fire of his passion
 the whole earth shall be consumed;
 for a full, a terrible end
 he will make of all the inhabitants of the
 earth.

2 ¹ Gather together, gather,
 O shameless nation,
² 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 LORD's wrath.

³ Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
 who do his commands;
 seek righteousness, seek humility;
 perhaps you may be hidden
 on the day of the LORD's wrath.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What similarities and differences do you see between Zephaniah 1:2—2:3 and Amos 5 in terms of how both prophets present the Day of the LORD?
2. What sorts of sins does Zephaniah target in this oracle? Are they more related to idolatry or social injustice?
3. How might a seventh-century BCE audience have understood references to “ruin,” “devastation,” and a “battle cry against the fortified city?”
4. If Zephaniah spoke during the early reign of Josiah, how might the words of Zephaniah 2:3 motivate the king’s religious reforms?



of certain Judean kings, scribes, and prophets, and his acquiescence to Babylonian rule. Not surprisingly, Jeremiah's message was met with considerable resistance. Perhaps more than any other prophet, Jeremiah experiences bitterness and isolation, as is evident in the so-called "laments" of Jeremiah (Jer. 11–20). Nevertheless, the book of Jeremiah also contains several hopeful oracles about the restoration of Jerusalem and the return of "the voice of gladness" to the towns of Judah (Jer. 30–33).

The five highly stylized poems in the book of Lamentations share much in common with the city lament, a literary genre well attested in the ancient Near East since the end of the third millennium. Using lurid detail, Lamentations brings the reader face-to-face with the horrific devastation of Jerusalem. Though Lamentations believes this punishment is deserved, it nevertheless professes confidence in "the steadfast love of the LORD" (Lam. 3:22). This book is most well-known for its heart-wrenching expression of grief over God abandoning his people and disavowing his sanctuary. These words of lament have resonated with readers throughout the ages and have been incorporated into Jewish and Christian liturgies (the Ninth of Ab and Good Friday, respectively) that commemorate past tragedies.

Key Terms

Chaldeans Of Aramean origins, the Chaldeans were a heterogeneous population that settled between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers early in the first millennium BCE. This southern Mesopotamian region would later be called the "Land of the Chaldeans." Under King Nabopolassar (626–605 BCE), the Chaldeans became one of the dominant elements of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. In much of the Hebrew Bible, the term Chaldeans is used as a synonym for Babylonians.

Lament A lament is a literary genre that expresses grief or sorrow. Various types of laments are known from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature. For instance, the book of Lamentations is modeled on Mesopotamian city laments while the material in Jeremiah 11–20 reflects individual laments. The Psalter features communal laments while the funeral dirge is evident in several prophetic texts. During the time of exile, the lament was an appropriate response

to loss and the experience of divine punishment and abandonment.

The Ninth of Ab In later Jewish tradition, the Ninth of Ab is an annual fast that commemorates not only the destruction of the first temple (587 BCE) but also the fall of the second temple to the Romans (70 CE) and the defeat of Bar Kochba (132 CE). By virtue of being used in the liturgy for the Ninth of Ab, the book of Lamentations becomes a lament for all major tragedies in Jewish history. This tradition may originate in a much earlier time when mourning rituals were used in connection with the Babylonian exile (see Jer. 41:5; Zech. 7:3; 8:19).

Greek Jeremiah The Greek translation of Jeremiah differs in significant ways from the Hebrew version preserved in the Masoretic Text. Not only is the Greek text one-eighth shorter, but the oracles against foreign nations are located after Jeremiah 25:13 instead of at the end of the Hebrew text (Jer. 46–51). It was initially believed that the Greek translator abridged and rearranged the Hebrew.

However, evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests that the Greek preservers an older form of the book.

Acrostic An acrostic is a literary composition in which the first word of each stanza or line begins with a consecutive letter of the alphabet. Lamentations 1, 2, and 4 are simple acrostics with twenty-two stanzas each (to match the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet). A more complex acrostic is found in Lamentations 3, where the three lines of each of the twenty-two stanzas all begin with the appropriate letter. Lamentations 5 has twenty-two lines but breaks from the acrostic pattern, perhaps suggesting the inability to bring closure to the lament.

Key Personalities

Jeremiah

The prophet Jeremiah was a descendant of Abiathar, a Levite who served (along with Zadok) as one of David's two chief priests. Abiathar was eventually exiled to Anathoth when he supported Adonijah, the king's rival to the throne. Subsequently, control of the Jerusalem priesthood fell into the hands of Zadok and his descendants. Jeremiah's critique of the Davidic dynasty and Jerusalem temple, as well as his emphasis on the exodus tradition, likely owes much to his association with Abiathar and the town of Anathoth. Jeremiah's prophetic call, which is placed during the thirteenth year of King Josiah (627 BCE), shares much in common with the call of Moses. Both prophets have an auditory experience, initially resist God on the basis of their unsuitability for the mission, and ultimately are assured that they have been appointed by YHWH. The details of his prophetic career are somewhat difficult to

reconstruct, although it is clear that Jeremiah's ministry was closely intertwined with the critical events surrounding Josiah's reforms, two unsuccessful revolts against Babylonia, and the comprehensive deportation in 586 BCE. While Jeremiah initially chose to stay in Jerusalem after it fell, he was later forced to accompany a group of exiles seeking refuge in Egypt. The book of Lamentations is often attributed to Jeremiah, though the Hebrew Bible never makes this claim. Nevertheless, the prophet's doleful tone is the most prominent aspect of the book that bears his name, thus giving rise to the term "jeremiad," which refers to a speech or writing that expresses mournful complaint.

Baruch

Baruch was a scribe and close associate of the prophet Jeremiah. Almost every time he is mentioned in the book of Jeremiah, he is referred to as the "son of Neriah" (Jer. 32:12, 16; 36:4, 8, 14, 32; 43:3, 6; 45:1). It is believed that Baruch was a royal scribe in Jerusalem in part because of a discovery of a seal impression in a royal archive with the inscription "Berechiah, son of Neriah, the scribe" (Berechiah is the long form of the name Baruch). During the siege of Jerusalem, Baruch functions as a witness to Jeremiah's purchase of a piece of land in Anathoth, an act meant to symbolize that land would one day be restored to Israel. In Jeremiah 36, the prophet receives a command from the LORD to write on a scroll all the words that were spoken to him. Instead of doing this himself, Jeremiah has Baruch write on the scrolls as he dictates what the LORD had told him. Since Jeremiah was barred from entering the temple, he calls on Baruch to read the scroll in the house of the LORD on a fast day. Baruch also reads from the scroll in the presence of the King Jehoiakim's officials at the royal palace.

When the scroll was read again in the presence of the king (though not by Baruch), Jehoiakim burns the scroll. After escaping, Jeremiah once again dictates words to Baruch for another scroll. Some scholars consider Baruch as Jeremiah's biographer and others suggest that Baruch was responsible for writing large

portions of the book's prose. Jeremiah's relationship with Baruch is an obvious exception to the prophet's critical view of scribes. Baruch is a popular figure in later Jewish tradition. An apocryphal letter from the second century BCE is attributed to Baruch, as are several other texts.

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Societies tend to silence voices that cry out for unpopular change. Jeremiah's situation was no different. He preached a deeply unpopular message to a largely resistant audience. Can you think of any modern day "Jeremiahs"? How do their messages, lives, and reception within the society parallel the literary portrayal of Jeremiah?
2. The book of Jeremiah is dominated by oracles that announce impending judgment. But there are also oracles about Israel's future—both in and after exile. What kind of future does Jeremiah envision? How do these visions of the future compare to other utopian visions of the future of which you are aware?
3. Both Habakkuk and Jeremiah identify Babylon as a divinely commissioned agent of violence and judgment. According to these two books, God uses Babylon to accomplish God's will in the world. Throughout history, both ancient and modern, religious leaders have tended to associate might, power, and influence with God's will. What is your reaction to this tendency?
4. Habakkuk and Jeremiah, in their own ways, highlight the problem of evil in the world. Habakkuk wonders why God delays in his response to prayer. For his part, Jeremiah cries out, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" In your view, how do these two books respond to these questions, if at all? What is your own response to these questions?

Primary Text

Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur

Source: Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, fully revised and expanded 3d. ed. (New York: Paulist, 2006), 249–55

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ Ur was a Sumerian city located in southern Mesopotamia that was destroyed around 2000 BCE.
- ▶ Note that defeat in war is interpreted as a sign that the deities have abandoned their cities or temples.
- ▶ The goddess Ningal, the wife of Nanna, mourns for the city as a mother mourns for her child.

- ▶ The expression “the Day of the Dust Storm” is used in a somewhat similar way as the biblical expression “the Day of the LORD” or “that day.”
- ▶ Note that no explanation is provided for the divine assembly’s decision.
- ▶ On a mythopoetic level, the city is laid waste by a violent dust storm sent by the god Enlil. In historical terms, the city fell to the Elamites and Amorites (lines 171–206).
- ▶ The text describes the bloody aftermath of the destruction. Note the graphic nature of this description.
- ▶ Note that the text beseeches Anu and Enlil to end the destruction and to permit the rebuilding of Ur. This lamentation likely would have been sung during various stages of the rebuilding process.

FIRST LAMENT

Enlil, the shepherd of Sumer, has fled Nippur
 His sheep are without a shepherd.
 Enlil, divine patron of the Earth, has abandoned Nippur,
 His sheep are without a shepherd.
 Enlil has left Nippur,
 His sheep are without a shepherd.
 Ninlil, wife of Enlil, has fled Nippur,
 Her sheep are without a shepherd.
 Ninlil has abandoned her temple,
 Her sheep are without a shepherd. . .

SECOND LAMENT

Cities of Sumer, weep bitter tears!
 Cities of Sumer, mourn!
 Weep bitter tears for Ur, the faithful city!
 Mourn with Nanna, the divine patron of
 the city!
 Cities of Sumer, mourn!
 Weep bitter tears over the ruins of Ur.
 Mourn with Nanna,
 Weep bitter tears as long as Nanna
 mourns!
 Weep bitter tears over the walls of Ur!
 Mourn for Ekishnugal, the temple of
 Nanna. . .

THIRD LAMENT

That Night, I could not go to bed,
 That Night, I could not fall asleep.
 Night after night, I could not go to bed,
 Night after night, I could not fall asleep.
 The land of Ur is filled with sorrow,
 Sorrow fated for my land.
 Although I screamed for the life of my calf,
 cried out for its release,
 I could not save my land from its misery.
 My land was in distress,
 Distress that condemned my city to death.
 Even if I could flap my wings like a bird,
 Even if I could fly to save my city,
 Still my city would be destroyed,
 Still my city would be razed to its
 foundations,
 Still my Ur would be destroyed where it
 lays.

FOURTH LAMENT

The Day of the Dust Storm struck Ur over and
 over,
 I watched the destruction of my city. . . ,
 The Day of the Dust Storm, the divine assembly
 condemned my city,

Enlil commanded the total destruction of
 my city and its people,
 The Day of the Dust Storm, I did not abandon
 my city,
 I did not forget my land.
 I shed tears of sorrow before Anu,
 I uttered prayers of supplication before
 Enlil.
 I repeated cried, "Spare the city and its
 people!"
 But Anu and Enlil did not relent;
 They gave no comfort to my heart.
 Their command remained to destroy my city.
 Their decree was to kill my people. . . .
 "Spare my city from destruction," I asked.
 "Spare Ur from destruction," I begged.
 "Spare its people from death," I pleaded
 with Anu and Enlil.
 Anu would not listen to me,
 Enlil would not sooth my distress,
 He would not decree: "Grant her petition!"
 Instead, Enlil and Anu ordered the city
 destroyed,
 They ordered Ur destroyed.
 The fate of Ur was sealed,
 The people of Ur were sentenced to death.

FIFTH LAMENT

Enlil prepares the dust storm,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 He withholds the rain from the land;
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 He delays the winds that water the corps of
 Sumer,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 He gives the winds that dry the land their
 orders,

 And the people of Ur mourn.
 Enlil orders Kingaluda, the dust storm, to put
 the city to death,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 He prepares the winds that dry the land,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 Enlil orders Gibil, the lightning, to prepare the
 dust storms.
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 The winds that dry the land howl.
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 The storm sweeps across the land,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 The winds that dry the land rush unrestrained
 to the sea,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 Great waves swallow the city's ships,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 Earthquakes rock the pillars of the earth,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 Lightning flashes and explodes in the dust
 storms.
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 The dust storm leaves the city and the Temple
 of Nanna in ruins,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 The dust storm scatters bodies everywhere like
 broken pots,
 And the people of Ur mourn. . . .
 The walls are breached and corpses block the
 gates,
 And the people of Ur mourn. . . .
 The main streets are choked with the dead.
 Bodies fill the streets.
 Where crowds once celebrated festivals, bodies
 lie in every street,
 Corpses are piled on every road.
 In the squares where people danced,

Heaps of corpses lie.
 The blood of the dead fills every crevice,
 Like molten metal in a worker's mold.
 The bodies of the dead melt,
 Their flesh is like the fat of sheep left in the
 sun.
 Warriors wounded by an ax bleed to death.
 Warriors wounded by a lance go untended.
 Soldiers lie in the dust,
 Fighters gasp like gazelles pierced by
 hunters' spears. . . .

The elders of Ur are slaughtered,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 The wise of Ur are scattered,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 Mothers turn their backs on their daughters,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 Fathers walk away from their sons,
 And the people of Ur mourn.
 Women, children, and houses are abandoned
 and looted. . . .

SEVENTH LAMENT

All the buildings outside the walls are
 destroyed.
 And the people of Ur say: "Our poor city!"
 All the buildings inside the walls are destroyed.

And the people of Ur say: "Our poor city!"
 Ur, my fertile ewe, has been slaughtered.
 Its good shepherd is gone.
 My strong ox no longer stands in its stable.
 Its oxherd is gone.
 The daughters and sons of Ur have been car-
 ried away in ships.
 And the people of Ur say: "Our poor
 children!"

My poor city and temple are destroyed,
 The Temple of Nanna is destroyed, and the
 people of Ur are dead.
 Poor me, I have no place to sit or stand.
 Poor me, ruins I do not recognize stand in
 place of my city.

EIGHTH LAMENT

May Anu, divine patron of the sky, decree:
 "Enough!"
 May Enlil, divine patron of the winds,
 grant Ningal a better fate.
 May Anu rebuild Ur,
 May he restore the Temple of Ningal.
 May Anu return your city to its former
 grandeur,
 May he make you, once again, its queen.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

1. What is the underlying reason why Ur is allowed to be destroyed? How does this compare or contrast with the explanation given in Jeremiah or the book of Lamentations?
2. In this lament, the goddess Ningal mourns for the desolation of her city. What character plays a similar role in the book of Lamentations?
3. The profession of the steadfast love of YHWH (Lam. 3:22-24) interjects hope into the biblical lament. Do you see any future oriented hope in the Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur? Where?
4. Why do you think the author of this lament, much like the author of Jeremiah and Lamentations, included such graphic depictions of violence and desolation? What affect does this have on the reader?

Jeremiah 29

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ The time frame for this letter is several years (C. 594–593) after the first wave of exiles were deported from Jerusalem.
- ▶ The purpose of the commands in verses 4-7 is to emphasize that the exiles should not expect an immediate restoration as some false prophets had been predicting (verses 9-10).
- ▶ The prediction of a seventy year exile (verse 10) is difficult to account for. It may refer to the period between the destruction of the temple (587 BCE) and its rebuilding (516–515 BCE). More likely, it is a typological figure representing the period of a normal life span.
- ▶ The purpose of verses 16-20 is to critique those who remained behind in Jerusalem, including King Zedekiah and his officials. The imagery of rotten figs is also used in a similar message in chapter 24.
- ▶ Note that Shemaiah had attempted to have Jeremiah imprisoned.

¹ These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiyah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: ⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your

welfare. ⁸ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

¹⁵ Because you have said, "The LORD has raised up prophets for us in Babylon,"— ¹⁶ Thus says the

LORD concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, and concerning all the people who live in this city, your kinsfolk who did not go out with you into exile: ¹⁷ Thus says the LORD of hosts, I am going to let loose on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like rotten figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. ¹⁸ I will pursue them with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be an object of cursing, and horror, and hissing, and a derision among all the nations where I have driven them, ¹⁹ because they did not heed my words, says the LORD, when I persistently sent to you my servants the prophets, but they would not listen, says the LORD. ²⁰ But now, all you exiles whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon, hear the word of the LORD: ²¹ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name: I am going to deliver them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and he shall kill them before your eyes. ²² And on account of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon: "The LORD make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire," ²³ because they have perpetrated outrage in Israel and have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and have spoken in my name

lying words that I did not command them; I am the one who knows and bears witness, says the LORD.

²⁴ To Shemaiah of Nehelam you shall say: ²⁵ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: In your own name you sent a letter to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, and to all the priests, saying, ²⁶ The LORD himself has made you priest instead of the priest Jehoiada, so that there may be officers in the house of the LORD to control any madman who plays the prophet, to put him in the stocks and the collar. ²⁷ So now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who plays the prophet for you? ²⁸ For he has actually sent to us in Babylon, saying, "It will be a long time; build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat what they produce."

²⁹ The priest Zephaniah read this letter in the hearing of the prophet Jeremiah. ³⁰ Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ³¹ Send to all the exiles, saying, Thus says the LORD concerning Shemaiah of Nehelam: Because Shemaiah has prophesied to you, though I did not send him, and has led you to trust in a lie, ³² therefore thus says the LORD: I am going to punish Shemaiah of Nehelam and his descendants; he shall not have anyone living among this people to see the good that I am going to do to my people, says the LORD, for he has spoken rebellion against the LORD.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where in this passage do you see Jeremiah challenging other religious authorities? What does this suggest about his prophetic leadership?
2. What specific issue causes conflict between Jeremiah and other prophets?
3. How is Jeremiah's command in verses 4-8 consistent with his theological assessment of the exile?
4. Why might Jeremiah's perspective on submitting to Babylon not sit well most of his audience?

Habakkuk 1

CLOSE READING TIPS

- ▶ The term “prophet” (verse 1) is only used in the superscriptions to two other books, Haggai and Zechariah.
- ▶ Habakkuk’s language in verses 2-4 is typical of the complaint section of the lament genre (see Ps. 13).
- ▶ Note that the term “violence” occurs six times in this short book (Hab. 1:2, 3, 4, 9; 2:18, 17).
- ▶ In verses 5-11, the speaker seems to be God but is never identified as such.
- ▶ Chaldeans (verse 6) is another name for the Babylonians.
- ▶ Habakkuk is the speaker once again in verses 12-17. Here he offers a second complaint (verse 17).
- ▶ Note that verses 14-16 employs an extended analogy between fish and people, where the enemy (Babylon) is a fisherman.

¹ The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴ So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

⁵ Look at the nations, and see!
Be astonished! Be astounded!
For a work is being done in your days
that you would not believe if you were told.

⁶ For I am rousing the Chaldeans,
that fierce and impetuous nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth
to seize dwellings not their own.

⁷ Dread and fearsome are they;
their justice and dignity proceed from
themselves.

⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more menacing than wolves at dusk;
their horses charge.

Their horsemen come from far away;
they fly like an eagle swift to devour.

⁹ They all come for violence,
with faces pressing forward;
they gather captives like sand.

¹⁰ At kings they scoff,
and of rulers they make sport.

They laugh at every fortress,
and heap up earth to take it.

¹¹ Then they sweep by like the wind;
they transgress and become guilty;
their own might is their god!

¹² Are you not from of old,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
You shall not die.

O LORD, you have marked them for judgment;

and you, O Rock, have established them
for punishment.

- ¹³ Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;
why do you look on the treacherous,
and are silent when the wicked swallow
those more righteous than they?
¹⁴ You have made people like the fish of the sea,
like crawling things that have no ruler.

- ¹⁵ The enemy brings all of them up with a hook;
he drags them out with his net,
he gathers them in his seine;
so he rejoices and exults.
¹⁶ Therefore he sacrifices to his net
and makes offerings to his seine;
for by them his portion is lavish,
and his food is rich.
¹⁷ Is he then to keep on emptying his net,
and destroying nations without mercy?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What sort of problem—sin within Judah or an external threat—do you think Habakkuk is referring to in the opening verses?
2. What instrument does God use to respond to the violence and wrongdoing that Habakkuk observes?
3. Is the prophet persuaded that God's solution to his first complaint will work? Why or why not?