

MICAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH, OBADIAH

St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

Micah

(740-711 B.C.)

The prophet Micah, from a small village about 27 miles from Jerusalem, was chosen by God to reproach Israel for her sins: the abuse of the poor by the wealthy elite (6:9-12); the corruption of Israel's leaders (7:2-4), and the worship of false gods (5:11-13). However it is the ruling elite that Micah reserves special condemnation; those who use their positions of power to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor: **"Woe to them that devise wickedness, and resolve on evil, lying on their beds; by the first light of the morning they execute it, for it is in their power. They covet fields and take them by violence, and houses and take them away Therefore, thus has said God: 'Behold, I will devise against these families evil, from which you shall not remove your necks.' . . . "** (2:2-3).

With these harsh words, the people heed Micah's call to repentance. Alternating with threats and promises, Micah warns them that "the day of Yahweh" is near at hand. But if the people repent, and after a period of purification, a new light of hope will shine.

Micah tells the people that God wants not sacrifices but acts of virtue—humility, justice and charity—actions which prove man's faithfulness. Only such worship that stems from the virtues will render Israel's sacrifices pleasing to God (Amos 5:24-25). This is what pleases God: **"He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do the right, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God"** (6:8).

Finally, Micah's message is that God's promises to Abraham will come true (7:20); that from this purified "remnant" of the people will be born in Bethlehem the Savior (5:1). This will be Israel's final triumph, Micah proclaims, when the Messiah comes to deliver the people: **"Then shall every man sit under his vine and under his fig tree, with none to make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken. Though all the peoples walk each one in the name of his god, we shall walk in the name of God, our God, for ever and ever"** (4:4-5).

Nahum

(711 B.C.)

Nothing is known about the prophet Nahum apart from the scant information provided in the book identifying him as "of Elkosh," which is either a clan or a town of Judah. The book was likely written between 663 and 612 B.C.

Reading Nahum one may ask why an entire biblical book is devoted to prophesying the destruction of Assyria, and why such shocking imagery is used? The answer is that the fall of Nineveh was a great event, the ancient equivalent of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. In fact,

Nahum's focus on the impending judgment of Nineveh continues the story begun in the Book of Jonah.

Around 760 B.C., God sent Jonah to Nineveh, Assyria's capital city, to preach repentance and hope; it was a message they heard and adopted—at least for a time. One hundred years later however, during the time of Nahum, the Assyrians had returned to their brutish ways, conquering the northern kingdom of Israel and lording their power over Judah in the south (2 Kings 17:1-6; 18:13-19:37).

Indeed the Ninevites were notorious for their cruelty. On campaign soldiers horribly mutilated their captives and forced them to march in procession, carrying the heads of their dead brothers-in-arms. This is the reason Jonah at first did not want to preach repentance to the Ninevites but rather wished their destruction.

Nahum also knew the evil of the Ninevites, as he wrote of their horsemen rushing through the streets, leaving a trail of death behind them. Nahum denounces their tyranny and bloodshed and foretells the city's complete annihilation; **"Woe to the bloody city! It is full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not. Hark! the whip, and hark! the rattling of wheels, and prancing horses, and bounding chariots; the horsemen charging, and the flashing sword, and the glittering spear; and a multitude of slain, and a heap of carcasses; . . ."** (3:1-3).

Amidst all this bloodshed Nahum sought to console Judah, promising the downfall of its greatest enemy, Assyria. Thus the capture of Nineveh in 612 B.C. by Babylonian and Median forces demonstrated that the course of history ultimately lies in the hands of God.

This is the enduring message of the Book of Nahum: no persecuting enemy will stand forever. The day of God's judgment will come, bringing punishment on those who have done evil and consolation to those who have sought refuge in the Lord. The Lord's power is almighty. God reveals His justice by judging His enemies, and His mercy by showing compassion to those who seek His protection (1:2-8).

Habakkuk (626 B.C.)

Habakkuk lived during the height of Babylon's power, when after the victory of King Nebuchadnezzar at Charchemis (between Turkey and Syria, 608-598 B.C.), Babylon's power extended over vast areas of the near East and so threatened the southern kingdom of Judah.

Habakkuk poses the problem of evil: how can a just God be "silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?" In his prayer Habakkuk accepts that God has chosen the Babylonians to be the instrument of justice against Judah. Yet, echoing Job, Habakkuk also asks how can God allow them to be so brutal and commit such terrible crimes (1:13ff.)? **"How long, O Lord, shall I cry and You will not hear? I cry out unto You of violence, and You will not save (1:13). "Behold, I will raise the Chaldeans, that bitter and impetuous nation that march to the wide spaces of the earth to conquer dwelling places that are not theirs. Terrible and dreadful are they; from them alone go forth their laws and dignity. Swifter than leopards are their horses, and fiercer than wolves at night. And their horses come riding on, arriving from**

afar. They fly like eagles, hastening to eat. They all come for violence; their faces are like the east wind, and they gather captives as the sand. And they will make sport with kings, and princes will be a play to them. At every stronghold will they laugh They make their power god" (1:6-11)

Note: The 16th century Protestant Reformation centered primarily upon the interpretation of Scripture. Specifically the Protestants called into question Catholic understanding of justification. The Protestants proclaimed a doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) which they based on Habakkuk 2:4 as quoted by St. Paul in Romans 1:17. **"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written: 'BUT THE RIGHTEOUS ONE WILL LIVE BY FAITH.'"** However the Council of Trent (1545-1563) concluded with the conviction that both the works of Christ and sacraments are necessary for salvation. Thus, the Catholic interpretation of Habakkuk 2:4 is that man is saved by faith in Christ and his work, but then is preserved by observing the sacraments.

Thus Habakkuk begins his book by complaining to the Lord. God counsels Habakkuk and all the righteous to have patience, even if it seems that His promises are slow in fulfillment: **"If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith"** (2:3-4). In the end, the life of righteousness requires faith and not merely the observance of the ceremonies of the law.

The book ends with a prayer of hope and faith in God. The man who trusts in the word of Yahweh may suffer, but in the end, if he maintains his fidelity, he will rejoice in the God of his salvation.

Zephaniah (626 B.C.)

As a contemporary of the prophets Jeremiah, Nahum and Habakkuk, Zephaniah is unique among the biblical prophets in that he descended from the royal house of David, the great great-grandson of King Hezekiah (Zephaniah 1:1). And like the prophets before him, Zephaniah preached against Israel's sins of idolatry. Indeed, after the disastrous reign of King Manasseh who had embraced witchcraft and its demonic sacrifices, Zephaniah had much to condemn: **"Manasseh . . . did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole (sacred tree or pole honoring the goddess Asherah) as Ahab king of Israel had done. . . . In the two courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts (the sun, moon, planets, and stars which were worshiped by the pagan cultures of the day). He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger"** (2 Kings 21:1-6).

Earlier Israel had been warned by Isaiah that God would exile the Judeans for such conduct. Now, a century later, Zephaniah denounced the "rebellious and polluted city" and her princes and judges who are like "roaring lions" and "evening wolves." Zephaniah also denounced the false prophets whom he calls "men of treachery," and the priests "who have profaned the sanctuary" (3:3-5).

Essentially Zephaniah's message is the announcement of the "day of the Lord." The "day of the Lord" was a Judean phrase that applied to any holy day on the Temple calendar, such as the feasts of Passover, Yom Kippur and Tabernacles (Leviticus 23). Thus, the "day of the Lord" had positive and festive connotations of social and liturgical celebration. However Zephaniah reverses this image; that is, the "day of the Lord" will not be a time of feasting celebration but a day of "distress and anguish . . . ruin and devastation . . . darkness and gloom" (1:15-16). Yahweh will pour out his wrath on a people given to paganism. This "day" to which earlier prophets often referred, implies a clear invitation to penance which was also being extended to pagan nations and to Judah. And when that "day" comes, God will give his people—the faithful remnant—new hope and confidence. This remnant will consist of the poor, the humble and all those who put their trust in God. Such hope clearly references the New Testament; that is, no matter how seriously the sin, these humble people are being promised salvation—the Redeemer to come (Matthew 11:5).

Obadiah (590 B.C.)

The Book of Obadiah is only one chapter, and it is entirely preoccupied with the fate of Edom—the land of the Edomites who are the descendants of Esau, the firstborn son of Isaac and the twin brother of Jacob. In Genesis 25:23, Esau and Jacob struggled together in their mother's womb as she gave birth. God told their mother, Rebekah, that her sons would become two nations, with the firstborn (Esau) serving the second born (Jacob). Later Esau foolishly sold his birthright (his father's blessing as the firstborn) to Jacob for a bowl of soup (Genesis 25:34). Esau later regretted his folly and thereafter always hated his brother. Esau went on to become the father of the Edomites (south of the Dead Sea) and Jacob became the father of the Israelites. "Edom" means "red" in Hebrew, for the land where Esau settled was known for its red sandstone. Edom and Israel battled each other over the centuries, especially because Edom's land was fertile and was situated along profitable trade routes. In fact, the "King's Highway" (Numbers 20:17) passed through Edom. Also recall that when the Israelites asked to use the route during the Exodus from Egypt, the Edomites refused them permission (Numbers 20:21).

When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C., the Edomites attacked and looted the Temple. Obadiah raged with anger that the Edomites had actually participated in the destruction of Solomon's Temple, which led to the persecution of the refugees who survived the catastrophe (Jeremiah 49:7-22). However because they were close relatives, the Israelites were forbidden to hate the Edomites (Deuteronomy 23:7). This is the reason Edom (or "Mount Esau, 1:8) fell under the judgment of God because the Edomites took advantage of Judah and Jerusalem during the defeat and exile of the Judeans (10-14). Obadiah promises that once Jerusalem is restored and the Edomites punished, Judah will again be inhabited and will dominate the land of Edom (15-21).

Throughout salvation history Edom stands as a type of opposition to the people of God, even though they should be as close as family. Such conflict continues in the New Testament. King Herod, who persecuted Jesus (a Galilean of Judah) was himself an Edomite. In the end, the Book of Obadiah assures the people of God that God's justice will ultimately triumph, and that they will be vindicated over against their enemies.