

Notes on Five Minor Prophets¹

7. Nahum

a. Context of Nahum's ministry

- i. No clear indication of the exact timeframe of Nahum's ministry but we do have clear boundaries
 1. Fall of Thebes mentioned in 3.8 occurred in 663 BC
 2. Fall of Nineveh to the Medes, which is the main subject of this book, occurred in 612 BC
- ii. A couple of common sense observations about the likely time period of Nahum's oracles
 1. History demonstrates that the Assyrians had overextended themselves militarily by around 620 BC and began to decline
 2. The height of Nineveh would have been before this time, making the years between 650-620 BC a reasonable time period for Nahum's ministry

b. Nahum the prophet

- i. Nahum's name means 'comforted by Yahweh'
 1. Appropriate for one bringing comfort and present hope to Judah
 2. Ironic, at best, from Nineveh's perspective
- ii. Nothing is known of the prophet except that he was from Elkosh, probably in Judah

c. The message of the book

- i. Primary focus of Nahum is God's coming judgment on Nineveh
 1. Clearly her repentance seen by Jonah was short-lived as there were approximately 150 years between Jonah and Nahum
 2. Nineveh is directly addressed by Nahum (speaking to the city as 'you')
 - a. There is no evidence that Nahum ever visited Nineveh like Jonah
 - b. The primary audience is actually Judah (cf. 1.15), to whom Nahum brings a word of comfort, consistent with his name
- ii. The key verses of Nahum of 1.2-3a and 1.7, which together present the justice and mercy of God
 1. The whole of chapter 1 goes back and forth between these two attributes of God
 2. To the wicked, God is to be feared as the one whose wrath will not be abated or neglected
 3. To the contrite, God is a refuge of goodness and grace
 4. Here is the 'Gospel According to Nahum' and the enduring theological application for our lives
 - a. Comfort (warning) that God will not let injustice /sin to prosper always (cf. Ps 7, 10, 42-43 et al)
 - b. Assurance that none of those turning to God for mercy will be cast out (cf. Ps 11, 16, 18, et al)
- iii. An aside on the graphic vengeance of God portrayed in Nahum
 1. Many have objected to the vision of God shown in Nahum, which is unprecedented in all of Scripture in its brutality and graphic, offensive fury
 2. What are we to say to such critiques?
 - a. The role of God in this prophecy is not to defile an innocent maiden (Nineveh) but to expose shamefully the one who has already played the whore (3.1-4)

¹ Though a new document, this numbering sequence continues from our previous notes in this series, to be collated into one complete document later

- b. Nineveh is charged here with unimaginable wickedness, expressed in a panoply of crimes, sins, and atrocities...this description is confirmed even by the Assyrian's own internal records
- c. Like modern preachers, prophets often resorted to hyperbole and vivid imagery to make a point, sometimes trying to intentionally shock their hearers
- d. The essence of Nahum's theology is captured in 1.2-3, 7...the two 'sides' of God's love must be kept in check with God's actions toward Nineveh a response to her heinous sins

8. Zephaniah

a. The context of Zephaniah's ministry

- i. The book's introduction places Zephaniah's ministry precisely, during the reign of Josiah (639-609 B.C)
- ii. Reminders about Josiah (cf. 2 Ki 22-23 and 2 Ch 34-35)
 - 1. The last good king in Judah and the best (2 Ki 23.25)
 - 2. Began a sweeping series of religious reforms to turn the people back to God
 - a. Restored temple worship
 - b. Removed Asherah from the temple, defiled Topheth, smashed pagan altars
 - c. Restored Passover celebration
 - 3. Died prematurely while intervening against Egypt, who was on the way to meet the Assyrians (2 Ki 23.28-30; 2 Ch 35.20-25)
- iii. After Josiah's death, reform stopped as the people had never recovered fully from the apostasy of Manasseh, for which the Lord has promised judgment (2 Ki 23.26-27)

b. Zephaniah the prophet

- i. Zephaniah's genealogy means he was closely related to King Josiah and perhaps also Isaiah
- ii. Zephaniah means 'Yahweh has hidden / stored up,' but finding a connection between this literal meaning and his historical context or the content of his oracles is difficult
- iii. Apart from the lengthy genealogy in 1.1, we know nothing of the prophet

c. The message of the book

- i. The book divides easily into three parts
- ii. The first part—prophecy against Judah (1.2-18)
 - 1. Zephaniah predicts the destruction of nearly everything in the land
 - 2. He picks up on (from Amos) and described the coming 'day of the Lord' as a great day of judgment and devastation
 - 3. As we shall see, Zephaniah's description of the 'day of the Lord' is especially influential on Ezekiel's proclamations a generation later
- iii. The second part—prophecy against the nations around Israel (chapter 2)
 - 1. The Philistines, Moabites, and Ammonites are judged for taunting Israel
 - 2. Reinforcing Nahum's oracles, Assyria's (Nineveh) destruction is again sentenced to destruction for her arrogance and self-reliance (2.15)
- iv. The third part—judgment and hope (chapter 3)
 - 1. Judgment is again meted out against Jerusalem and the surrounding nations (3.1-8), summarizing the content of the first two chapters
 - 2. Hope is proclaimed / promised in a glorious vision of restoration, peace, and salvation (3.9-20)
 - 3. Though seemingly contradictory, judgment and redemption are tied closely together

- a. Israel would have a shadowy glimpse of this paradox in God's sacrificial system
 - b. Only at the cross do judgment and redemption (for humanity and the cosmos) come crashing together, though still in a way that is beyond our ability to fully grasp
9. Habakkuk
- a. The context of Habakkuk's ministry
 - i. Unlike Zephaniah, Habakkuk gives no clear date for his ministry
 - ii. Like Nahum, several important clues allow us to determine a range of dates with remarkable certainty
 - 1. God's reference to the Chaldeans (1.6) means that Judah's invasion by Babylon is still a future event, making 605 B.C. the latest possible date
 - 2. Habakkuk's knowledge of Babylonian ferocity toward their enemies suggests first-hand knowledge with them as a significant military-political force, making their defeat of the Assyrians in 612 B.C. the earliest probable date for his ministry
 - b. Habakkuk the prophet
 - i. Neither the prophet's name (meaning 'embraced by Yahweh') nor any contextual information from the book gives us any glimpse into Habakkuk's character, genealogy, or identity
 - ii. Though many efforts have been made to identify him with other characters mentioned in Scripture², all are speculative and unproductive
 - c. The message of the book
 - i. This book divides naturally into two parts (chapters 1-2 and chapter 3)
 - ii. The first section records a dialogue between Habakkuk and God
 - 1. Habakkuk complains against God for allowing Judah's wickedness to continue unchecked (1.2-4)
 - 2. God responds with a promise of judgment at the hands of the Chaldeans / Babylonians (1.5-11)
 - 3. Seeing God's instrument of judgment as a bigger problem (i.e., worse sinners than Judah), Habakkuk then complains against God for using a more wicked nation to judge a less wicked one (1.12-2.1)
 - 4. God responds by foretelling of the later judgment against the Babylonians, reinforcing the paradoxical truth (cf. Is 10) that being God's agent of judgment does not alleviate one from moral responsibility
 - iii. The second section contains Habakkuk's response to God's revelation, including:
 - 1. Habakkuk's plea for God's merciful intervention in human affairs
 - 2. A description of God's sovereign involvement to deliver his people and land
 - 3. Habakkuk's worshipful response in the face of apparent destruction
 - iv. This book has great value for its timeless lessons:
 - 1. Habakkuk affirms God's interest in the fate of his people, even in the face of his apparent silence concerning prevalent wickedness and sin
 - 2. Here God responds to the honest, sincere doubts of the faithful. Bewilderment with earthly experience is to be expected. Here God responds to Habakkuk's frank confession of confusion / disenchantment / disillusionment with an explanation of events to come.³

² Dr. Daniel Block describes attempts to identify Habakkuk as the son of the Shunammite woman (2 Ki 4), the watchman introduced by Isaiah (Is 21.6), and a descendant of the tribe of Levi, among others.

³ Contrast God's response to Habakkuk with his response to Job. Habakkuk's complaints clearly express concern with God's reputation as holy and just...and God responds accordingly. In contrast, Job's complaints to God are more self-centered (In essence, 'Why is this happening to me?'), resulting in God's sterner response (cf. Job 40.6-41.34)

10. Obadiah

- a. The context of Obadiah's ministry
 - i. Like Joel (below), Obadiah's ministry is difficult, if not impossible, to place accurately due to the lack of historical information and the vagueness of the book itself
 - ii. Two views, both acceptable within conservative circles:
 - 1. Obadiah prophesied during the eighth century B.C.
 - a. Views his ministry as a response to an Edomite attack on Judah during the reign of Ahaz (cf. 2 Ch 28.17)
 - b. This view makes Obadiah a contemporary of Jonah, Hosea, and Amos
 - 2. Obadiah prophesied after the fall of Jerusalem
 - a. Understands vv. 10-14 to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586 B.C., an event in which Edom is known to have participated (Ps 137)
 - b. This view makes Obadiah a contemporary of Ezekiel and Daniel
- b. Obadiah the prophet
 - i. Obadiah's name means 'servant of Yahweh' and is a common OT name
 - ii. Apart from his nationality (Judean) and his claims of divine inspiration, we know nothing of his character or genealogy
- c. The message of the book
 - i. The central messages of Obadiah are unmistakable
 - 1. The impending judgment of Edom
 - a. Edomite conflict with their Israelite relatives goes back to Jacob and Esau
 - b. Edom later refused passage to Israel coming from Egypt
 - c. And so on and so on...
 - 2. The proclamation of Israel's ultimate salvation
 - a. Here the 'day of the Lord' is seen both negatively and positively
 - b. Negatively, as a day of judgment
 - c. Positively, as a day of salvation and deliverance
 - ii. Enduring lessons from Obadiah:
 - 1. God judges humanity for non-involvement in injustice, sin, and struggles
 - 2. God judges those who take joy in others' troubles
 - 3. God rebukes national pride and self-sufficiency
 - 4. There are no such things as fate, chance, or luck. God is sovereign over all things.

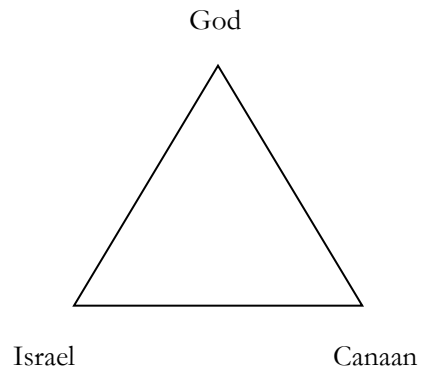
11. Joel

- a. The context of Joel's ministry
 - i. For the same reasons we find in Obadiah, dating Joel's ministry with any level of precision is difficult
 - 1. Suggested dates range from the ninth century B.C. to the fifth century B.C., making him one of the earliest or latest writing prophets
 - 2. Several indicators only allow us to narrow Joel's ministry to either before Jerusalem's fall or after its reconstruction (i.e., eliminating him as a prophet ministering during the exile)
 - a. Jerusalem had intact walls (2.7-9) that had either not been destroyed or had already been rebuilt
 - b. Worship was centered at the temple (2.7-9), either before its destruction or after its restoration

3. While the date of this book is certainly no test of orthodoxy, Joel 3.2-3 seems to presuppose the fall of Jerusalem, suggesting an early post-exilic date, perhaps in the time of Nehemiah
- b. Joel the prophet
 - i. Joel (meaning 'Yahweh is God') is a common OT name, telling us more perhaps about the faith of his father (Pethuel) and unnamed mother than anything
 - ii. No other genealogical or biographical information about Joel is given
 - c. The message of the book
 - i. Most of Joel's oracles center around the 'day of the Lord'
 1. Many other prophets refer to this day as one of God's great intervention in human affairs (cf. Amos, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah)
 2. While Amos depicts this day solely as one of judgment, Joel gives a fuller, more balanced description as a day of both judgment and salvation
 - ii. The 'day of the Lord' as judgment
 1. In complete agreement with Amos and others, the first half of Joel 1.2-2.17) depicts the 'day of the Lord' as one of devastating judgment
 2. Joel's description of judgment as an invasion of locusts would be a graphic, completely understandable illustration for his audience
 3. God's judgment would be complete, catastrophic, and unmistakable
 - iii. The 'day of the Lord' as salvation
 1. The second half of Joel (2.18-3.21) describes this day in completely different terms, as a day of salvation, redemption, and consummation
 2. Chapter 3 is a fascinating 'divine warrior hymn' describing the judgment of the nations and final restoration of Zion, but 2.18-32 is especially interesting to Christians
 - a. Joel describes the outpouring of the Spirit on 'all flesh' (that is all Israel, not all humankind), with the implication that the spiritual and ethnic boundaries of Israel will finally be equal
 - i. That Joel limits 'all flesh' to Israel is apparent from the context
 - ii. In his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2), Peter describes this prophecy as fulfilled!
 - b. Notes on 'pouring' out of the Spirit
 - i. Variations of a 'pouring' of the Spirit occur in only four places in the OT (Is 44.1-4; Ezek 39.29; Joel 2.28; and Zech 12.10)
 1. Each reference occurs within a salvation oracle, specifically in the context of the restoration of God's covenant with Israel
 2. The pouring of the Spirit is God's act of sealing and restoring the nation as his own
 - ii. More importantly for us, these four instances are matched with four instances in the book of Acts whereby the salvific work of God expands into the Christian mission
 1. Acts 2.3, 33, 38 – Jews in Jerusalem
 - a. Joel's prophecy fulfilled
 - b. Israel 'redefined' as those believing in Christ, at this point mostly ethnic Jews
 2. Acts 8.14-17 – Samaritans in Palestine
 3. Acts 10.44-48 – Gentile 'God-fearers' in Palestine
 4. Acts 19.6 – Ephesian Gentiles in Asia Minor (Turkey)

iii. Here the covenant community and 'covenant triangle' have expanded and been redefined:

1. Previously in the OT:



2. As expanded in the NT after Pentecost:

